

February 1, 2016

The following is a response prepared by the Mission Training Center Director, Rev. Dr. Paul Mueller, related to Task Force 4-06A's recommendations addressing Licensed Lay Deacons (LLD) and their ministry in the LCMS.

There has been much conversation and discussion and debate about the recommendations in the report penned by Task Force 4-06A these last few months. As a result, there have been numerous responses developed in various ways. This email includes a brief summary list of recommendations from the report. It then lists issues which should be considered in light of the report – listing report ideas which are helpful, but also issues which many who disagree with the conclusion of the report have noted.

Please take some time to study the items below, and then take some action in a way which you, your congregation, or your organization feel is best for continuing to support God's mission to all people.

I would encourage you to develop an overture supporting the LLD ministry, directing it to the Synodical Convention Floor Committee where this issue will be addressed, and if a resolution emerges from the Floor Committee, will be voted on during the convention. President Matt Harrison has established a separate Floor Committee simply for this issue. Having noted that, the routing for any overture to the Synodical Convention at this moment remains the same: Overture@LCMS.org and needs to arrive by February 20th, 2016.

Following are some bullet point issues and notes which should play a significant role in helping anyone determine how they might vote to determine the outcome.

The Report of Task Force 4-06A Recommends, in Brief:

- All trained, ecclesiastically supervised LLDs be eliminated from serving in ministry by January 2018.
- LLDs older than 55 be ordained through a regional SMP colloquy process.
- Deacons younger than 55 apply and enter the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) training at seminary.
- Congregations served by LLDs
 - become multi-point ministries served by one pastor,
 - be served by inactive and retired pastors,
 - utilize technology such as “live-streamed sermons or services.”
- LLDs who enter the ordained ministry protocols be assisted by Synod to cover the cost for the SMP training/colloquy process if needing financial assistance.
- A potential role of “Evangelist,” an “outreach” role be developed, but that role would not allow the person to administer sacraments or preach.

Issues to Consider:

- The report seems to assume that all LLDs would have enrolled in a process to become an ordained pastor, but for various reasons, they have not been able to do so – geography, finances, job, family, life-stage, etc. Almost all of the LLDs with whom I have spoken, (and I have spoken with many), never intended on becoming a pastor. They have not felt called by God into the Office of the Public Ministry. They do not desire to wear the mantle of the office, nor carry the responsibility it bears. They do not feel they have been gifted for that ministry. They do however desire to serve their congregation and its people with the gifts with which they have been graced by God. They see their role as extending the Office of the Public Ministry by serving in functions of that ministry under supervision of an ordained pastor who bears the ultimate responsibility for the entire ministry. The

report requires LLDs to act on a call by God into the ministry even though they may not feel called to do so.

- However, LLDs represent an effective “farm system” for leaders. Despite most LLDs indicating they do not feel called into the Office of the Public Ministry, the Alaska Region of the Northwest District noted that 10% of their LLDs have enrolled in SMP or have used other avenues to become ordained pastors. Similar things have occurred in other districts. The LLD programs across the districts function as a type of “farm system” that, if removed as recommended by Task Force 4-06A, would immediately and severely limit the growth of identifying and recruiting high level leaders.
- A concern in the report is that LLDs serve without the blessing of the entire church, a transparochial blessing, which is an assumed function of ordination. Yet, LLDs do not serve simply at the request of a congregation. Districts are intimately involved in licensing any deacon who serves in a congregation. Pastoral supervision is a requirement of any LLD serving in that role. In that regard, oversight is transparochial since districts are the synod in that place. Seminary trained pastors supervise their ministry. Though licensing protocols may be slightly different in each district, the protocol followed and developed by the Council of Presidents could be refined even more if needed. In addition, the transparochial blessing of the church was given in 1989 when the synod in convention voted to allow the use of LLDs overseen by district developed protocols and processes.
- Though the report indicates that a primary role of ordained pastors is not to supervise leaders in ministry, the report is also quite clear that any SMP graduate be supervised by a local ordained pastor. In addition, it would seem that no one would disagree that all pastors have the responsibility of supervising and overseeing workers – volunteers and commissioned – in the congregation to which they have been called.
- The definition of the term “emergency” is debated among the leadership in the church. Some contexts have emergency situations which last for longer periods of time and appear quite often. In other contexts, emergencies are short-lived and appear infrequently. Small villages in Alaska, for example, are examples of emergencies which do not fit a short-lived, “moment in time” definition. Geographical areas which are large and sparsely populated and have small gatherings of faithful Christians rely on LLDs for supervised ministry which is for more than a moment in time. Congregations which faithfully gather, but have exhausted all possible means for an ordained pastor in its midst, rely on LLDs to receive the gifts of grace each Sunday when they gather. Understanding the context of ministry needs to inform how “emergency” is defined. In addition and quite important, translations vary on the translation of the term – some using the word “necessity” rather than “emergency” placing a significant different emphasis on the conversation.
- Many of our altar-pulpit fellowship partner churches around the globe frequently employ the use of men who have been trained to serve in ministry, are supervised, but are not ordained. The practice is often applauded by the LCMS as an integral and necessary strategy for ministry overseas, but some would disparage that strategy when it is implemented in America, despite the USA being the third largest mission field in the world.
- Creating the role of “evangelist” as a distinct office in western culture once again moves the missionary task out of the hands and vision and responsibility of the ecclesia/the people in the church, to those professionally trained. American churches have been battling that viewpoint for years. By so doing, it indicates to the church that the LCMS has other trained people for that special task. In other parts of the world, the evangelist office is a valuable resource, for most Christians recognize and act on their role as missionaries in and to their local communities. However, in the USA as a result of living in a Christendom world for generations, people have not been actively involved in local mission work. There has been no need for Christians to go to their neighbors when all their friends were Christian. This newly created auxiliary office gives Christians the comfort of

knowing that someone else is being trained for this particular important work, and reinforces the perspective that pastors only feed found sheep.

- Though there is a fear among some that our Lutheran theology will become the victim of a water-downed, adulterated version of the truth due to a lack of sound, lengthy seminary training, there is a robust vetting process for determining who can serve as an LLD. No “to-be deacon” self identifies. They fill the functions of ministry after 1) a congregation determines they need to employ the services of a LLD, 2) a supervising pastor agrees and is appointed to oversee the entire ministry, including that of the LLD, 3) a prospective LLD is identified in collaboration between an individual and the leadership of a congregation, 4) the LLD enrolls and finishes training developed by the seminaries and taught by ordained pastors or university instructors including yearly continuing education requirements, and 5) the district office employs a robust process to finally approve the LLD and license them for service for one year. There is more accountability and oversight for a LLD than there presently is for a pastor in our LCMS.
- Data from 26 years of LLD ministry supports the role in extending mission and supporting the Office of the Public Ministry:
 - Congregations served by LLDs have been brought back from “death” to the point of being able to call a full-time pastor.
 - The Office of the Public Ministry is highlighted and elevated as a result of LLDs in ministry. Ordained pastors are recognized as the spiritual overseers and do not take that responsibility lightly. The supervision of LLDs, and the pastor’s role as the responsible individual for the ministry in the congregations where the LLD serves indicates the significant burden of responsibility our LCMS lays on the shoulders of the ordained pastor who serves in the Office of the Public Ministry. The use of LLDs highlights that important role and office.
 - LLD ministry has become a path to ordained ministry for those who have felt called into the office. Their previous LLD training and service has prepared them well for the next step in their vocational ministry.

Why Licensed Lay Deacon Ministry Is Necessary

- The “shrinking middle” – increasing numbers of smaller churches on both ends of the life spectrum (birth and death) unable to support full-time workers.
- Innovative ideas – the need and desire to begin new and vital ministries in an ever-increasing secular context of people unwilling to engage through traditional channels is supported by trained leaders who can gather people together in venues through creative and innovative efforts without the burden of high costs and salaries.
- Secularization – as a result of antagonism and ambivalence to Christianity, bi-vocational workers, many of whom are LLDs, have credibility.
- Scope of the mission task – population of the USA projected to go from 321 million to 400 million by 2051.
 - Life-cycles of congregations – many congregations are entering late-stages of the life-cycle as the Boomer generation ages. Additional financial burden placed on these aging or newly born churches to send a worker to SMP or call a seminary graduate or pastor from the field is simply not possible for them.
 - The financial burden for ministry training – the SMP program, though beneficial as part of the spectrum of training in the LC-MS, requires a minimum of \$32,000, but often closer to \$50,000. This cost for staying in ministry (as recommended by the report) cannot be carried by most bi-vocational leaders, small starts, shrinking congregations, and congregations dealing with transition issues.

- The “cost” for a full-time pastor to serve in a congregation continues to rise. And with many first call pastors, as well as those in field, bringing with them families and large debt, some congregations are simply unable to bear that cost.
- In addition, as the Task Force Report recommends, eliminating the high costs for anyone interested in serving in the ordained ministry, and lowering hurdles and requirements that make it difficult for people to engage the process is a task which the LCMS should not only investigate, but embrace as a high priority.
- Presently, there are less than 100 students total enrolled at both seminaries in ordination track studies. Individuals are not enrolling, which translates to fewer graduates available to fill vacancies. The Task Force Report recognizes this important limitation as well.

Some Other Thoughts:

- We need more time
 - Due to the nature of the topic,
 - The diversity of perspectives and interpretations regarding The Office of the Public Ministry and its application,
 - The magnitude of impact on congregations using LLDs.
- Voting does not achieve consensus – voting as a Synod on this issue may not be the most appropriate method to achieve consensus.

Finally, eliminating LLDs also inhibits the law of love. That is, many in need of God’s grace and mercy will be denied that opportunity as a result of these recommendations. Information gathered from the districts and contexts in the LCMS indicates that the removal of trained, ecclesiastically supervised LLDs would eliminate (according to the Task Force’s own report, at least 118 congregations now worshipping with LLD leadership would close their doors), or severely reduce Word and Sacrament ministry, particularly among small, poor, aging, remote, or new congregations. Ultimately we are telling faithful Lutheran Christians who wish to continue gathering regularly for worship that unless they can find the means, in their difficult circumstances and contexts, to employ an ordained pastor, Word and Sacrament ministry must stop.

I hope these thoughts above are helpful for you. They are meant to be so. Continue to lead God’s people faithfully and powerfully into His mission field.

God bless your work. He is faithful.