GUIDE FOR LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE IN CANDIDACY: WORD & SACRAMENT AND WORD & SERVICE



ReconcilingWorks
LUTHERANS FOR FULL PARTICIPATION

Guide for LGBTQIA+ people in Candidacy:

Word & Sacrament and Word & Service

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A Note from ReconcilingWorks

This resource is intended to be used by candidates as a parallel to the resource that ReconcilingWorks has produced to support the work of synodical Candidacy Committees. But it may also be useful for members of synod staff and the members of Candidacy Committees to review the information this resource provides.

ReconcilingWorks affirms public LGBTQIA+ identities, and this resource is written from the standpoint that people are LGBTQIA+ can be effective witnesses to the church and the world as simultaneously people of faith and church leaders.

ReconcilingWorks

ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation was created as a pan-Lutheran organization in 1974 in order to advocate for the full welcome, inclusion, and equity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/aromantic (LGBTQIA+) Lutherans in all aspects of the life of their Church, congregations, and community. ReconcilingWorks maintains a public commitment to increase our intersectional work dedicated to anti-racism and racial equity.

ReconcilingWorks is an independent non-profit 501(c)(3) organization funded by the financial support of individuals, faith communities, grants and generated by the sale of resources offered for purchase and fees from a variety of training fees. The organization does not receive funding from either the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Our Mission: ReconcilingWorks advocates for the acceptance, full participation, and liberation of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions within the Lutheran Church.

Our Vision: To keep expanding the welcome, liberating those who are forced to live in the margins. To keep dismantling barriers and building bridges. To keep working until all of God's beloved have equity.

Our Values: We believe that God values and embraces each person as a beloved child, that the Spirit gives a diversity of gifts for the common good, and that Jesus Christ calls us to work for justice.

1. Welcome to the Journey of Discernment for LGBTQIA+ individuals

This document is created to assist and support anyone thinking of a ministry vocation – Word and Sacrament or Word and Service – who identifies as Queer as they enter the ELCA's or ELCIC's formal Candidacy processes. The resource is intended to serve as a general guide, as each candidate's process is unique to their synod and call. Both the ELCA and the ELCIC as national church bodies welcome and affirm candidates in the Entrance, Endorsement, and Approval processes who are Queer and who meet all the requirements for rostered ministry.

When it comes to the ELCA, however, that while it is true that the denomination in its national "churchwide" expression supports any and all potential candidates who are self-identified as LGBTQIA+, it is also true that support and affirmation at the synod and congregational level may be uneven. Synod candidacy committees and congregational call committees may include members who have little to no experience engaging with LGBTQIA+ people. This may also be true in the Canadian context for candidates, synods, and congregations in the ELCIC.

Given this complicated reality, it will be important that each potential candidate review any of their denomination's official stances on same-gender relationships and individuals. It will be equally important to research, as best as you are able, the history of support for LGBTQIA+ candidates and LGBTQIA+ rostered leaders who are in your home synod or the synod which will be responsible for decisions about your candidacy. And perhaps even more importantly, potential candidates for rostered ministry need to be aware that there will not always be consistency in attitudes and practices. Although statements made by churchwide or national assemblies are clearly defined, with individual congregations having autonomy in its own practices, all faith communities that consider themselves part of the ELCA or ELCIC may not be either as welcoming or as affirming of LGBTQIA+ people as others.

Consider how the ELCA addresses the topic of people in “same-gender relationships” according to their formal descriptions and definitions of long-term monogamous relationships:

From section 1.8 in the ELCA Constitution & Bylaws - Guidelines for People in Same-Gender Relationships

1. All applicants and candidates shall be treated equitably.

2. When working with an applicant or candidate who is in a same-gender relationship,the candidacy committee will follow the same processes for discernment and evaluation as with all other candidates and will use the standards of this church, including Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline.

3. When this church’s diversity of faith-based opinions concerning these matters is present on a candidacy committee and/or in its context, some conversations and decisions will be complex and challenging. Integrity can be maintained best when committee members honor others with differing convictions and keep in mind the foundational responsibilities and purpose of the candidacy committee. Aspects of this integrity include:

a. Treating each committee member, applicant, and candidate with respect

b. Inviting and expecting candor from all applicants and candidates about their relationships

c. Being candid with one another and with applicants and candidates about whether committee members can support or not support the rostering of people in same-gender relationships.

4. In some instances, the transfer of candidacy to another synod will be a helpful tool for respecting the faith convictions of a candidate and of all members of a candidacy committee. A candidate may be encouraged to seek a transfer (section 1.7). In some circumstances, applicants may, after consultation with the bishop of their synod, be advised to apply for candidacy in a synod other than the one of congregational membership. In that case, the candidacy committee may depart from normal practice and accept registration from the congregation of membership, even though it is in another synod.

5. It is always appropriate in the candidacy process to invite further conversation about a candidate’s responses on the Candidacy Application form. Such responses may open the possibility for further helpful conversation with a candidate.

6. In this responsibility, as in others, this church continues to trust its candidacy committees and others to whom it has given the responsibility to discern who should and should not be rostered or called to rostered ministry. Accordingly, it is essential that the committee report to the synodical bishop and to the Christian Community and Leadership home area any relevant information, as well as any procedural or policy problems encountered, so that the ELCA candidacy process can be enhanced for the sake of mission and the good of all concerned.

Coming Out or Inviting In?

Up above, you read that ReconcilingWorks sees Rostered Leaders coming out publicly as an “act of public witness” that can make a difference in the church and in the lives of other people. However, when you have entered formal candidacy, coming out to your synod or inviting synod staff and candidacy committee members into the story of your identity is still a personal choice. There is no requirement in the candidacy process in either official policies or procedures describing how and/or when to identify yourself publicly when it comes to your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. If you reach out to ReconcilingWorks staff for advice or support, those conversations will be confidential. You are in charge of your own story!

Each LGBTQIA+ individual may face challenges in this process, including family relationships, friendships, professional standing, and personal well-being. Longstanding relationships may be disrupted or need to be reevaluated. These are parts of your story that may already be familiar to you, and we hope you have found unexpected allies as you have shared who you are with more people. As in all things related to this aspect to being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, if you choose to include coming out or inviting people in as part of your essays or interviews during discernment and candidacy, this “coming out or inviting in” dynamic will be ongoing. This is also true about discernment itself, which is a deeply personal journey during the candidacy process and throughout your life as a rostered leader after approval and ordination.

A question many LGBTQIA+ candidates might want to ask themselves is this: If I’m not already publicly out in multiple contexts, should I come out as a public witness? If I feel I should, when in the candidacy process should that happen? While context and decisions will vary, sharing this part of yourself earlier in the process is better than waiting until later. Sharing this information demonstrates another important thing people should know about you. You are a beloved child of God, and sharing this private and personal part of your life gives the Candidacy Committee a broader picture of who you are as a human being called into ministry.

For many LGBTQIA+ candidates for rostered ministry, your personal coming out or inviting in story and your personal call story may be closely related. If this resonates with you, you are encouraged to make that connection in your Entrance Essay and Entrance Interview with the candidacy committee. When you share your story, this benefits the committee in understanding how your sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression is an aspect of the way God has called and gifted you for ministry. Sharing your story, your identity, and experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person with the committee, offers a deeper understanding of God’s welcoming, inclusion, and grace through our baptism.

And to say it again: If you reach out to ReconcilingWorks staff for advice or support at any point during the discernment process, those conversations will be confidential. Always remember that you are in charge of your own story!

2. The Basics: Ministry of Word and Sacrament or Word and Service

The constitutions, bylaws, and candidacy manuals for both the ELCA and the ELCIC both clearly define two different ordained – or rostered – ministries, Word and Sacrament and Word and Service, also called Pastors and Deacons. The descriptions of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service in those documents offer candidates a somewhat clearer perspective of each of these rostered ministries, even though the descriptions in the ELCA constitution lacks specificity in identifying the types of calls you might receive after approval and ordination. The Administrative Bylaws for the ELCIC does include a more comprehensive list of potential calls with rules and the sources of different kinds of calls. We encourage you to review the complete descriptions of each roster in the Candidacy Manual or the Constitution and Bylaws for your denomination as you discern which makes the most sense for your own call to ministry.

This resource takes no position on which is the best possible choice for you as one of God's beloveds. Your own calling into either of these ministries is a personal reflection of your discernment through the Holy Spirit into a public ministry of the church.

7.20 Ministry of Word and Sacrament [from ELCA Constitution and Bylaws]

> 7.21 Within the people of God and for the sake of the Gospel ministry entrusted to all believers, God has instituted the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament. To carry out this ministry, this church calls and ordains qualified persons.
>
> 7.22 A minister of Word and Sacrament of this church shall be a person whose commitment to Christ, soundness in the faith, aptness to preach, teach, and witness, and educational qualifications have been examined and approved in the manner prescribed in the documents of this church; who has been properly called and ordained; who accepts and adheres to the Confession of Faith of this church; who is diligent and faithful in the exercise of the ministry; and whose life and conduct are above reproach. A minister of Word and Sacrament shall comply with this church's constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions.

B-1 Introduction to Candidacy and B-2 Standards for Pastoral Ministry [From ELCIC Candidacy Manual]

> From B-1: Pastors are baptized persons for whom the ELCIC calls and ordains to the church's ministry of Word and Sacrament. On behalf of the church, pastors give leadership and vision to Christian communities of faith. Pastors are called to provide faithful preaching, teaching and witness to the Scriptures and the doctrinal teaching of the ELCIC. They work in intentional partnership with bishops, other pastors, deacons, lay leaders in congregations and synods, synod and national staff, and ecumenical partners in common mission.
>
> From B-2: The ELCIC is a church Living out God's grace & unconditional love. The ELCIC recognizes the emergence of a renewed emphasis upon God's mission in the world in the 21st century. Christians enter into partnership with God's work in the world through baptism into the body of Christ. Every faith community is part of a mission field. Every baptized Christian is to be an ambassador for God's mission in the world. Through Word, Sacrament and Service, individuals and communities are strengthened for mission. Rostered leaders are called to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

A mission-oriented leader can be defined as someone who is rooted in the gospel; is knowledgeable, passionate, able to articulate their faith and the confessional teachings of the ELCIC; and through the church participates in

God's mission of love, redemption, justice and reconciliation.

People who have discerned a call to pastoral ministry shall demonstrate and build upon the characteristics of a missional leader. The ELCIC seeks candidates for pastoral ministry who demonstrate certain competencies. The candidacy process provides educational and formational opportunities to integrate skills, knowledge and tools for ministry in five interrelated areas:

- Spiritual and Personal Formation
- Vocational Awareness and Pastoral Identity
- Adherence to Lutheran Theology
- Missional Awareness and Cultural Context
- Capacity for Public Ministerial Leadership.

7:50 Ministry of Word and Service [From ELCA Constitution and Bylaws]

> 7.51. This church calls and receives onto the roster qualified persons to provide a ministry of Word and Service, exemplifying the life of Christ-like service to all persons and creation: nurturing, healing, leading, advocating dignity and justice, and equipping the whole people of God for their life of witness and service within and beyond the congregation for the sake of God's mission in the world.
>
> 7.52. A minister of Word and Service of this church shall be a person whose commitment to Christ, soundness in the faith, aptness to serve, teach, and witness, and educational qualifications have been examined and approved in the manner prescribed in the documents of this church; who has been properly called and ordained; who accepts and adheres to the Confession of Faith of this church; who is diligent and faithful in the exercise of ministry; and whose life and conduct are above reproach. A minister of Word and Service shall comply with this church's constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions.

C-1 Introduction to Candidacy for Diaconal Ministry and Standards for Diaconal Ministry [From ELCIC Candidacy Manual]

> From C-1: Deacons are baptized persons whom the ELCIC calls and ordains to the church's ministry of Word and Service. A deacon in the ELCIC is called by and publicly serves the church with primary responsibility for witnessing to the gospel through a ministry of service mandated by the Word and Sacraments that enables and equips the people of God in their ministry. They work in intentional partnership with bishops, pastors, other deacons, lay leaders in congregations and synods, synod and national staff, and ecumenical partners in common mission.

The Constitution of the ELCIC (Article IV, Section 1, 2015) says that The mission of this church… is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people in Canada and around the world through proclamation of the Word, celebration of the sacraments, and through service in Christ's name. The public diaconal ministry of the church has a particular calling to strengthen and support sharing the gospel through service in Christ's name.

> From C-2: The ELCIC is a church Living out God's grace & unconditional love. The ELCIC recognizes the emergence of a renewed emphasis upon God's mission in the world in the 21st century. Christians enter into partnership with God's work in the world through baptism into the body of Christ. Every faith community is part of a mission field. Every baptized Christian is to be an ambassador for God's mission in the world. Through Word, Sacrament and Service, individuals and communities are strengthened for mission. Rostered leaders are called to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

A mission-oriented leader can be defined as someone who is rooted in the gospel; is knowledgeable, passionate, able to articulate their faith and the confessional teachings of the ELCIC; and through the church participates in God’s mission of love, redemption, justice and reconciliation.

People who have discerned a call to diaconal ministry will demonstrate and build upon the characteristics of a missional leader. The ELCIC seeks candidates for diaconal ministry who demonstrate certain competencies. The candidacy process provides educational and formational opportunities to integrate skills, knowledge and tools for ministry in five interrelated areas:

- Spiritual and Personal Formation
- Vocational Awareness and Diaconal Identity
- Adherence to Lutheran Theology
- Missional Awareness and Cultural Context
- Capacity for Public Ministerial Leadership.

3. The Journey of Discernment

Note: For purposes of brevity and conciseness, this section will mostly focus on the journey within the ELCA. See the section above [section 2] for descriptions of rosters in the ELCIC.

Within the ELCA, the formal journey of discernment is divided into three distinct stages. Within the ELCIC, there are four steps, described within the section for each roster, Pastors in section B and Deacons in section C. Each stage or includes specific criteria that can be found in the respective candidacy manuals (ELCA, revised 2023; ELCIC, revised 2025). If you haven't already downloaded a candidacy manual to one of your devices or printed it to consult on paper, please make sure to do that before beginning the journey or as soon thereafter as possible.

As a person considering a call, your journey through these individual stages will depend on the outcomes for each stage. If approved for Entrance [ELCA] or Registration [ELCIC] into candidacy after synod staff reviews your application and you meet with a synod representative for an interview, this is where your synod's Candidacy Committee becomes involved with your personal calling.

Below are definitions of each of the processes and a definition of a Candidacy Committee from the ELCA Candidacy Manual. A similar description can be found in the ELCIC Candidacy Manual in Section A-4, pp. 9-13. Please note that individual synods may have further definitions as they relate to the committee's membership and responsibilities, but each denomination has a standard guide to use. For candidates in the ELCA, a complete description of a candidacy committee's responsibilities and processes can be found in section 1.4.3.1 of the Candidacy Manual.

Candidate Committee description from ELCA Candidacy Manual (pg.10)

> 1.4.1 Applicant/candidate: Personal faith, commitment to Christ, and a sense of call are at the heart of an applicant's decision to apply for candidacy. Prior to submitting a Candidacy Application form, a person has discerned a readiness for candidacy. At Entrance, an applicant will share with a candidacy committee experiences and learning acquired during the discernment journey. The process of discernment (Appendix A) is a lifelong endeavor. It precedes candidacy, continues throughout candidacy and the period of study at a seminary, and evolves into an expression of vocation for the remainder of a person's life. Discernment will be frequently and regularly assessed, not only by the candidate but also by the community of faith, the seminary, the candidacy committee, and others in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and openness to the spirit.

To begin the candidacy process, people seeking to serve as rostered ministers contact the synod where they are active in an ELCA congregation, an ELCA worshiping community or a campus ministry. After completing a Candidacy Application form, an applicant is expected to demonstrate initiative in completing the pre-entrance candidacy requirements outlined in the manual.

Growth and development are expected as candidates seek to become equipped for rostered ministry. A candidate must be a mature, emotionally and physically healthy, and trustworthy partner in the process of preparation, formation, and evaluation for rostered ministry. A candidate provides requested information and a signed release to a candidacy committee so that the partners in the candidacy process may fully and openly communicate with each other and share relevant information. Applicants or candidates are expected to be in regular communication with their candidacy committee.

Summary of the ELCA Candidacy Process (ELCA Summary of Candidacy, 2021)

Pre-Entrance

Pre-entrance is a period of discernment that precedes formal Entrance into the candidacy process. It can assist people in reflecting on aspects of their lives that might confirm a call to rostered (that is, Word and Sacrament or Word and Service) ministry or other kinds of leadership in the ELCA.

Some aspects worthy of consideration are listed below:

- an understanding of vocation
- spirituality and prayer life
- formative life experiences
- relationship with a community of faith
- significant life influences, including family of origin
- the ability to articulate what God is calling a person to pursue vocationally
- openness to the call of the church wherever it is needed

A call to leadership can come in many ways and lead in many directions. Pre-entrance is an informal pathway that leads toward a clearer understanding of the path God may be calling a person to pursue, whether that might be Word and Sacrament or Word and Service ministry or some other form of church leadership. (Candidacy Summary, pg. 1-2)

Entrance

Entrance is when a person begins to work with a synodical Candidacy Committee. Granting Entrance means that a Candidacy Committee is welcoming and accepting an applicant into candidacy. As an applicant assesses his or her own sense of call, the committee also assesses an applicant's readiness for various kinds of leadership. An Entrance decision normally assumes that an applicant is considering some type of rostered leadership.

In preparation for candidacy, several of the steps involved can further assist an applicant's discernment. Components relating to the Entrance process are as follows:

- The applicant's home congregation completes a Congregational Registration Form based on active ELCA membership for a minimum of one year.
- The applicant completes a Candidacy Application Form and writes an Entrance Essay.
- The applicant participates in a psychological evaluation.
- The Candidacy Committee requests a background check for each applicant.
- The Candidacy Committee conducts an Entrance interview with the applicant.
- The applicant completes a Personal Health Assessment.
- The applicant prepares a financial worksheet.
- The Candidacy Committee receives copies of all post-secondary education transcripts and continuing education certificates.

For some candidates, once a Candidacy Committee grants an applicant Entrance, they will then select a seminary and apply for admission. For other candidates, an applicant may apply for Entrance after being enrolled in a seminary. For candidates attending divinity schools or non- ELCA seminaries, some kind of formal affiliation with an ELCA seminary will normally occur soon after Entrance. Occasionally, there will be candidates who have completed some form of theological education at the graduate level, but they did not seek candidacy during their time at the institution or following receiving a degree or certificate.

Following Entrance, candidates, in consultation with the appropriate ELCA seminary and the Candidacy Committee if relevant, develop a Candidate Accompaniment Plan for the rest of the candidacy process.

The primary intended benefit of a Candidate Accompaniment Plan is to strengthen the partnership and relationships among a candidate, a seminary, and a Candidacy Committee or between a candidate and a Candidacy Committee when graduate education is not needed. The plan establishes mutually determined timelines and serves as a guide for the remainder of a candidate's discernment and preparation for rostered leadership. The plan is revisited at every step of candidacy.

Endorsement

Endorsement is a second major point of discernment for both a candidate and a Candidacy Committee. The endorsement stage focuses on the type of rostered leadership for which a candidate is best suited and a candidate's readiness to complete candidacy successfully. In this phase of the process, collaboration and communication between a Candidacy Committee and the appropriate seminary faculty are critical. When a Candidacy Committee grants Endorsement, it means the Candidacy Committee recognizes and affirms a candidate's readiness to complete the candidacy process. Endorsement also affirms a candidate's demonstration of appropriate gifts and characteristics for a specific roster in the ELCA.

Components relating to Endorsement include the following:

- A candidate prepares an Endorsement Essay in preparation for an interview with Candidacy Committee members and seminary faculty.
- A candidate submits a CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) evaluation to the Candidacy
- Committee.
- The appropriate seminary provides a transcript to the Candidacy Committee.

Approval

The final step in the candidacy process is Approval. A Candidacy Committee, the seminary of enrollment (or affiliation), and a candidate discern together a readiness for service as a rostered leader in the ELCA following the successful completion of all academic and candidacy requirements.

Components related to Approval:

- A candidate submits an Approval Essay to the appropriate seminary faculty and to the Candidacy Committee.
- The seminary faculty prepares a recommendation for Approval (form D) and submits it to the Candidacy Committee.
- The Candidacy Committee receives an internship evaluation report (for those seeking ordination) or an evaluation of supervised field experience (for Word and Service candidates).
- The seminary provides the Candidacy Committee with transcripts for the candidate.

When a Candidacy Committee grants Approval, it acknowledges that a candidate is qualified and competent to serve under call in a specific rostered ministry. The bishop or designated staff person of each synod in the region and the Candidacy and Leadership Manger of the region will meet at a scheduled regional consultation to discuss the candidate and determine a post- approval First Call plan for the candidate, including helping to determine in which region or synod the candidate will be available to interview for first call. Relevant information about the process is available on the ELCA website at https://elca.org/Resources/Candidacy#FirstCall.

4. Additional Forms, Processes, and Documents

A. Candidate Name and Gender Change [See appendix]

If a candidate transitions from one gender to another or to no gender, there is a form available that candidates need to use to make the change official within the ELCA. This form is also used even when there is no legal name change that is part of the transition journey. The form is included as part of the Appendix.

B. Transfer of Candidacy [Candidacy Manual, Section 1.7, see appendix]

It does happen, from time to time, that it will be in the best interests of both the candidacy process and the candidate to transfer the person and the work to a different synod. Reasons for this will vary, and synod staff and the bishop will need to be involved in any decision involving a transfer. There are no forms to use for this, but the process is covered in the Candidacy Manual, in Section 1.7. That section along with section 1.8 will be included in this document's appendix.

5. Final Words

In closing, as an LGBTQIA+ person you may face unfortunate barriers to ministry like homophobic candidacy committee members, uninformed professors in seminary or divinity school, or congregational leaders nervous about hiring a “gay" or "Queer" pastor. It is especially important that you understand the risks of pursuing professional ministry (educational debt, periods of potential unemployment, geographic relocation, and/or spiritual difficulties). It will serve you well to imagine contingency plans and sketch out what sorts of support networks can sustain you through difficult times. Where do you find strength?

The “external” sense of call is what determines if you are going to be a rostered leader in the ELCA or ELCIC. You must receive the validation from your candidacy committee, seminary profs, and personal references . . . but you will also be writing and speaking along the way about your “internal” discernment. Throughout life, folks may ask why to tell the story about the paths you chose to what you are doing in the Church. Intentional discernment can help you tell your own story. If you encounter difficulties with your committee regarding your identity as a beloved LGBTQIA+ individual, you do have rights along the process. It is important you create a relationship with your Candidacy Relator; this person is normally from the committee as your mentor and go between with questions. If the opportunity exists, you may ask that your Candidacy Committee have a person who identifies as LGBTQIA+, or someone who is well knowledge in LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns. You have a right to voice concerns about language or beliefs as it relates to your committee. This includes any rejection of you as a candidate or someone able to continue in the process based on your identity as well as a refusal to acknowledge preferred pronouns, the misinterpretation of theology and biblical teachings, and personal bias against Queer individuals or their calling into ministry.

Reconciling Works has created a supplementary resource for synod Candidacy Committees, which is available as a downloadable PDF via this link or at the following URL. https://www.reconcilingworks.org/resources/churchwide/ We recommend that you download and read this to help you better understand the process from the institutional perspective.

As stated in the opening of this guide, your journey of discernment into ministry should be a joyful and fulfilling process. As an LGBTQIA+ [or Queer] individual called into ministry, you bring a unique perspective to your call. Listen to where God is calling you, speak to others who support you to engage in your discernment. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Be authentic, you are a child of God.

Additional Resources

The Mysteries of the Ages: A handy guide for LGBTQ people exploring or preparing for rostered ministry in the ELCA, Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, Feb. 2016.