

Guidelines for Negotiated Resignations in Northwest Washington Synod

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Introduction: The ELCA has placed a high value on educated and trained leaders for its mission in the world. To serve in public ministry in this church requires extensive education for rostered ministers. In addition, the church acknowledges the call of God as the source for the vocations of its leaders and confirms that call by installing rostered ministers into covenantal relationships with congregations.

In this relationship, the rostered minister is sustained by means of monetary compensation, housing or equivalent housing allowance, medical coverage, retirement contributions, professional expense reimbursement, and, in some cases, other benefits and allowances provided by the congregation. It is hoped that this partnership thrives.

Unfortunately, there may be times when our human relationships become frayed for a variety of reasons, and even well-intended covenants fail to accomplish the mission for which they were established. The guidelines below are to provide objective assistance in determining what is fair and compassionate in the breaking of a covenantal relationship between a rostered minister and a congregation.

Under normal circumstances, a rostered minister who serves a congregation under regular call will serve that congregation until the leader dies or resigns according to the provisions of the Northwest Washington Synod Constitution (S14.18, S14.43). These sections of the constitution and other documents of the ELCA also provide clear guidelines for removal of a rostered minister under extraordinary circumstances.

Since the Constitutional process for removal of a rostered minister can be an extremely time- and energy-consuming process and can cause considerable distress for the minister and within the congregation, there are some situations when this process for negotiating a resignation of a rostered minister may better serve both the rostered minister and the congregation. Recognizing that such situations may occur within congregations of this synod, the following process may serve as a guideline prior to a negotiated resignation.

1. Any problems or perceived problems concerning the appropriateness or effectiveness of the rostered minister serving the congregation should always be addressed first within the congregation's Mutual Ministry Committee, the Executive Committee of the Congregation's Council, the elected leadership, or within whatever group is designated to provide staff support. The same approach should be followed for problems or perceived problems regarding agreed-upon support for a rostered minister. Should these efforts within the congregation prove unsuccessful, the congregational president, governing body, or rostered minister is to contact the Office of the Bishop.
2. The elected congregational leadership will hereafter be defined as the council, as stated in the congregational model constitution in chapter 12. The council is usually represented by the president of the congregation. The president shall consult with the bishop or the bishop's designee to determine possible strategies for resolution, which may include the use of outside consultants, additional training in skills or management, or conflict mediation.

3. Should the rostered minister and the council of the congregation find themselves unable to resolve their differences, even through suggested strategies, the council must take an official action to express their lack of confidence in the rostered minister's leadership (such as a vote of no confidence at a council meeting). Furthermore, as stated in the Northwest Washington Synod Constitution S14.18 and S14.43, the council must determine their willingness to pursue the constitutional provision for the removal of a rostered minister whom they deem to be "unable to fulfill the ministry given the local climate." This action must contain specific examples of the rostered minister's inability to perform adequately. Further, it must document events that the elected leadership and the rostered ministers have taken to bring them to this point.
4. If the bishop of this synod determines there is no possibility of resolving this situation short of following the constitutional provisions for the removal of a rostered minister, the option of a negotiated resignation may be recommended. The bishop, or the bishop's designee, will first consult with the rostered minister to establish the circumstances under which the rostered minister would be willing to step down voluntarily. The rostered minister's spouse is welcome to be part of the consultation if the rostered minister requests this.
5. On the basis of this consultation, the bishop or the bishop's designee will make recommendations to the president of the council regarding the terms of the negotiated agreement. Recommendations may include finances, benefits, final day, etc. Please reference number 10 below. The bishop or the bishop's designee will serve as negotiator throughout the process.
6. The president will oversee the drafting of a preliminary Memorandum of Understanding that spells out the conditions and considerations of a voluntary resignation by the rostered minister. This will be in consultation with the council executive committee as defined in the congregation's constitution. This agreement shall not be drafted without the participation of the bishop or the bishop's designee.
7. Once the executive committee drafts the preliminary Memorandum of Understanding, it will be presented to the council for approval, with the understanding that this is a negotiable document.
8. The draft of the Memorandum of Understanding must be shared with the rostered minister so that the rostered minister may consult and pray with their spouse, mentors, and/or advisors.
9. The rostered minister will meet with the council's executive committee together with the bishop or the bishop's designee. Differences in expectations or considerations may be negotiated at this time. If further negotiation is needed, please refer to steps 6-9 until a negotiated Memorandum of Understanding is reached

10. The Memorandum of Understanding shall address the following issues:

- a. Transitional support for the rostered minister will include the rostered minister's present salary and benefits for an agreed-upon length of time. However, allowances for continuing education, mileage, etc., will not continue beyond the date of resignation. It is helpful in negotiating

transitional support to focus not on an evaluation of service rendered, but rather on the needs of the persons involved and the congregation's ability to provide transitional compensation, recognizing that neither the rostered minister's need nor the congregation's resources shall be the primary or sole criterion for negotiations.

- b. It is strongly suggested that the separation pay is at a minimum of twelve weeks' pay with full benefits plus accrued vacation. Depending on the length of service and circumstances, this may be extended up to 26 weeks. Contingencies of each situation need to be considered.
- c. Additional assistance may be provided for emotional support of the rostered minister and the minister's family, such as extended use of the parsonage, and other issues of concern.
- d. An agreement shall be strongly encouraged that neither party will make public comments beyond the official communications on this resignation decision.
- e. The written resignation of the rostered minister will be presented to the council and the bishop within forty-eight hours after both the council's executive committee and the minister have signed all the provisions of the Memorandum of Understanding.
- f. After informing the president and council, the rostered minister prepares a letter of resignation. This letter may be mailed or emailed to the congregation membership. Depending on the circumstances, the rostered minister, the bishop or bishop's designee, or council president will inform the congregation orally at the next worship service.

11. The rostered minister resigning will end their term of service within 14 days of the date of the resignation unless otherwise negotiated with the executive committee and in consultation with the bishop or the bishop's designee. A public opportunity to express appreciation to the rostered minister and their family will be provided by the congregation's elected leadership.

12. In the event that this protocol is used to bring about a negotiated resignation, the financial support that the congregation provides to the rostered minister shall be considered "transitional support" or "separation pay" and not "severance." Therefore, the "lump sum" concept associated with severance packages shall not apply. Should the rostered minister receive a new call or new employment whose compensation is commensurate with the former called position at any time during the period of transitional support, the congregation's responsibility will be adjusted to reflect the income the minister receives from the new call or employment per the negotiated Memorandum of Understanding.