

A Personal Leave of Faith for Southern Ohio Synod Rostered Ministers

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America asks her rostered ministers to be women and men of passionate faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This expectation is set forth in the constitution. (7.31.11) For example: “Pastors are to show commitment to Christ and a commitment to lead a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ and in so doing to be an example in faithful service and holy living.” The vows of ordination and consecration ask pledges before God to whom the man or woman will one day give account: “Will you be diligent in your study of the holy scriptures and faithful in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people, nourish them with the word and sacraments, and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?”

The ELCA constitution further charges her pastors to: 1) preach the Word; 2) administer the sacraments; 3) conduct public worship; 4) provide pastoral care; 5) seek out and encourage qualified persons to prepare for the ministry of the Gospel; 6) witness to the Kingdom of God in the community, in the nation, and abroad; and 7) speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world. Similar requirements are set forth for deacons.

Certainly, leaders join the ministry because they feel a deep sense of love for Jesus and a deep need to introduce others to Jesus. But, being women and men of faith and also shepherds of souls striving for that same faith has its perils. Chief among those perils is that the work of the minister and the faith of the minister have very unclear boundaries that sometimes make faith not a strength, but a burden. It is important to the church that its leaders tend to the faith in Jesus that first captured their hearts. The health of the leader's faith is important to the synod and the congregation. Exhausted faith does not preach, pray, preside, teach, counsel, or administer the work of the church well.

Tending faith is often best done when the leader is intentionally removed from the day-to-day work of the church. Though this might sound strange, we should remind ourselves that even monks, whose work is prayer, will leave the monastery to go on retreat to rediscover the heart of the faith that led them into the monastic life in the first place.

It is therefore important that the Southern Ohio Synod and its congregations institute a Policy of Personal Leave for Faith.

We must not confuse Personal Leave for Faith with vacation or academic Sabbatical. The former serve the body's and spirit's needs for rest and relaxation; for connecting with and tending to hobbies and personal interests. Vacation is important for tending our connections with family and children, as well as friends. Sabbaticals are meant to give opportunity for uninterrupted research and/or writing. Sabbaticals bring back a very tangible product. What is proposed for adoption by the Southern Ohio Synod will have physical benefits as a vacation does, it will also do good for the spirit of the rostered minister and even involve pursuit of personal interest. It might further bring back tangible products such as new ideas, programs, curricula, maybe even a book or thesis written. Yet, the proper “product” of a Personal Leave for Faith is a renewed faith in Jesus Christ that will propel the ministry of the rostered minister and the congregation with new power.

As a rostered minister plans a Personal Leave for Faith the following scheme might be helpful. It is based on the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*. The leader's Personal Leave for Faith should have the following elements.

1. *Lectio*: The word means: reading. Many things can be “read.” *Lectio* is an invitation to read, study, discover, or take in new information or experiences. The focus is on the word “new.” Reading ahead in the lectionary to be preached on upon return is not what is envisioned here. The *Lectio* needs to be directed to the heart of the person who, the congregation prays, will be renewed. Voyages can be *Lectio*. Academic study can be *Lectio* even if it is not done in formal setting. *Lectio* can be anything that the leader takes in that has promise to be of fresh food for the faith of the leader.
2. *Meditatio*: Is a reflection on what has been “read” or experienced. It is an intentional attempt to put the immediate *Lectio* into perspective within the life of the rostered minister. It is a moment to integrate new things into the spirit and ultimately renew faith. *Meditatio* might well take the form of writing about what has been learned. Often such writing will have very practical impact upon return and might well lead to new ways of mission. On the other hand, *Meditatio* may yield less tangible results. For example, a leader might take an extended stay at the community at Taize, France and, upon meditation on the experience, return with a different and fresh outlook on how faith expresses itself in worship, which in turn would lead to rejuvenation of the worship in the congregation.
3. *Oratio*: Prayer needs to be a significant part of Personal Leave for Faith. A rostered minister’s prayer life contains a large portion of prayers that are demanded by the moment. It is a leader's privilege and vow to pray with and for the people in their best and worst times. The challenge on Personal Leave for Faith is to discover prayer anew in a time and place that does not demand pastoral prayers but allows for prayers of the heart. *Oratio* can take many forms depending on individual temperament. A stay in a monastic community can feed the faith very well, but it is not beneficial for all temperaments. Seeking a capable spiritual director as a guide even before the time of Personal Leave for Faith arrives would make for a good experience.
4. *Contemplatio*: *Contemplatio* seeks to quietly and peacefully allow the presence of God to make itself known in the heart of the rostered minister. It seeks to take in what God has to offer in the moment in trust that it will strengthen faith and resolve. It is done best when the usual daily life and routine is put aside and replaced. Again, the temperament of the individual must be kept in mind when shaping what replaces routine. Whatever suggests itself to the leader as a course of action that intentionally reconnects with self and the Lord is a proper start for *Contemplatio*. For purpose of this document, *Contemplatio* might be the closest thing to a biblical *Sabbath*.

A Personal Leave for Faith will be most profitable to rostered ministers, congregations, and the church when it incorporates all these facets yet, at the same time, personalizes the time away towards the leader in question.

A proposal:

The following represents a suggested framework to develop a congregational policy for a Personal Leave of Faith. It is not intended to replace congregational sabbatical policies already in place.

The Congregation or Synod will allot the rostered minister(s) paid 10 days of Personal Leave for Faith time per year.

These days can be accumulated up to a total of 60 days.

The rostered minister shall take all the days accumulated when embarking on a Personal Leave for Faith.

The rostered minister can take the Personal Leave for Faith days accumulated at any particular time in consultation with the congregational council, allowing a minimum of 60 days for the congregation to prepare for the leader's absence. Since longer leaves will require more planning from the congregation and rostered minister, a leave of 20 days or more must be announced 6 months prior to the beginning of the leave. Grant applications to cover the expense of the Personal Leave for Faith sometimes require up to 12 months of lead time and require the involvement of the congregation from the beginning of the grant process. Leader and congregation need to be aware of these lead times.

The congregation shall excuse the rostered minister from all duties while on Leave.

The rostered minister shall excuse him or herself from all duties while on Leave.

The rostered minister shall notify the synod of the impending Personal Leave for Faith to be taken. The Synod shall excuse the rostered minister from all synodical duties for the duration of the leave.

Good practice suggests that a small task force be created that shepherds the process into the congregation.

- This task force will hear plans for the Personal Leave for Faith and debrief the rostered minister following Personal Leave for Faith.
- The scope and content of plan and debriefing is to be agreed upon by the rostered minister and task force at the beginning of the journey.
- The task force will further be the advocate for the Personal Leave for Faith with the congregation. Most importantly, the task force will pray for the leader and encourage prayer for the leader in the congregation, especially in the prayer of the people during worship. It will prepare the congregation for the absence by noting well the things that leader is doing for the congregation that will now go undone and make arrangements to have the congregation take on those tasks.

It is recommended that the rostered minister's Personal Leave for Faith plan be filed with the congregation and the synod.

The Policy for Personal Leave of Faith shall be written into the rostered minister's letter of call.