

I am now approximately two and a half years into this call as one of your synod ministers and there are many things I am still learning, but if I were asked to describe in one word the most important part of this work, I would say accompaniment. Here are some examples of the ways in which we walk with candidates, pastors, and congregations in the various areas of oversight for my work in the synod office.

Candidacy

When someone expresses interest in serving as a rostered leader in the ELCA, the first thing someone from the candidacy committee does is conduct an initial interview with that individual to hear more about their background, their sense of call, and their hunches about what their future might look like as a leader in God's church. When they are entranced into candidacy, a member of the committee is assigned as their relator and it is the role of the relator to stay in touch with the candidate, to support and encourage them, answer questions they may have, and help them navigate the ins and outs of the process from entrance to endorsement to approval.

First Call Theological Education

Research has shown that the first three years of life as a pastor can be some of the most difficult and that many newly ordained clergy leave the ministry during this time. That is why the first-call pastors in our synod take part in FCTE. They are assigned to a group with other first-call pastors and a mentor where, in monthly meetings, they receive support and wisdom from each other and an experienced pastor as they discuss the joys and challenges of their ministries. The three-year cycle also includes a week-long family camp one year and a three-day retreat each of the other two years. Pr. Linda Lagergren shepherds this program and Pastors Gene Alms, Art Weise, Joyce Graue, and Tim Lindhorst serve as mentors. We are grateful for the work they do for this program.

Ministerial Excellence Fund

We are in the third year of our Lilly grant and through the funds we have received from the grant, congregations, and individual donors we have been able to significantly impact the financial lives of our pastors in three important areas: reducing educational debt, increasing retirement contributions, and providing assistance for unexpected medical costs. The notes of thanks that we received from recipients of these grants indicate that, although they greatly appreciate the financial gifts they receive, even more important is knowing that their synod cares for and supports them in these areas of their lives, enabling them to better care for and support the congregations they serve.

Call Process

When congregations receive notification that their pastor has taken a new call or is planning to retire, it's important that they know the staff in the synod office will be there with them through every step of the call process: meeting with the church council and call committees, searching for candidates, and answering questions along the way. I've found there are two times I enjoy the most during this time of transition. The first is the opportunity to meet with members of the congregation to explain the process to them so they understand exactly how we help them find a new pastor. Often I will preach at a Sunday worship service and then stay for an adult forum or informal meeting. It gives members the chance to ask questions and eases their anxiety, knowing that we will work closely with them until, together, we find the candidate they ultimately choose to be their next pastor. My second favorite time is when I am there to install their newly called pastor. The air of excitement and expectation from both the congregation and pastor is a joy to experience and makes all the time and energy spent well worth it. I am grateful to be able to serve our synod in this and all of the other areas of ministry that make up my call as one of your ministers in our Southwestern Minnesota Synod.