



Florida-Bahamas Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Parish Lay Minister Program Handbook

Program Handbook

A ministry in service to the congregation,
flowing from the office of Word & Sacrament,
under the direction of the Office of the Bishop.

The Heart of the Parish Lay Ministers Program: The Parish Lay Ministers are members of the priesthood of all believers who are experiencing God’s call to express their faith and commitment to service further and use their unique gifts in a more focused way. The local pastor in their congregation publicly affirms them. The Parish Lay Minister’s work is solely within the congregation, at the discretion of the local pastor. The pastor determines the extent of the role performed as a Parish Lay Minister in the congregation. For this reason, the Parish Lay Minister serves at the pastor's discretion in the local congregation. The line of responsibility and accountability runs solely to and from the pastor.

Administration

Overall, the Florida-Bahamas Parish Lay Ministers Program is a synod ministry entirely overseen by the Office of the Bishop. Yet, it is specifically pastorally connected and congregationally based. A listing of commissioned, active, and inactive Parish Lay Ministers is maintained by the Office of the Bishop. Because of their unique public function and role, Parish Lay Ministers are held to the same standard as rostered leaders outlined in the document, “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline and Expectations.” The program is directly administered by the sitting synod Bishop. However, while the Bishop’s office maintains oversight of the Parish Lay Ministers, for the sake of good order, this is not meant to imply a direct relationship between the Bishop’s office and the individual Parish Lay Ministers. Parish Lay Ministers serve the local pastor in their congregations only and do not serve the synod.

The Bishop’s Parish Lay Minister Oversight Committee

The Oversight Committee comprises three clergy and three Parish Lay Ministers, each serving staggered three-year terms. Members may serve two consecutive terms. In addition, one Parish Lay Minister candidate (an approved applicant in training), with the approval of the candidate’s pastor, may serve a term of up to two years, or until the candidate is commissioned, whichever comes first. The Bishop’s appointed liaison serves as a permanent member of the Committee. All term committee members must participate actively in the Parish Lay Ministers Program. Suppose a pastor/congregation ends participation in the program, or a Parish Lay Minister’s tenure terminates in a congregation. In that case, they will cease serving on the Oversight Committee at the conclusion of their term. The committee may suggest term candidates for the Oversight Committee to the Bishop’s liaison for the Bishop’s approval. From among the Parish Lay Minister members of the committee, the Bishop will appoint a chair and a secretary. The Bishop may also nominate advisors to the committee as the Bishop deems necessary.

Responsibilities of the Oversight Committee

The Oversight Committee is not a policy-making board. The Bishop establishes policy for the Oversight Committee and the Parish Lay Ministers Program. The Oversight Committee serves as an ambassador for the Parish Lay Ministers Program. To this end, the Oversight Committee displays the program at synod assemblies and other communication outlets, including monitoring the program's information on the synod website. Also, it serves to inform, implement, and communicate to pastors, congregations, and Parish Lay Ministers policies set by the Bishop regarding the program.

Specific Responsibilities of the Oversight Committee include:

1. Working with the synod, keep an updated listing of participating pastors, congregations, and Parish Lay Ministers currently serving, as well as a list of persons who have been Parish Lay Ministers but are currently not serving in congregations. It also keeps other documents necessary to administer the program. Electronic copies of all documents must be maintained at the synod office.
2. Serves to keep pastors and Parish Lay Ministers informed of changes in the “Parish Lay Minister Program Handbook” and reviews applications.
3. Verifies the pastor’s certification that all training requirements have been met, and coordinates dates and times for commissioning Parish Lay Ministers.
4. Plans the annual Parish Lay Minister Retreat.
5. Plans and/or conducts the required “Table Talk” (an initial orientation session explained below for applicants and pastors in the program.
6. Informs the Bishop of any communications from pastors and/or Parish Lay Ministers regarding the program, the changed status of Parish Lay Ministers, or any situations that may arise from the program.
7. Establish and maintain the Candidate checklist for completing the requirements for commissioning.

Procedure for Becoming a Parish Lay Minister

The journey to becoming a Parish Lay Minister will follow the procedures below, though some steps may be in a different order:

Discernment: A person perceives an inward call seeking an outward expression: a desire to express their faith in a focused and committed public way. Before a pastoral endorsement, the pastor and the candidate should meet and discuss a book on discernment approved by the Bishop's Oversight Committee (ex, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer).

Pastoral Endorsement: After discussions with the pastor, the pastor decides to endorse the individual. At this point, the pastor may want to begin educating the congregation as to the meaning and roles of Parish Lay Ministers. It is essential to show that the Parish Lay Minister does not further the distance between the pastor and the baptized members, but actually bridges that gap. The application is made and forwarded to the Bishop's Deacon Oversight Committee for approval and guidance. Upon approval, the person becomes a Parish Lay Minister candidate.

Fulfillment of Education Requirements and/or Committee Recommendations: This may have already begun even before making an application. It may be accomplished through individual study with the pastor, or it may take place in several other approved settings, including, but not restricted to, the Select Program, the School for Lay Leaders, or other established regional educational clusters throughout the synod, or approved denominational deacon's schools, i.e., Episcopal centers. Whatever the avenue of instruction, documents of completion should be verified by the pastor and forwarded by the pastor to the oversight committee. Throughout this process, it is expected that the pastor will work with the candidate regarding liturgical instruction and spiritual formation. Also, the pastor will likely educate the congregation on the benefits and functions of Parish Lay Ministers.

Table Talk: All candidates, with their pastors, must participate in the oversight committee's Table Talk. The purpose of the Table Talk is for pastors and candidates to review and discuss the Parish Lay Minister's Handbook. Table Talks usually will take place via Zoom (or other) conference application.

Oversight Committee Approval: Upon completion of the instructional requirements checklist, the pastor may forward the candidate's completed checklist to the Oversight Committee for final review and approval.

Commissioning: Once the completed checklist is approved, the pastor and the congregation will coordinate a date for commissioning. The pastor will conduct the commissioning service. Usually, the commissioning takes place in the Parish Lay Minister's home congregation, within the worship service. An order for the commissioning can be downloaded from the synod website. Each Parish Lay Minister will receive a necklace and certificate from the Bishop's office.

Commissioning Participation: For the commission ceremony, the pastor may wish to invite other Parish Lay Ministers to participate. Parish Lay Ministers may vest in the approved alb and red cincture, process, and participate in laying hands upon the new Parish Lay Minister. However, rostered leaders in attendance do not lay hands upon the Parish Lay Minister, but standing behind instead raise their hands in prayer surrounding the commissioned one. There are times when Parish Lay Ministers may also be invited to attend an ordination of a pastor or an ELCA Deacon. Parish Lay Ministers do not process forward or participate in the laying on of hands of rostered leaders.

Vestments: Parish Lay Ministers may wear a white alb, a red cincture, and the PLM necklace in their home congregation and other settings. Parish Lay Ministers are not to wear clergy shirts, collars, or vestments, as these are signs of the rostered ministry. Parish Lay Ministers may wear their white stole, red cincture, and the PLM necklace at the ordinations of ministers of Word and Sacrament or Word and Service.

Terms of Service:

The Parish Lay Minister serves at the behest of the pastor. The term of service is for as long as the pastor and Parish Lay Minister desire. For any reason, the pastor may terminate the program or a particular Parish Lay Minister's service. Parish Lay Ministers may serve the congregation when a pastor leaves a congregation. However, the new pastor may terminate the program or a particular Parish Lay Minister's service for any reason. The Parish Lay Minister's name is now removed from the active service list.

Interims: When an interim pastor arrives, Parish Lay Ministers may continue to serve the congregation if the interim wants to continue the program.

New Pastor: When a new pastor is called and installed as pastor of a congregation, they may decide to continue or terminate the program or a particular Parish Lay Minister's service for any reason.

Mobility-

- When a Parish Lay Minister moves to another congregation within the synod, they may serve again under the new pastor's oversight, if the new pastor so desires. The pastor should request a commission date for the Parish Lay Minister to begin service in the new congregation.
- When a Parish Lay Minister ceases to officially serve as a Parish Lay Minister in a congregation (for any reason), and later resumes service in that same congregation, re-commissioning is not necessary. The pastor, however, may wish to recognize the resumption of service with a prayer of blessing during a worship service.
- Persons moving to Florida congregations from other synods who have served in such authorized ministries may ask their pastor to apply. They will be evaluated for the Parish Lay Ministers program on a case-by-case basis.

Functions of Parish Lay Ministers

Parish Lay Minister in the Liturgy: Generally, the function of the Parish Lay Minister in liturgy will be determined by the pastor according to the needs of the congregation and the specific gifts of the person. The pastor may assign some of the liturgical duties rightfully carried out by the pastor. This may involve setting the table, resetting after the distribution, and assisting the pastor by tending to the missal (turning pages, etc.) as the pastor presides at the liturgy. If the pastor reads the Gospel, this may also be delegated to the Parish Lay Minister. Care should be taken that the Parish Lay Minister shares the pastor's duties and does not replace duties usually delegated to other congregation members, including lector, communion assistant, etc. Parish Lay Ministers may also be trained to lead other liturgical offices that do not have Eucharistic worship liturgies. They may also lead or assist in funerals. A Parish Lay Minister may not officiate at church weddings.

Parish Lay Ministers as Celebrants: Instead of paying a supply pastor, Parish Lay Ministers are often requested to supply in worship for the pastor when the pastor is absent. This is acceptable when Communion is not celebrated. It is the teaching and policy of the ELCA that presiding at Eucharist is properly the function of ministers of Word and Sacrament. The minister of Word and Sacrament invites those in attendance to come to the table of the Lord. It is proper, however, that Communion be carried from the altar to the house for distribution to homebound and hospitalized members immediately as is possible following a worship service. Baptisms are the proper function of only the Word and Sacrament ministry.

Counseling: Parish Lay Ministers do not enter into counseling relationships with other people unless the person is a licensed therapist in Florida. If authorized, the Parish Lay Minister functions as a therapist, not a Parish Lay Minister. The two roles should not be confused in a congregational setting. This form of professional counseling is not done on church property. The Parish Lay Ministers program has no confidentiality between members and a Parish Lay Minister. The Parish Lay Minister always serves under the oversight of the pastor.

Boundaries of Service Outside the Parish: Parish Lay Ministers serve in their home congregation only, unless specifically called by the Bishop to serve in a synod capacity in another congregation. "Loaning" Parish Lay Ministers to another congregation creates the misunderstanding that an order of Parish Lay Ministers exists in the synod and succumbs to the notion of the Parish Lay Minister as super-laity or minor clergy. Therefore, the practice of loaning Parish Lay Ministers to another congregation is not acceptable.

Parish Lay Ministers and the Congregation Council: Obviously, leaders in a congregation are called to serve on the congregation council. These leaders may also desire to serve as Parish Lay Ministers. The Parish Lay Minister serves the congregation under the direction of the pastor. A Parish Lay Minister may serve on the congregational council if the pastor allows.

Pastor and Parish Lay Minister Relationship: In the unlikely event of a conflict between the pastor and Parish Lay Minister, it is the pastor's sole right to dismiss the Parish Lay Minister from functioning as a Parish Lay Minister immediately. The Parish Lay Minister serves at the behest of and under the pastor's oversight. The pastor is responsible for the accountability of the Parish Lay Minister.

For complete information and forms, please visit <http://fbsynod.com/resources/PLM/>