

To: Bishop John Bradosky, Executive Council
From: Commission on Theology and Doctrine
Re: Word of Counsel for Lay Worship Leadership
Date: March 2012

Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession provides the norm for worship leadership in the NALC. "Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called." Article 14 of the Apology notes that "we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority."

The constitution of the NALC reflects this confession. "All authority in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ and is manifested through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments... Within the people of God and for the sake of the Gospel ministry, entrusted to all believers, God has instituted the office of the ministry of Word and Sacrament. To carry out this ministry, the North American Lutheran Church ordains qualified persons, both men and women" (3.04 and 3.05).

In accordance with its confessional and constitutional commitments, the North American Lutheran Church will maintain the norm that ordained ministers shall serve our congregations as ministers of Word and Sacrament. In most cases ordained ministers, with some planning, are available to NALC congregations. Moreover, ordained ministers of other Lutheran church bodies may be available as well.

At the present time unordained laypersons are leading worship in a few congregations of the North American Lutheran Church, most of them with the approval and under the authorization of the bishop of our church. The practice of laypersons leading worship, including the celebration of the sacraments, has in fact been a part of ministry in American Lutheranism since the time of Muhlenberg.* The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its predecessor church bodies permitted lay persons to lead congregational worship and provided a process for authorizing such ministries.

In a small number of our congregations an ordained minister is not readily available for leading worship. These may include small-membership congregations in rather isolated communities. They may include congregations in interim ministry, in the calling process. They may also include ethnic congregations, that is, congregations using a language other than English at worship, for whom an ordained minister in their own language is not readily accessible.

For the sake of Christ's ministry and the ongoing spiritual life of those congregations, the Commission offers this word of counsel:

A. The North American Lutheran Church will continue to honor the norm for ministry: namely, ordained ministers are the ministers of Word and Sacrament in the church. Exceptions to this norm will be made only among those congregations in which there is a clear emergency or other serious need.

B. In certain circumstances an ordained minister may set apart elements for the Holy Communion, which may be retained for subsequent distribution. The ministry coordinator will develop and implement a plan for the ongoing education and training of lay persons who preach, lead worship, and distribute the elements of Holy Communion.

C. On the request of the church council of a congregation, and in consultation with the ministry coordinator, the Bishop may authorize a lay person to preach and preside at Holy Communion in a given congregation of the NALC. Such permission will be limited to the congregation making the request and will be for a period not to exceed one year. The ministry coordinator will develop a plan for the ongoing education and training of the layperson engaged in this ministry of Word and Sacrament. Such a plan will include Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, preaching, liturgy, and other aspects of ministry according to need. The ministry coordinator will also appoint ordained ministers as mentors who will provide guidance and support for such lay persons.

The process described above is to be a temporary one. The Commission on Theology and Doctrine will seek to develop a more nuanced theological study of the subject and will include in its study relevant references from its ongoing study on the formation of one office for lay ministry.

* Reference: Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, page 46.