GOOD, WISE, AND SPIRIT-LED:
HOW ELCA PASTORAL CANDIDATES
RESPOND TO A LETTER OF CALL

A PROJECT REPORT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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APRIL 2002
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude to Dr. David Draper, Dr. Leslie Lightner, and Ms. Marilyn Smith, whose support and encouragement nurtured this project.

With appreciation to the pastors whose participation was so instructive, to countless colleagues whose conversations, comments and insights were part of the soil from which this study grew.

With thankfulness to the bishops, assistants and church-wide staff whose cooperation served to keep this study connected to the wider church.

And with all my heart to my wife Linda, my sons, and my parents whose patience, understanding, and love sustained and carried me throughout every step of the whole process of the work.

I consider it a privilege to offer this study to the glory of God with a prayer that it may contribute in some small way to the edification of the Church.
ABSTRACT

This study investigates how a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

In the ELCA a congregation and pastor enter into partnership for ministry by means of a call process. This process involves a bishop providing the names of prospective candidates to the congregation’s call committee. The object of the process is for the congregation to extend a Letter of Call to the candidate recommended by the committee. Once the congregation’s action is taken, the candidate receives the Letter of Call and discerns whether to accept the call to the position offered or to return the call and decline the position.

The pastor’s response to a Letter of Call is a matter of significant consequence in the life of the pastor, the pastor’s family, the calling congregation, the congregation the pastor currently serves, the bishop, and finally, the whole church. With so much at stake for so many, it is no wonder that pastors and all parties in the process are encouraged to undertake the task with prayer and trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

However, I am aware that there are pastors who participate in the call process with sincere devotion, who respond to a Letter of Call with confident conviction, and still discover, too late, that the response does not result in a satisfying or rewarding match for ministry. Reflecting on personal experience and conversations with colleagues, I realized that many pastors have received little or no preparation for responding to a Letter of Call. Because a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call is so crucial for so many, I decided that I wanted to learn how a pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response.
In pursuing the problem statement of this study, I undertook library research on God's call, the call to ministry, and the call process. I interviewed six ELCA pastors who had recently participated in the call process. I conducted a survey of deployed staff persons from the nine regions of the ELCA and a document analysis of several ELCA resources related to the call process.

I found that pastors make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response by faith. At the same time, the preparation, equipping, strengthening, and support for that response of faith from the believing community, the church, synods, seminaries, and colleagues is present only to a very limited extent. Helping pastors to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is a challenge to which I believe the Lord is calling the various expressions of the church.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

As it comes out of the manila envelope, the piece of paper is just a bit heavier weight than normal, adding a formal feel to the already formal appearance of the document. The barely legible signatures beside the gold seal in the lower left-hand corner make it official.

The words are simple, straightforward, and to the point. Yet, there is something about the paper and its message that communicates reverence. For this reason, its arrival brings with it both promise and threat, hope and fear, affirmation and apprehension. The paper is an ELCA Letter of Call. A fictitious sample is reproduced below as Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample ELCA Letter of Call

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter of Call</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to an Ordained Minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor Hans H. Hoepfl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to do God's will,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit of Joy Evangelical Lutheran Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happenheim, Gladstate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a congregation of the Heilige Synod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 25, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extends to you this call to serve as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Context of the Problem

A pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has received a Letter of Call. On one level, it means the recipient is faced with a simple yes or no decision. The choices are to accept the call or to decline the call. It is a choice that could be made by simply tossing a coin. Heads is go. Tails is no.

On another level, however, the choice is anything but simple. It is a response usually made with earnest prayer and sincere, disciplined reflection which seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If the candidate is a recent seminary graduate who has been awaiting just such a Letter of Call, it is rare that the response will be other than to accept (Rev. Timothy Isringhausen, Assistant to Southern Ohio Synod Bishop, telephone interview with the author, 5 October 2000). If the candidate is a pastor currently serving under call to another congregation or specialized ministry setting, the process of response may include not only prayer and reflection, but a spiritual and physical anguish akin to the experience of Jesus, praying and sweating drops of blood on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22.44).

What is at stake in such a response is the life, ministry, and future of the pastor and the pastor's household, if the pastor has a family. Also at stake is the life, ministry, and future of the calling congregation and the context where the pastor is currently located, whether that context is a seminary, a congregation, or a specialized ministry setting. What is at stake for all involved is faithfulness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in living out God's call.

In the polity of the ELCA, responding to God's call to ordained pastoral ministry in general and a congregation's Letter of Call in particular is understood to involve both
an individual and an institutional dimension.

This church believes that the call comes to individuals from God both personally and through the church. Persons experience the call to ordained ministry through a variety of ways. Fundamental to each is the personal experience of God's justifying act in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. . . . The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America believes that such a sense of call must be tested over a period of time, shaped by theological study, and finally confirmed in the church's call to serve as a pastor. It is the Holy Spirit who enables the church to discern a person's gifts and abilities for ordained ministry. (Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA, adopted by the Church Council of the ELCA, 1990)

To be sure, other factors will be weighed in the course of responding to a particular Letter of Call. Such factors may include the kind of considerations that enter into similar decisions involving secular career opportunities. There is no formula for making a response. There is no step-by-step process that can be followed to ensure that every response will be satisfying, rewarding, and a blessing to all involved.

So, how does a pastor, specifically an ELCA pastor, make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call? To bring this question more clearly into focus, it is necessary to have an idea of how clergy are deployed in the ELCA. The ELCA expects congregations and pastors to engage one another in the call process with judicatory officials exercising oversight and serving in an advisory capacity.

In the ELCA, the Call Process can and does vary among the sixty-five synods. However, the following description (based on The Call Process, Southeast Michigan Synod, 1995) illustrates some of the main elements which are characteristic of many synods. For the sake of clarity, words and phrases which have a specific meaning in ELCA usage appear, at their first occurrence, in italic type. The reader is referred to the section Definition of Terms, ELCA Terms, below page twenty and following.

When an ELCA congregation determines it wants to call a pastor, the
congregation contacts the synod bishop. The bishop, a member of the bishop's staff, or other designated representative of the bishop meets with the congregational leadership to outline the call process and give attention to the formation of a call committee. Because God is understood as the source of a call to ministry, the process intentionally seeks the guidance of God's Word and Holy Spirit.

All the work of the Call Committee is set within the context of Bible study and prayer. This includes, at a minimum, regular reading and discussion of Scripture and significant time devoted to prayer at each meeting of the Call Committee." (The Call Process, Southeast Michigan Synod, ELCA, 1995)

Once a call committee is formed, the committee begins its work by preparing a Congregational Mission Profile (Appendix A). Upon satisfactory completion of the profile, the bishop or bishop's representative meets with the call committee to present the name or names of a candidate or candidates who may be contacted by the committee for an interview. These names are selected by the bishop from pastors who have informed the bishop they are available for call, who have been nominated by the congregation, or who have been suggested by rostered leaders from neighboring ELCA congregations.

For a pastor or seminary graduate who has completed the candidacy process, mobility involves preparing a Mobility Form (Appendix A). This form is filed with the bishops of those synods in which the pastor is open to receiving a call. The Mobility Form is current for one year. When a pastor who does not have a current Mobility Form on file is suggested by the congregation or invited by the bishop to enter a call process, the pastor will be expected to prepare a Mobility Form.

On the basis of the Congregational Mission Profile and the Mobility Form, the bishop determines the appropriateness of a particular congregation and pastor pursuing the call process. Along with the name or names of recommended candidates, the bishop
supplies the call committee with information from the Mobility Forms of each candidate. At the same time, copies of the Congregational Mission Profile are forwarded by the bishop to each candidate the congregation will be interviewing.

At this point, a member of the call committee contacts each candidate to schedule individual interviews. At the time of the interview the candidate travels to the community where the congregation is located. The spouse, if there is a spouse, may accompany the candidate or the spouse may visit the community at a later point in the process. Upon arrival, the candidate is met by a member or members of the call committee and, not necessarily in this order, is provided a tour of the community, shares a meal with some or all of the members of the committee, and meets with the entire committee for an interview. If the spouse has accompanied the candidate, she or he may be present for the interview. During the interview the committee poses questions which they have prepared in advance, to which the candidate responds. The candidate is then given an opportunity to ask questions of the committee and they respond. In some synods, the description of the call process specifies that the congregation is expected to pay the expenses of this interview, including transportation, meals and lodging for the candidate and spouse.

The call committee repeats this process for each candidate interviewed. At the conclusion of the interviews, the committee determines whether or not to recommend a candidate to the congregation council. Candidates who are not recommended are notified that they have been released from consideration. If the committee decides not to recommend any of the candidates, this is reported to the bishop and the bishop returns to present another set of candidate suggestions and the process continues as before.

If the call committee decides to recommend a candidate to the congregation
council, the candidate and bishop are notified. When the council receives the recommendation, they may reject the recommendation, in which case the process goes back to the committee. Or the council may accept the recommendation and call a special meeting of the congregation for the purpose of presenting the name of the candidate for a vote. The ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations, unalterable article C.09.01 provides that the issuing of a Letter of Call to a candidate requires a two-thirds majority of the congregation’s voting members present.

In between the council action to present the committee’s recommendation to the congregation and the special, congregation meeting, the council prepares, as much as possible, the Definition of Compensation, Benefits and Responsibilities attachment. If it can be arranged with the candidate, the candidate may be introduced to the congregation by means of a videotaped interview, a "Meet the Candidate" social gathering at the calling church, or other appropriate format. The practice of bringing a candidate to the congregation for a trial sermon is officially discouraged, though a candidate may offer to do so. Some call committees send a delegation of committee members to worship with the candidate’s current congregation prior to making a recommendation to the council.

At the congregation meeting, if the recommended candidate is not elected by a two-thirds majority vote, the process is returned to council and committee. If the two-thirds majority is achieved, the Letter of Call is issued and delivered to the bishop for official signature, attesting that the process was conducted decently and in order. The bishop forwards the letter to the candidate.

Upon receipt of the Letter of Call, the candidate may request another meeting or meetings to continue conversation with the congregation that will result in her or his
response. Some call process descriptions specify that the candidate is responsible for expenses incurred in such a meeting or meetings. The candidate is also encouraged to be in conversation with the bishop or bishop's staff throughout the process.

By the time the Letter of Call arrives, the candidate has received considerable input, impression, information and perhaps even insight. Prior to the Letter of Call's arrival, the whole process is merely an exploration of possibilities. With the arrival of the letter, however, the candidate is faced with the need to make a response. Understandably, there is substantial investment in the outcome of the process on the part of both call committee and candidate, as well as the bishop and staff. The response, when made, will be reached against the background of the entire process. In addition to announcing the congregation's vote in favor of extending the Letter of Call, the document includes the considerations presented on the following page in Figure 2.

The first two lines at the bottom of the letter are signed by the congregation's President and Secretary as official representatives of the congregation. The third line bears the bishop's signature and the date of the bishop's signing with the seal of the synod affixed to the lower left hand corner. The Letter of Call is often accompanied by a letter from the bishop to the candidate. Such a letter often contains instruction and encouragement.

I am pleased to be forwarding to you the Letter of Call that Spirit of Joy congregation is extending to you to serve as their pastor. The people of Spirit of Joy congregation have expressed their confidence in you and in your ministry.

If you accept the Call, please sign all three copies that are provided. . . .

Hans, I know that you have been seriously considering this Call and the prospects it holds for your future. If there is any way in which this office may be of help and support, please do not hesitate to be in touch. May the Holy Spirit guide your deliberations and confirm your decision! (adapted from Bishop Philip Wahl's letter to the author, March 1998)
Figure 2. Sample ELCA Letter of Call

We call you to exercise among us the ministry of Word and Sacrament which God has established and which the Holy Spirit empowers: [a general description of typical pastoral ministry.]

We call you to fulfill this pastoral ministry in accord with the standards and policies for ordained ministers of the ELCA.

In so doing, we call you to be diligent in the study of Holy Scripture, in use of the means of grace, in prayer, in faithful service, and in holy living.

With this call, we pledge our prayers, love, esteem, and personal support for the sake of the ministry entrusted to you by God and for our ministry together in Christ's name. Specific responsibilities, compensation, benefits and conditions of this call are contained in a document related to this call.

In testimony of this call, we have subscribed our names on behalf of the congregation on this twenty-fifth day of December, in the year of Our Lord 2001.

[seal] [signatures] [congregation president] [congregation secretary] [synod bishop]

Statement of the Problem

At first reading, a description of the ELCA Call Process may give the impression that this is an example of an intentionally-crafted, experience-tested, carefully-refined, well-ordered, and highly-supervised procedure, which in fact, it is. The church has given some of its best attention to good order, due process, and effective management of resources in developing the Call Process, while at the same time taking care to maintain theological and confessional integrity.

It may also be supposed that such a procedure would serve our Lord Jesus Christ and his church well. And in many instances, the partnership which is created between congregation and pastor through this process results in an effective, rewarding, satisfying, and long-term match for ministry that is a blessing to all.

Yet, such a happy outcome is not always the case. The process is not always
effective in bringing about healthy partnerships between congregations and pastors. On the basis of ELCA research, Lori Eickmann observes, "In the past decade, 443 people resigned from the clergy roster, or about 50 per year, while 744 people, about 82 per year, left the roster for reasons other than death, disability or retirement." In addition, she notes, "... five percent of men and up to seventeen percent of women go on leave from the ministry after their first call. It's not known how many of those leave the ministry permanently - or why" (2000, 45).

Again, when it comes to accepting or declining a Letter of Call the stakes are high for the pastor, the pastor's family, the congregation, the synod, and the whole church. The official ELCA process that leads up to the moment of response is clearly defined and carefully supervised. Yet, for all the attention to the details of the process, there seems to be a piece missing. That missing piece is the problem this study seeks to address.

Simply stated, the problem is: how does a pastoral candidate make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call?

It has already been acknowledged that there is no sure-fire formula for discerning such a response. There is no prescribed series of steps a pastoral candidate may take to guarantee a response will be good, wise, and Spirit-led. It is said that a pastor once asked the late Dr. Joseph Sittler, eminent Lutheran teacher and theologian, to explain how he would know if accepting a particular call was the right thing to do. In reply, Dr. Sittler reportedly answered the pastor, "You will know it is right when you have finished serving the call." The question that begs asking is: Does this represent the best we can do? Or is it possible to describe a responsible process of discernment which will permit
pastoral candidates to make a response with greater confidence at the beginning, as the partnership between congregation and pastor is being considered.

**Purpose of the Study**

It is the purpose of this study to examine ways pastoral candidates identify, interpret, and process information and insights gathered through the call process in making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

Again, there is no formula for making such a response. Nevertheless, pastoral candidates can and do bring various insights, skills, and disciplines to bear in making their response. These include, though are not limited to personal, spiritual, intellectual, practical, and professional resources. This study seeks to identify the resources which pastoral candidates employ and how various factors are understood, interpreted, and weighed in making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response.

This study examined four types of material in the course of the investigation. The first type focused on personal and spiritual resources which the candidate brought to the response. These included the expertise, experiences, background, disciplines, insights, and skills which were unique to the individual. A second type examined the practical and professional guidance provided by the church through seminaries, synods, *regions*, or other expressions of the *wider church*. Considered in this group were the training, preparation, seminars, courses, background, recommended readings, consultation, and mentoring resources which were available to candidates either before or during the process. A third type was composed of data gathered in the call process. This was defined as information and impressions provided by the congregation as it represented itself in the call process. The fourth type, selected from the first three, sought to identify what was
most useful to the candidate in the process of making a well-discerned response.

Research Methodology

This study pursued the question of how pastoral candidates respond to a Letter of Call using the phenomenological approach to qualitative research. In selecting this methodology, I acknowledge Merriam's insight which states,

Phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that underpins all of qualitative research - and herein lies much of the confusion surrounding the writing in this area. Qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation. . . ." (1998, 15)

While it may be accurate to state that all qualitative research draws from a phenomenological philosophy, it is also possible to distinguish a specifically phenomenological approach, such as employed in this study. As Merriam points out, "In the conduct of phenomenological study, the focus would be on the essence or structure of an experience (phenomenon). . . . The task of the phenomenologist, then, is to depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (1998, 15-6).

The experience (phenomenon) under investigation in this study was how a pastoral candidate makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. In researching this phenomenon I followed, with minor adaptations, the outline for phenomenological research developed in 1965 by Spiegelberg (Merriam 1998, 16). The steps as I defined and employed them in conducting the study were:

1. giving explicit statement to an intuitive grasp of the experience
2. investigating several examples to gain a sense of the general essence of the experience
3. systematically exploring relationships in the examples
4. bracketing beliefs about the experience
5. interpreting the meaning of experience.

Step number one was expressed as the problem statement of this study. Step number two was carried out through the selection of a sample and conducting research using interviews, survey questionnaires, document analysis, and personal reflection as described in Chapter Four. Steps three and four involved the analysis of data, presented in Chapter Five. Step five, the task of interpretation, was the subject of Chapter Six.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study was the problem statement. How does a pastoral candidate make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call?

In addition, four key questions sought to focus on various factors or aspects of the process of making a response. These served to shed light on the experience under consideration. The questions included:

1. What background and skills did the pastoral candidate bring, personally and spiritually, to the process of making a response and from what source?

2. What preparation and resources were provided to pastoral candidates for making this response, either by seminaries, synods, regions, or other expressions of the church?

3. What information and impressions gathered in the call process itself were involved in making a response?

4. What resources and information were most useful to the pastoral candidate in making this response?

Question number one recognized that persons who were pastoral candidates have diverse and unique gifts, abilities, skills, and experience. As such, some pastoral candidates were more well-equipped than others to participate effectively in the call
process and thus to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response. Identifying these attributes can be a step toward helping other pastoral candidates recognize and perhaps, discover and develop ways to make use of such gifts, abilities, and skills.

Question number two acknowledged that pastoral candidates were not alone in the process of making a response, but were interdependent partners with the wider church. Discovering what background and resources were provided through various expressions of the ELCA, especially if these have not been made available on a church-wide basis, can be a means of extending the benefits of an interdependent partnership to more pastoral candidates engaged in the process of making a response.

Question number three acknowledged that data generated by the congregation in the Call Process was significant. Identifying the information and impressions which can be drawn from the process itself may enhance the clarity and focus of listening and observing during the process. It may also serve to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of both congregation and candidate to the significance of insights gained through the course of their interaction.

Finally, question number four attempted to sort out from among the variety of available possibilities, the types of preparation, resources, background, skills, information, and disciplines which seemed to be most useful for making a response. This can serve to guide the efforts of both the pastoral candidate and other expressions of the church for emphasizing and developing those factors which contribute most substantially to a good, wise, and Spirit-led response.

**Significance of the Study**

Intentional, disciplined research on the question of how pastoral candidates make
a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call serves to address the missing piece identified in the problem statement, above. While the call process itself is clearly defined and carefully supervised, the pastoral candidate's participation is often much more ambiguous. By gathering, studying, analyzing, evaluating, and reporting on data which support and substantiate the various aspects of a well-discerned response, this study contributes to the body of knowledge and basis of understanding available to ELCA pastoral candidates and the whole church in using the call process to bring congregations and pastors together in partnership for ministry.

The results of this study can assist pastoral candidates who are or who contemplate being involved in the call process. A pastoral candidate's participation and response can be informed and strengthened by drawing on the insights discovered in this project. The pastoral candidate who feels confident about her or his participation in the call process can draw on this study to give substance and validity to those feelings. The pastoral candidate who does not have a sense of confidence in her or his own ability to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response can use this study as a guide for determining those considerations which she or he may be well-advised to take into account through the process. In fact, the ELCA Department of Research and Evaluation has discovered a desire for just call process resources on the part of women having trouble finding a second call. In reporting on a study conducted in June 1995, Jan Erickson-Pearson states, "A number of women suggested that training and preparation for call committee interviews might be helpful" (1998, 14).

In addition to direct application for pastoral candidates engaged in the call process, this study may be useful for synod bishops and staff assistants, ELCA Division
for Ministry/Department of Synodical Relations (DM/DSR) deployed staff, other church-wide staff, and any person whose ministry deals, in some fashion, with the call process. A bishop or assistant to a bishop may suggest this study as recommended reading in working with an individual pastoral candidate. An ELCA DM/DSR deployed staff person might facilitate the development of a workshop or training event in her or his region for seminarians or pastors who expect to be participating in a call process, incorporating this study and its findings as a resource. Church-wide staff and others who are responsible for administering and developing various resources which serve the call process may find this study helpful as they review and refine policies, practices, and resources which will best serve the church.

Beyond the ELCA, this study may offer helpful insights for improving the matches between congregations and pastors. The insights may apply more directly in denominations whose practice resembles the ELCA’s process, though denominations with other methods of deployment might be able to appropriate the general principles involved. Pastors, congregational leaders, and call committees; those who counsel and support pastors, judicatory officials, and leaders who are responsible to review and refine practices currently in use in their denomination may all benefit from this study to inform, clarify, and strengthen their understanding and practice as all strive together under the leading of the Holy Spirit toward more effective partnerships between congregations and pastors.

Improved matches may well be a significant factor in reversing the trend which has seen the tenure of senior pastorates decrease from seven to four years over the past two decades (Barna 1993, 36). Reflecting on a nationwide survey which he conducted,
George Barna observes,

Because other bodies of research show that a longer pastoral tenure is more likely to result in greater ministry productivity, efforts to better match a pastor and a church and to facilitate a longer pastor-church relationship might significantly help the Christian cause in this country. (1993, 40)

Finally, however, the significance of this study is dependent upon the actual contribution it makes toward bringing pastors and congregations together in partnership for faithful ministry before God, in service to the Lord Jesus Christ and his body, the church. In making this statement, it is important to recognize that the partnership for faithful ministry envisioned between pastor and congregation may be expressed in the traditional and familiar form of issuing and accepting a Letter of Call. At the same time, it is possible that creative expressions of partnership will emerge in the new century.

Again, to quote from the report by Erickson-Pearson,

In this culture, and increasingly, we see an incredible, rich and diverse proliferation of flexible, improvised, contractual, consulting, and entrepreneurial services, including ministry. Our pastors who require greater flexibility will find opportunities to serve the Gospel outside the ordained ministry of the ELCA if they cannot find options within it. (1998, 15)

By focusing on how a pastoral candidate makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call, this study addresses one among a set of many rapidly expanding possible responses to God's call.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

In taking up research on the problem statement of this study, my primary assumption is that ELCA pastoral candidates approach the call process with a desire to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Such a response prizes faithfulness to Christ and the call of the Holy Spirit to a particular ministry setting. It is
concerned with discerning a match for ministry that results in a partnership between congregation and pastor which brings glory to God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies us as a community of faith and equips the community to serve the mission entrusted to the church with integrity and authenticity. In making this assumption, it must be explicitly stated that a good, wise, and Spirit-led response is not necessarily consistent with the typical North American cultural norms and expectations for career advancement. The prevailing cultural point of view places a premium on promotion to positions which are seen as bigger, better, richer, or more prestigious. While such considerations are not, indeed cannot be excluded from the discernment process, this study assumes that the leading of the Holy Spirit is far more than simply the pursuit of personal advancement or preference.

Linked to this primary assumption is the notion that there are certain disciplines, skills, and insights which can assist the pastoral candidate, and the candidate's family, in making a response to a Letter of Call. Further, while some pastoral candidates are able to draw on these resources effectively, a second assumption of this study is that there are other pastoral candidates and families who are not equipped to do so. This assumption is not a judgment against the qualifications of a pastoral candidate to serve the office of ministry or of the pastoral candidate's family. Neither is it an indictment of seminaries, synod staff members, or other expressions of the wider church. It is simply a recognition that the gifts and abilities that equip discernment are not equally or uniformly distributed among all pastoral candidates.

A third assumption is that helpful and useful resources can be identified on the basis of the research conducted in this study and that the results can be presented in such
a way that a pastoral candidate might be equipped and strengthened for more discerning participation in the call process. While is it beyond the scope of this study to create specific opportunities to accomplish the equipping and strengthening of pastoral candidates, I am hopeful that this research might be able to provide useful input for such an undertaking.

A fourth assumption is that a pastoral candidate’s spouse, when the candidate is married, as well as the other members of the candidate’s household when present, are involved, affected, and considered in call process. For that reason, it is also assumed that the household participates appropriately and substantially in the process, including making a contribution to the discernment and response.

Finally, this study assumes that the various expressions of the church, specifically congregation, seminary, synod, regional, and church-wide, are equally possessed of a desire that the call process result in a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Just as the pastoral candidate may be susceptible to influence by the spirit of the age in the form of careerism, so congregations can fall prey to the temptation to subvert the call process into what might be called holy head-hunting. Synod, regional, and church-wide staff persons may find themselves caught up in the expediencies of filling empty slots and so view the call process simply as a means of putting any pastor in any pulpit, just to keep congregational wheels from squeaking.

One of the limitations of this study is imposed by the character of the phenomenological research method. By definition (Merriam 1998, 16) this method confines the study to depicting the experience of how a pastoral candidate makes a response to a Letter of Call. This study does not presume that such a response can be
reduced to a set of manageable or controllable variables, in the manner of quantitative research. In fact, such a methodology would be inconsistent with the theological understanding and practice of call current in the ELCA. Neither does this study seek to transform the way a pastor makes a response to a Letter of Call or participates in the call process, as a study employing a pro-active research method might seek to do (Myers 2000, 25f.).

Another limitation stems from the problem statement which restricts the research sample to ELCA pastoral candidates. No attempt has been made to research and depict the experience of pastoral candidates in other denominations, though the literature review in Chapter Three does draw on material and sources from other traditions. I do not presume to suggest, however, that the findings and results of this study will be directly applicable to the practice of other denominations, especially those which employ other methods of clergy deployment.

The study is also limited by its intentional focus on how a pastoral candidate responds to a Letter of Call. Clearly, the call process involves multiple parties including congregations and synod bishops and staff. The question of how congregations make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in issuing a Letter of Call must be the subject of another study. How synod bishops and staff and other church-wide staff contribute to the process, facilitating the discernment of both congregation and pastoral candidate in the call process is also a matter to be undertaken by a different study. So too is the question of how the church will respond creatively to opportunities for matching pastors and ministry settings in shapes appropriate for the emerging frontiers of a new century.
Definition of Terms

ELCA Terms

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) gives specific definition to a certain words and phases. As noted on page three above, when such a word or phrase is used, its first occurrence appears in Italic:

1. *Bishop* - ELCA pastor, elected by a synod to serve as chief judicatory official of that synod

2. *Call Committee* - constitutionally mandated committee of congregation members, appointed by the congregation council and installed by the bishop or designated representative to serve during the call process

3. *Call Process* - official procedure defined by each synod and carried out under the supervision of the bishop, whereby a pastor and a congregation pursue partnership in ministry

4. *Candidacy* - the process by which the ELCA assures that qualified individuals are placed on the official roster of the church, with primary responsibility for administration of the process entrusted to the Division for Ministry

5. *Congregation Council* - the duly elected leaders of a congregation who serve as the official, governing board of the congregation

6. *Congregational Mission Profile* - official form (Appendix A) developed by the ELCA Department of Synodical Relations and affirmed by the Conference of Bishops, presented and explained by the bishop or bishop's representative to a congregation council and call committee of a congregation as that congregation enters the call process, and when completed with statistical, demographic, historic, community,
identity, ministry, mission, value and vision information, needs and expectations, becomes the document which represents the congregation in the call process 

7. *Church-wide* (or wider church) - common designation used to refer to the ELCA as a whole

8. *Definition of Compensation, Benefits and Responsibilities* - document attached to a Letter of Call which specifies applicable terms of the Letter of Call

9. *ELCA Deployed Staff* - ELCA staff person assigned to a region who is responsible to facilitate cooperation among synods in a region and with the church-wide organization

10. *Letter of Call* - formal ELCA document which, when executed by the appropriate officers of the congregation on the basis of a two-thirds majority vote of the congregation, attested by the bishop and accepted by the elected pastoral candidate, establishes the basis of a partnership in ministry between a congregation and pastor

11. *Mobility Papers* - official form (Appendix A) developed by the ELCA Department of Synodical Relations and affirmed by the Conference of Bishops, when completed by a pastoral candidate, becomes the document which represents the pastor in the call process

12. *Pastor* - a person who maintains her or his status on the clergy roster of the ELCA in accordance with the constitution and governing documents of the ELCA.

13. *Region* - a partnership among several synods in a geographic region of the country to promote cooperation in ministry and mission and to provide a networking of various resources among the synods of the region and with the church-wide organization

14. *Synod* - legally incorporated ELCA judicatory representing an average of 170 to 200
congregations, partnered in ministry and mission

Other Terms

1. Call - an initiative of the Holy Spirit which, when discerned, brings a person to offer herself or himself in the public ministry of Word and Sacrament and which, when confirmed through a congregation or ministry setting, results in the person being entrusted with the office of pastor, (not to be understood as simply a matter of a congregation hiring an employee)

2. Good, Wise, and Spirit-led Response - the acceptance (or rejection) of a Letter of Call on the basis of discernment which seeks the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, for the building up of the body of Christ through a mutually satisfying, rewarding, and God-pleasing partnership in ministry

3. Ministry - obedience and service to God in the world (Anderson 1998, 49-51), (not to be understood only as a job undertaken in service to the world or to meet the needs of people)

4. Pastoral Candidate - the person who seeks to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in responding to a congregation's Letter of Call

5. Phenomenology - a method of qualitative research which seeks to depict the essence or structure of an experience (Merriam 1998, 15-6).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into six chapters with the following titles:

Chapter One: Introduction to the Project

Chapter Two: Biblical and Theological Foundations
Chapter Three: Review of Literature and Other Sources

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Procedures

Chapter Five: Results and Analysis of Data

Chapter Six: Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Chapter One provides a statement of the problem in its wider and narrower context and introduces the intended purpose of the study. In addition, the methodological approach and research questions are presented. An attempt has been made to assess the significance of the study as well as an effort to acknowledge the assumptions and limitations which I bring to the study and which should be explicitly stated. Terms which have been given a specific meaning in the course of this study and which must be understood in order to comprehend the material of this study are defined in this chapter. Finally, this brief overview of the study's organization is presented in this chapter.

Chapter Two serves to establish the biblical and theological foundations which were used in addressing the problem statement. In building this foundation, one pastor's personal experience was selected as the point of departure for dialogue with scriptural and confessional material. The account of this experience proved to be one source of intuition which prodded and drove inquiry into the problem statement of this study.

The dialogue between Scripture, tradition, and personal experience was extended in Chapter Three to include additional voices from various sources. These voices made their contribution through available literature, personal conversations and experiences with respected friends, colleagues, elders, and advisors. Together they served to further shape and sharpen the purpose and conduct of the research of the study.

Chapter Four presents a detailed description of the research conducted in the
course of the study. The subjects addressed in this chapter include the selection of the research sample and the conduct of the research. The development and use of interviews and a survey questionnaire as well as the process of document analysis and personal reflection are also described.

The research data generated by interviewing the pastors selected for participation in the study is organized, analyzed, and reported in Chapter Five.

The task of summarizing the study and its findings is undertaken in Chapter Six, along with a statement of conclusions reached and recommendations generated by this study.
CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

One Pastor’s Response and Its Outcome

As it came out of the manila envelope the heavy piece of paper was not nearly so weighty as the realization that came with it. The pastor, his wife, their two children, the congregation he was serving, the calling congregation, the bishops and staff of two synods and others would spend the days ahead in anticipation of the decision he was now responsible to make. (“He” is an anonymous pastor who gave permission to reproduce his experience of responding to a Letter of Call as related here. A word or phrase enclosed in [brackets] indicates an alteration to preserve his anonymity.)

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), pastors are encouraged to seek God’s guidance by engaging in prayer, self-examination, and conversation as they respond to a Letter of Call. Conventional wisdom in ELCA circles suggests the decision be made within two to four weeks of receiving the call. The rationale behind the wisdom holds that less than two weeks may not provide adequate opportunity for discernment while more than four weeks prolongs the process unduly.

In his experience of two decades as a pastor, he had been in the position of responding to a Letter of Call on seven occasions. Twice he had been led to return a call. (In the ELCA, this is the expression used when declining the position offered in a Letter
of Call.) Five times he had accepted. In each case, he devoted himself to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading, journaling and reflecting, conversation with leaders and members of both current and calling congregations, synod bishop and staff, trusted colleagues, and most importantly his wife. As Sittler suggested, looking back did provide him a sense of confirmation that the Holy Spirit was at work in each instance providing support and guidance to bring about a good, wise, and Spirit-led response. The partnership shared with the people of God in each calling congregation had been blessed with a satisfying and rewarding partnership in ministry. However, he did acknowledge a suspicion that the Spirit must have found it necessary to work in spite of him as well as through him during the times he engaged in deliberation leading to a response. He also imagined the same might have been said of each of the call processes and many of those involved.

In January 1998, he entered into a call process as candidate. More accurately, he was invited to enter a call process. Members of a Call Committee in a neighboring synod had asked him to interview with them for the position of Senior Pastor. Their previous pastor had accepted another call six months earlier, after fourteen years of ministry with the congregation.

The invitation was the result of the Call Committee's initiative. At the time he was beginning his eighth year as pastor of a congregation in one of the synods of ELCA Region 6. He was not seeking another call, nor did he have Mobility Forms filed with the bishop of his synod. The bishop of the neighboring synod had not recommended his name to the congregation. The committee had interviewed candidates whose names had been presented by the bishop's staff and in each case decided not to recommend
extending a call. As the Call Committee continued the process, a colleague suggested his name and the committee pursued the suggestion.

At first, he was reluctant to enter the call process. Upon further reflection, he related to the chairman of the Call Committee that according to ELCA protocol, it would be necessary to consult with the bishops of both synods involved and to receive their affirmation prior to taking any steps involved in the Call Process. Both bishops were contacted and both gave assent for the parties to proceed.

He prepared and filed Mobility Forms and the bishop provided him with the Congregational Mission Profile. From the ELCA web page he printed out the congregation trend report and the community demographic summary. Reading and reflecting on these materials he decided to proceed to the next step with the congregation and they scheduled an interview.

The interview with the Call Committee took place in late January 1998. The committee took prompt action and recommended his name to council. The council moved quickly to a decision to present his name to the congregation. A month after the interview with the Call Committee, he and his spouse came to the church for a "Meet the Candidate" fellowship event. Two weeks later, the congregation convened a duly called special meeting and voted to extend him a call to serve as Senior Pastor. The necessary documents were prepared, delivered to the bishop for signature, and then forwarded to him.

By the middle of March, he was opening the envelope which contained the Letter of Call. The church calendar was turned to the season of Lent. The Lenten lectionary readings along with the Lenten themes of discipleship and following Christ provided a
helpful basis for his reflection on scripture. He announced receipt of the Letter of Call to the congregation he was serving, invited the members to prayer and solicited any counsel they might be moved to offer. This resulted in dialogue with a number of leaders, members, and community people as well as dozens of notes and letters offering support, assurances of prayer, and the sharing of a variety of insights. He also received telephone calls, letters of support, and encouragement from members of the calling congregation. Most importantly, his wife and children, ages fifteen and ten, shared thoughts, feelings and insights in regular, open, and honest conversation and prayer.

For three weeks he devoted himself to deliberation, considering God's calling first to the vocation of pastoral ministry, then the call of his current congregation, and the call of the new congregation. Each of these three expressions of call raised its own question. From previous experience, he had found the time of responding to a Letter of Call to be first a time of testing his sense of God's calling to the vocation of pastoral work. In the context of this primary question he reflected upon whether there was for him a sense of continuation or completion in his current call while at the same time contemplating whether the new call was consistent with or contrary to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Through the time of deliberation he was granted a renewed confirmation of God's calling to pastoral work. This was the result of an inner feeling of satisfaction and peace in his identity as pastor, coupled with observations by trusted friends affirming his call and gifts for pastoral ministry. In considering his current call, he was able to recognize that he and the congregation had reached a point of completion in some aspects of the ministry they shared and that they were ready to enter upon a time of transition to a new chapter in the congregation's ministry, whether that transition would involve him or a
succeeding pastor.

In considering the new call, he determined from both the data and the interview that the congregation had been on a plateau for at least a decade in spite of its location in a community of growing population. During the interview the committee had made it clear they were looking for a person who would work with the congregation, leadership, and current staff in moving from pastor-centered to program-oriented ministry. He could see himself and his gifts contributing to this goal by fostering participation and building partnership among members, leaders, and staff. A vision for growing and strengthening the congregation's ministries in a community where there was also potential for reaching out to incorporate people beyond the current membership into the body of Christ started to emerge. He began to feel an energy and an enthusiasm for the work of ministry with this congregation. It seemed the new call might be both an opportunity and a challenge where his gifts, personality, skills, background, and experience would serve well.

In the context of his family, he discussed the impact of a move at that time and in particular the effect it might have on the children. The couple appreciated that a move would uproot the family from a community where they were comfortable, secure, and well-established. At the same time, it would provide an opportunity for each member of the household to be stretched and strengthened as they discovered their capacity to experience and grow through change. The pastor and his wife visited the community again to investigate housing, schools, and other community resources. The experience helped them imagine the move with confidence that their family could manage the transition well. The two children, while predictably reluctant, seemed willing to trust their parents to provide the love, help, and support they would need to make the move.
The subject of compensation is a significant topic for any pastor in considering a call, and he had found it helpful in previous experience to address it forthrightly in the call process. Compensation issues can come between a congregation and pastor to the detriment of ministry and sometimes to the dissolution of the relationship. For that reason, he had made it a point during the call process to share with the Call Committee how important it was to hear a commitment to using the synod compensation guidelines as the basis for determining compensation each year. These guidelines are a resource developed annually in each ELCA synod for use in determining a pastor’s compensation. Again on the basis of previous experience, he had found reaching an agreement at the beginning that the guidelines represented a fair and adequate minimum standard for determining compensation served to counteract the tendency toward self-interest for the congregation and for himself. Such an agreement represented a departure from previous practice for the new congregation, as it had for every congregation he had served. Still, they were able to see the wisdom of the suggestion and were willing to adopt it.

Thus, in the course of deliberation he was granted a sense of affirmation in his vocation as pastor, completion in the call to his current congregation and vision for the beginning a new partnership in ministry with the calling congregation. With respect to the pastor’s household, there was a feeling of assurance about the impact of a move on the family members. And there was an openness on the part of the congregation to providing adequate compensation.

At the end of three weeks, confident he had given himself to discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit, he made what he believed to be the good and wise response and accepted the call. Intentional closure with his current congregation occurred through
the month of April and he began serving the new congregation on May 1, 1998. His wife and their children adjusted to the move very well and the family was soon at home in the new community.

Eighteen months later, he announced his resignation from the office of Senior Pastor of the congregation.

For him, the decision to resign was the product of several months of deep and intense spiritual struggle. The experience was personally devastating. Like the decision to accept the call, his decision to resign was the result of prayer, spiritual discipline, and conversation with his wife and children, the bishop, trusted colleagues, and a professional counselor. His resignation was extremely painful for the people of the congregation, as well. In sorting out the factors which led to his decision to resign he reached a conclusion which he shared with the congregation, "I have come to realize that our match for ministry is not what it needs to be."

From the outset, efforts to strengthen the program ministries and build partnership among members, leaders and staff of the congregation were hindered and in some respects undermined by a long-term conflict which was more extensive and intense than the Call Committee, the synod staff or he had recognized. It took nearly ten months before he began to realize that even before his installation the conflict was what Speed Leas labels level four "Fight/Flight" and was approaching level five "Intractable" (Ammerman 1998, 123). Therefore, in addition to pursuing the original vision for ministry, the conflict required more and more energy and attention on his part and on the part of the rest of the staff, leaders, and members. Though he tried to maintain a primary focus on the vision, he found his energy being diverted more and more by attempts to
move toward a resolution of the conflict. What went undetected, at least on the conscious level, was what Peter Steinke terms a chronically anxious system. As Steinke describes it:

Chronic anxiety is habitual. We can't put anxiety to rest. Even the slightest change or a trivial annoyance incites reactive behavior. . . . No longer is anxiety an occasional warning signal. Rather, it is structured into life. (1993, 20)

By the end of the first year, he was internalizing an increasing amount of the system's anxiety. Over the course of twenty years as a pastor, he had encountered days and even seasons of spiritual struggle which are more or less common to the work of ministry. However, in this case and for the first time in his experience as a pastor, his ability to offer ministry was negatively impacted as he continued to internalize the distress.

At first, as he recalls, resignation was unthinkable. But the days, weeks and months wore on and he began to realize his future with the congregation was definitely being called into question by the significant disparity between the ministry he had envisioned with the congregation and actual experience. He had a growing sense that the issues they faced were more diverse and complex than anything he had anticipated in accepting the call.

At his invitation, the bishop and his assistant consulted with the leaders and staff of the congregation in September. In October, the bishop's report to the leaders identified "deeper wounds and deeper issues" ([Assistant to the Synod Bishop] 1999, 2) than the conflict and proceeded to a diagnosis and an observation.

What you are experiencing is a systemic disease; this is not a problem with the pastor, this is not a problem with [an existing group in the congregation], or with certain people in the congregation . . . . It is a problem with the system - how you live together interdependently, how one's action affects the other, how one's response elicits a response in another. . . . The situation looms larger than we have expertise to handle on our synod staff. ([Assistant to the Synod Bishop] 1999, 2, italics original)
Of the several recommendations offered in the report, the initial and primary step was to engage the Alban Institute for a congregational consultation. Consideration of this recommendation was postponed. One reason was a reluctance on the part of the leadership to commit already limited financial resources to such an expensive undertaking, though the more basic and compelling reason was a lack of consensus about whether such a step was indeed necessary.

The statement in the bishop’s report that the situation was larger than the expertise of the synod staff could handle helped him admit that the situation was definitely larger than his expertise could handle without an outside resource such as Alban. More specifically, the situation entailed what Norman Shawchuck has identified as “an entirely new and different breed of conflict” (1996, 8) which has emerged in our society in recent years. He describes it as “conflict that arises out of addictive processes” and suggests it can be distinguished from the more normal type of conflict by the presence of certain characteristics which are indicative of this new type of conflict, including: “denial, confusion, self-centeredness, dishonesty, lying, ethical deterioration, spiritual bankruptcy, hoping for a quick fix” (1996, 8). These characteristics were present in the system.

Over the course of the next three weeks he wrestled with the question of whether or not he could, in good conscience, continue in office. He began to realize that unless significant help and support were soon forthcoming he would need to make a change for the sake of his own well-being.

Signs of the systemic dysfunction continued to surface through the rest of October until finally he felt compelled to concede that the match for ministry between the
congregation and himself was not, nor was there the prospect it would become, what he needed it to be. He had reached the point where his enthusiasm for the ministry had been completely exhausted and he was becoming preoccupied with simply trying to maintain his balance in the chronic anxiety of the system. With regret, he submitted his resignation which the council accepted with equal regret.

During the time leading up to and following resignation, he was plagued with doubt. What had begun with confidence in the Spirit's leading came to an end with the sense that he and the congregation were not well-matched for ministry. He wondered if there might have been some way to avert the pain and disappointment for all parties involved. Of the many questions which occupied his reflection, one kept recurring. Had he truly made a good, wise, and Spirit-led response in accepting the Letter of Call in the first place?

**Responding to a Letter of Call: Expanding the Theological Context**

**Distinguishing the Primary and Derivative Meaning of Call**

On its face, the question of how a pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is an ethical question. Herbert E. Anderson addresses the issue of how pastors decide among competing priorities in responding to a Letter of Call when he states:

The decision inevitably involves discernment among competing loyalties and priorities. Usually there will be more than one good choice. For that reason, deciding about a call is more than a narrowly religious or spiritual process. It is a complex ethical process in which our compassion for the needs of people in a specific place must be balanced with a desire to do what is just for ourselves, our families and the Church that has made us eligible for public ministry. (Anderson, 9, italics added)
Yet, pursuing an ethical question in distinctively Christian fashion means the study must be biblically and theologically grounded. In his article "Theological Foundations for Social Ethics" Randolph A. Nelson proposes a method and model whereby Christian scholarship can establish such a foundation for attending to ethical questions.

The appropriate, but also the necessary, methodology is related to what Peter Berger has called the inductive option. "The inductive option is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations - one's own experience, to whatever extent this is possible, and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions" (Peter Berger 1979, The heretical imperative, Garden City, CA: Doubleday, 62-3). The attractiveness of the inductive option is related to the fact that it enables the construction of a social ethic which is in continuity with the fundamental affirmations of the Christian faith and witness, while responsive to the contemporary realities of human existence. In contrast to a deductive methodology which assumes a doctrinal starting point, the inductive option attempts to come to grips with the empirical details of any particular social issue and the context in which it arises. It asks about what the situation actually is, and it accords to those who have the relevant experience and knowledge of the issue under consideration a major role in providing description and direction for what is to be done. The inductive option, therefore, enables an approach to issues in the social order without denying either empirical reality or the resources of the Christian faith. (1984, 250)

What Nelson says about a theological basis for addressing ethical issues concerning society as a whole can be applied to ethical issues which arise within the society of the church. The particular reality at issue in this study, a pastor’s good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call, is inductively identified from the pastor’s experience recounted at the beginning of this chapter. An assumption that pastors generally make such a response to a Letter of Call is at least called into question by the Report of the Secretary to the 2001 Church-wide Assembly. According to the official statistics of the ELCA, during the ten years from 1991 to 2001, a total of 1,276 pastors resigned or were removed from the clergy roster. While the reasons for resignation and removal are not part of the report, it is at least possible that this figure indicates a need to
examine the experience of responding to a Letter of Call from the perspective of a pastor in order to gain a more complete understanding of what is involved in a good, wise and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Describing the experience of the pastor at the beginning of this chapter permits the voice of empirical reality to begin the conversation by suggesting the relevant theological point of departure for investigation.

What sets the process of theological reflection in motion is the necessity of a pastor's response upon receiving a Letter of Call. It has already been established that in the ELCA such a letter is a formal document and comes into being as the result of a clearly-defined process, "with prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to do God's will." Thus there is an awareness that the letter does not represent simply the will of the congregation or the candidate. Rather it is an occasion for a prayerful and disciplined effort in discerning and responding to the will and call of God on the part of all involved in the process.

The specific case of one pastor's experience is an example of a response to a Letter of Call which is at the same time an attempt to respond to the broader and deeper question of a person's response to a call from God to ordained ministry. Throughout this study the working definition of God's call to ministry is that presented in Chapter One: an initiative of the Holy Spirit which, when discerned, brings a person to offer her or himself in the public ministry of Word and Sacrament and which, when confirmed through a congregation or ministry setting, results in the person being entrusted with office of pastor.

This definition, however, represents what must be recognized as a secondary use of the word. This secondary use typically understands a person's call in the sense of
related concepts such as vocation, career, work, employment, job, and so on. According
to this use, speaking of a call to pastoral ministry brings a number of biblical images to
mind. The Lord called Moses to deliver the people of Israel from slavery (Exodus 3.10).
The Lord called prophets to proclaim a message to God's people: Isaiah (6.1-8), Jeremiah
(1.4-10), and Amos (7.14-15). The Lord Jesus called disciples to follow him (Matthew
4.18-22 and parallels, Matthew 9.9-13 and parallels). The risen Lord called Saul to

These examples of a call from God to an appointed work are of critical
significance for understanding the question of a pastor's response to a Letter of Call as
raised in this study. Yet this understanding of call is derived from what can be referred to
as the word's primary and foundational theological use. So, it is necessary to proceed
with a brief consideration of the primary use of call.

Prior to treatment of a person's call to ordained ministry, at the very beginning of
Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA, Part 1: The Call to Ordained
Ministry, the primary sense of call is acknowledged. The section begins by quoting
Luther's Explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. "The Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America believes that the Holy Spirit 'calls, gathers, enlightens, and
sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth'" (Vision, 2, italics added).

Thus, before there is a call to ordained pastoral ministry, God's Holy Spirit
addresses a call to the whole church on earth. It is a call which, as Luther continues his
Explanation of the Third Article:

... keeps it [the church] with Jesus Christ in the one common, truth faith. Daily in this
Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins - mine and those of all
believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give
to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. (Kolb, 2000, 355-6)
This is not then, a call to an appointed ministry or work. Rather it is a call to eternal union with Jesus Christ, in which God's gracious initiative of forgiving sin and promising resurrection to life opens the way for our response in faith. Teleologically understood, God's chief aim and purpose in calling us is to bring us into Christ through faith. As Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12.32).

Two Biblical Metaphors for the Primary Meaning of Call

Scripture commonly employs the metaphor of marriage in describing the union God desires with us and to which God calls us. Using the analogy of a proposal of marriage for the Holy Spirit's call to the church serves to focus attention on the primary intent of the calling. In calling a bride to himself, a bridegroom is not chiefly concerned with how satisfactorily his bride will wash the dishes, make the beds, clean the house, do the laundry, or tend to any of the other household chores. Rather the groom's primary desire is the person of his bride, his beloved. His chief motivation in calling her to be his marriage partner is to be with her, to share her life, even as he desires from her a response that is committed to sharing in his life so that the two become one.

This is the nature of the call which comes to the disciples on Pentecost with "a sound like the rush of a mighty wind" (Acts 2.2) and tongues of fire, filling them with the Holy Spirit. No longer timid and fearful, the disciples begin to speak boldly in other languages and "at this sound the crowd gathered" (Acts 2.6). The sound calls the people together into the presence of the living and loving Word. The call comes from God to people, seeking those who will respond and receive union with God in Christ. The proper
response to this call from God is the answering call which Peter identifies in his sermon, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2.21).

Therefore, at the primary level, to call is to summon a person, to seek that one's attention, for the purpose of entering into a relationship. For that reason, in the New Testament (Matthew 16.18, Acts 2.47, for example) the church is rightly termed the ecclesia (ἐκ- out and ἱητοσ called or invited), the community that is literally "called out" from the world and into relationship with its loving, saving Lord. It is by means of this initial call that the Holy Spirit brings about the response of faith which gives birth to the church, God's new creation.

The Spirit's call which establishes the church as a new creation in relationship with God is reminiscent of creation itself. In Genesis, the Hebrew qara, like the Greek καλέω, means to call or to name. "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Genesis 1.5, italics added). "God called the dome Sky" (Genesis 1.8, italics added). "God called the dry land Earth and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas" (Genesis 1.10, italics added). God's call to Day, Night, Sky, Earth and Sea summons the very elements of creation into a relationship with God, a loving union which is the very essence of their being. For that reason, it is virtually predictable that Adam, created in the image of God for a loving union with God, should be entrusted with authority to express a call of his own, a call resulting in a relationship between human beings and creation. "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2.19, italics added).
When the union between God and humankind is broken by sin, the human response is to hide from God and evade the threatening consequence of judgment. Still, by means of a gracious call God seeks reconciliation to restore union with the man and the woman.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3.8-9, italics added)

A second metaphor scripture employs to portray the intent and desire of God in calling God’s people is the image of parent and child. God calls the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to lead them to the Promised Land. The parent calls the child to leave the place of pain, sadness, and bondage and to come home to the loving embrace of the parent’s arms so the union God seeks with humanity can be restored. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11.1, italics added). But sin continues to separate God and humanity. So it is necessary for God to continue calling as loving parent throughout Israel’s history, from exile to restoration. "Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth - everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isaiah 43.6b-7, italics added). Ultimately, it is through Jesus Christ that God’s desire and intent in calling us is accomplished. “For this reason he [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised inheritance” (Hebrews 9.15a, italics added).
Responding to a Letter of Call: Four Theological Assertions

Theological Assertion: God Instituted the Office of Ministry for Faith

God calls us into union with Christ through faith that trusts and so receives forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life in righteousness before God as a free gift of God’s grace. This faith is the response God desires us to make to God’s call and thereby come to salvation. “For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’” (Romans 10.13).

The Augsburg Confession, Article V. Concerning the Office of Preaching states,

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our own merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe. (Kolb, 2000, 40)

According to the Lutheran Reformers, the office of ministry is instituted by God to serve as a channel or means of communicating the gracious call of the Gospel in order that people who hear may “obtain such faith.” That faith comes through the hearing of the Gospel as proclaimed by the office of ministry, Paul makes abundantly clear when he writes,

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Romans 10.14, 17)

Asserting God has instituted the office of ministry for the sole purpose of proclaiming the gracious call of the Gospel in order to bring those who hear to a saving faith anchors the purpose of the office in God’s intent. This understanding serves as a guide for keeping the focus of ministry on God’s purpose for the office and a guard
against all attempts to define the office in a manner inconsistent with or contrary to God’s purpose in instituting it.

The practical implication of this assertion for a pastor considering God’s call to pastoral ministry in general and a Letter of Call to the office of ministry in a congregation in particular is the warning it sounds against clericalism or enthusiasm, two tendencies which have plagued the church throughout history. Clericalism turns the office of ministry into the rigid business of providing professional services for a fee and the minister into a technician who does the religious things which lay persons are not able or, perhaps more common in congregations today, not willing to do. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, replaces the practice of a profession determined by God’s purpose with whatever will pack the house this week. The pastor is not so much the one who engages in the practice of a profession which calls people to faith but becomes instead a performer, preferably polished, whose purpose is to project a stage presence, measured in lumens of sincerity and angstroms of energy. In either case, the focus is on the pastor and what the pastor does rather than on God’s primary intent of calling people through the Gospel to saving faith resulting in eternal union with God.

In light of this theological assertion, a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call acknowledges that the office as well as the call to ministry comes from God for God’s purpose of calling people to faith. Whether a calling congregation is a prestigious flagship or a poor clinker, the pastor considering a Letter of Call needs to ask if she or he can envision serving a ministry that shares God’s call to faith with people in that particular context. In the midst of the many and varied responsibilities and expectations, circumstances and conditions which may accompany any Letter of Call,
keeping the parent-child metaphor for the primary meaning of call in mind can help maintain the focus of consideration on God’s intent and purpose. God the loving parent is calling God’s children from slavery into an eternal union through Jesus Christ. The call to serve as pastor is first and foremost a call to participate in sharing God’s call to faith with the people of this place.

Theological Assertion: Pastoral Ministry Can Be a Work of Faith

Faith, the response to God’s call that unites us with Jesus Christ, brings with it salvation and a new life of freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5.1). Paul holds that the believers of Galatia are facing a crisis. The controversy with those who insist that Jewish circumcision is necessary in order to be considered Christian requires them to make a choice. They can revert to a life of slavery under the law and the burden of obedience under the law. Or they can embrace the gift of freedom in Christ and in that freedom, give their life in obedience to love as the Lord Jesus did.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5.13-4)

Christian freedom creates a dilemma for believers. At issue is what to do with the new life we have been given. There is nothing we need to do in order to receive forgiveness and salvation. Eternal union with God is already ours, as a gift. That means, in the deepest and truest sense, there is nothing we could need which we do not already have. Neither is there anything we need to do. So, how does a believer keep busy? What keeps time, to say nothing of eternity, from weighing heavily on the hands of a person
who has responded to God's call in faith? According to Paul, the answer is to be found in obeying the commandment to love the neighbor.

The Augsburg Confession, Article VI. Concerning the New Obedience refers to the expressions of love for neighbor which arise from faith as good fruits or good works which have been commanded by God.

It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as Christ himself says [Luke 17.10]: "When you have done all [things] . . . , say, "We are worthless slaves."

The Fathers also teach the same thing. For Ambrose says, "It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved, and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit." (Kolb, 2000, 40)

For the Reformers, good fruits and good works are faith in action in daily life at home, at work, in the community, in any and every station in which God sets a person of faith. Because a believer engages in such works without fear of punishment or hope for reward, motives which often provide strong incentive for human behavior, this is truly a new obedience. It permits the person to devote her or his gifts freely to honorable pursuits that serve, bless, and help the neighbor, including gifts that can be devoted to pastoral ministry.

The practical implication of this assertion is that a person may freely consider a call to pastoral ministry and a Letter of Call to a congregation in light of the opportunity it presents to engage in the new obedience of love for neighbor. Accepting a call to pastoral ministry represents one way in which a person, gifted for such work, obeys the commandment to engage freely in loving the neighbor. For that reason, concerns born of a fear of punishment or a hope for reward need to be addressed and neutralized. This is
especially critical for pastors in a society such as ours, which assumes pastors will accept a new call as a career move in the process of climbing the ladder of success.

In light of this theological assertion, a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call recognizes that freedom in Christ means a person may pursue the vocation of pastoral ministry or not, may accept or return a Letter of Call without putting her or his salvation in jeopardy. Christian freedom means the pastor’s response is not a matter of right or wrong, for the pastor or the congregation or God. It is instead a matter of the new obedience which accepts the role of unworthy servant, doing what is commanded, so that the love of God can be shared with the neighbor. To employ the marriage metaphor, a husband can symbolize the love he has for his wife by presenting her with a gift of a box of candy, a dozen red roses or a diamond ring or anything else at hand which may communicate his love for her. Just so, God can symbolize God’s love for God’s people by bringing forth the fruit and work of faith from one pastor who is like a box of candy, another like dozen red roses, another like a diamond ring or still another who is like any other unique and priceless expression of God’s love for the bride of Christ.

Theological Assertion: A Proper Call Serves Faith

Freedom bestowed by faith can be frightening, especially as the commandment of love supercedes simpler categories of right and wrong. For instance, throughout much of Lutheran history in North America, it was considered wrong to ordain women as pastors. In the 1970’s the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches claimed the freedom of faith and began to ordain women. The considerable reaction within those bodies against this innovation, at least in part, grew out of fear that such a dramatic reversal in practice would completely
obscure the boundaries between right and wrong.

At the same time, the freedom of faith can be exhilarating. When a believer is grasped by the powerful confidence of faith, there is an openness to exploring imaginative, creative, vital, and widely diverse expressions of love. The Corinthian church experienced a flourishing of this diversity in the exercise of spiritual gifts, but to the detriment of unity in the body. For that reason Paul counseled, "... since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church" (1 Corinthians 14.12) and again, "Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14.26b). Addressing the issue of freedom for expressing the variety of spiritual gifts in relation to maintaining the unity of the body and thereby building up the church, Paul advised the Corinthians, “So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14.39-40).

Good order is not an enemy of Christian freedom, but its ally, so long as it is understood and exercised in the service of building up the body and not associated with ensuring or cultivating God’s favor and blessing. In affirmation of this principle, the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV. Concerning Church Government makes a brief and simple statement. “Concerning church government they teach that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call” (Kolb, 2000, 46).

By stipulating that the office of ministry is exercised on the basis of a regular call, the reformers provide the necessary authority for the church to guard against an abuse of the freedom of faith at the expense of the unity of the body. Commenting on the church’s commitment to good order represented in this article, George W. Forell observes,
The church is as dependent for its freedom on order as are all other human institutions. This reminds us that the church is not only called into existence by God to serve mankind but also administered by men. It is a very human institution as well. But it is more difficult to bring order into the church than into a school or a business.” (1968, 62)

The reasons Forell gives for this difficulty in bringing order into the life of the church include: sentimentality, false piety, and plain ignorance. Sentimentality is an enemy of good order when it promotes toleration of incompetence or other flaws which should be unacceptable in those who serve for the simple reason that the person serving is sincere. False piety undermines good order by imagining that the humans who administer the institution of the church, though sinful in every other aspect of their lives, will operate out of pure motives when serving the church. Plain ignorance results in disorder as essential concerns such as preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments are displaced by secondary matters such as property issues, financial concerns, or pleasing people. Forell makes a compelling appeal which seems even more urgent now than when he made it over thirty years ago.

... Since the churches favor government by men rather than by law, opposition to policies on both the local and the national level is always taken to be opposition to persons. The result is that there are no clearly marked channels for constructive criticism.

So if you don’t like the church, you just pick up your marbles and go home. The land teems with ex-church-members who left not because of any great theological difficulty but because there was no way for them to express opposition except by leaving altogether.

The Augsburg Confession advocates order in the church. Having no elector or prince to help us out, as Luther did, we might have to come up with some new answers. There is no time to waste.” (1968, 64)

Today, the ex-church-members Forell refers to as leaving the church are not only people leaving the pews, but pastors leaving the pulpits as well.

In practice, this assertion suggests that a pastor considering a Letter of Call may
and ought to expect the office of ministry will be shaped by a clearly defined vision and set of expectations, standards and practices, which are not dependent solely on local option or preference. Complex, diverse, and even mutually exclusive assumptions of who we are and what we are about as the community of faith are a part of the landscape in congregations today, particularly as these impact expectations of the pastor’s role and ministry. This can be overwhelming and detrimental to the unity of the body unless the partnership of pastor and congregation is held accountable to mutually accepted standards of a regular call.

In light of this theological assertion, a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call will include specific and careful attention to incorporating the resources of the wider church into the definition of the relationship between congregation and pastor. One of many concrete illustrations of the need for this is seen in the method for determining the pastor’s compensation package. In the ELCA some congregations, for one reason or another, are guided by the belief they are exempt from the synod’s compensation guidelines. Each year the same, tired litany of excuses is recited by certain members as justification for continuing to underpay the pastor. When penury continues to carry the day, after a few years the pastor’s supply of silent endurance is depleted. Unable to imagine a satisfactory outcome in conversation with the congregation, the pastor discovers an economic urgency to become available for call. Again, to quote Forell,

People assume that the usual safeguards against sin that protect us from each other in other institutions are out of place in the church. Employees are generally protected against employers too stingy to pay them a decent wage. For this purpose we have unions or professional organizations which safeguard the interests of plumbers and truck drivers, college professors and postal employees. Yet . . . pastors are not protected, and since all men are sinners, even members of a church council, pastors are by far the lowest paid of the professional people who have had seven or eight years of education beyond high school. (1968, 63)
The metaphor of marriage provides helpful insight in support of upholding good order. A husband and wife are free to share the joy of their union in whatever manner they choose. Yet, the state in which they reside does enact certain stipulations and regulations with respect to marriage for the protection of the partners and the whole community. In the union between God and God’s people, we enjoy considerable freedom to express our love for God. The observance of good order, however, restrains us from engaging in destructive behavior such as self-mutilation or suicide and thereby causing our bridegroom to suffer even more grief and pain than he has already so lovingly endured for us.

Theological Assertion: Responding to a Letter of Call Is an Expression of Faith

This study was first conceived as an investigation into how a pastor makes a decision about a call. However, in the course of refining the problem statement and developing a theological foundation, I have come to appreciate that prior to any decision a pastor might make about a call, she or he responds to God’s call and a Letter of Call. One of the important insights for this revision came as a result of distinguishing between the primary and derivative meanings of call. Again, in its primary sense, call is what God does to bring us into eternal union with God. Paul points out the radical significance of recognizing God as the origin of this call when he writes,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2.8-10)

To understand a Letter of Call primarily as an occasion for a pastor’s decision
implies that the process of reaching such a decision becomes a work of the pastor. When the outcome is deemed satisfactory the pastor may indeed be tempted to boast of the achievement in making the right choice. When the outcome seems unsatisfactory, as in the personal case described at the beginning of this chapter, the pastor may be left with a sense of having made the wrong decision.

To comprehend the Letter of Call as the occasion for responding to God’s call to the office of ministry instituted by God means that in making response the pastor has an opportunity to be what God has made her or him to be. It is not a matter of making a right or wrong decision, but rather, a matter of responding to God’s call in the freedom of the new obedience. It is an expression of the good works God has prepared to be the believer’s way of life. Responding to a Letter of Call, therefore, is not a decision made by a pastor at a moment in time, but is instead a believer’s response of continuing to walk by faith into an unknown future, in a manner ordered, shaped, and disciplined by the commandment of love as befits the Lord who calls us to follow. Paul’s encouragement to the Ephesians provides a good description of this response.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4.1-3)

A good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is an expression of faith. As an expression of faith it is not simply a decision, but a way of life that trusts God to fulfill the promises of forgiveness and new life, each day. Accepting or the returning a particular Letter of Call does not alter God’s call or the possibility of leading a life worthy of that call. Only against the background of this insight is it possible to consider the aspect of a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call represented by the decision to accept
or return it.

In order for it to be truly a decision, the pastor who accepts or returns a Letter of Call must have the freedom to exercise either choice. The Augsburg Confession, Article XVIII Concerning Free Will, sets clear limits on the realm of the human freedom in the making of decisions.

Concerning free will it is taught that a human being has some measure of free will, so as to live an externally honorable life and to choose among the things reason comprehends. However, without the grace, help, and operation of the Holy Spirit a human being cannot become pleasing to God, fear or believe in God with the whole heart, or expel innate evil lusts from the heart. Instead, this happens through the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God. (Kolb, 2000, 50)

In light of this teaching, it can be affirmed that a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call may be honorable, at least outwardly, and based on reason. Reason can comprehend accepting a call that will permit the pastor and family to enjoy more of the amenities usually associated with the good life, a move that advances a career, an opportunity for better utilization of a pastor’s specialized gifts and skills, a change simply because it is time, among others. Common sense can appreciate returning a call that will put the pastor and family in danger of physical harm or presents a health risk to a member of the family, that would represent unreasonable economic sacrifice or frustration of honest professional ambition.

However, the reformers maintain that the freedom of our will is limited to what reason can understand. Human beings are not able, on the basis of our will alone, to enter into a relationship with God which fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things. People cannot eliminate self-serving desire from the most altruistic acts apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call was solely a matter of her or his own decision, that decision would be tainted by what the Augsburg Confession
terms evil lusts. Indeed, to the extent that pastors are both saint and sinner, there is an element of concupiscence in every decision about a Letter of Call.

But God does give the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in every decision God is at work to bring about in us the response of faith, so that we can join with Paul in saying,

Now to him who by the power at work within us [that is, the Holy Spirit] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3.20-1)

The practical implication of this assertion is that a pastor need not shoulder an additional burden of anxiety over making the right decision about a Letter of Call. By herself or himself, the pastor is capable of nothing more than a decision which is already fatally tainted by self-serving desire, so that no one may boast. “But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2.4-5a). What is most crucial is not the pastor’s decision about a Letter of Call, but the response of faith into which the pastor is guided by the Holy Spirit.

By making the theological assertion that responding to a Letter of Call is an expression of faith, both pastor and congregation are freed for the adventure of partnership in ministry. In faith, pastor and congregation may trust the God who calls to provide as well, strength and guidance, power and love sufficient for the task. As he concludes his letter to the Ephesians, Paul employs both the marriage metaphor and the parent and child metaphor to summon his readers to “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5.21). For pastors, responding to a Letter of Call as an expression of faith involves a way of living and loving the bride for whom Christ has already given his life and love, the bride he calls to eternal union with himself. As
children give themselves to obedience of their parents, so pastors express faith in responding to a Letter of Call through a new obedience to the Father’s command to love the neighbor. And as parents do not provoke their children, but provide for their children’s discipline and instruction in the Lord, so pastors express faith in responding to a Letter of Call by encouraging the observance of good order.
CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND OTHER SOURCES

Introduction: A Primary Source

My first experience with a call to pastoral ministry came when I was in sixth grade. It came before my vocabulary included the facility to use such a word in reference to the initiative of the Holy Spirit which, when discerned, brings a person to offer herself or himself in the public ministry of Word and Sacrament and which, when confirmed through a congregation or ministry setting, results in the person being entrusted with the office of pastor. It preceded any awareness on my part of the existence of a formal document which, when executed by the appropriate officers of the congregation on the basis of a two-thirds majority vote of the congregation, attested by the bishop and accepted by the elected pastoral candidate, establishes the basis of a partnership in ministry between a congregation and pastor, commonly referred to as a Letter of Call. It came long before I could conceive anything as coherent as a reasoned, intentional response to God’s internal call and the external confirmation of that call.

Because it was my first encounter with God’s call to the office of ministry, the experience will always have an authoritative place in my understanding of the phenomenon. I had reached what might be termed the Lutheran version of the age of spiritual accountability. I approached the altar of God, but not in a response to an altar
call. I did not come forward to make a decision for Jesus. Rather, as I came forward, the Holy Spirit was at work to communicate a decision Christ had made for me. I came by way of the sacristy where, with the help of a junior deacon, I donned a black cassock and white surplice. Taking up the stave of an acolyte, I entered the sanctuary and served the Lord and God’s people gathered for worship by lighting the candles on and beside the altar in the manner and the order we had been taught at acolyte training. During the service I concentrated more on not fidgeting than on the ministry I was privileged to offer before the King of Heaven. At the end of the worship hour, I took up the stave, extinguished the candles, again in the proper manner and order, and went into the sacristy where the same junior deacon helped me out of my robes and hung them carefully in the closet.

According to the sixth grade assessment standards by which I evaluated it, the experience represented a successful debut as an acolyte because I had not tripped at the step or set the altar cloth on fire. I went to the narthex to rejoin my family, arriving just in time to find my mother in conversation with Audrey, a friend and fellow member of the church, a saintly woman, an example of the Christian life, who served as one of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounded us each Sunday as we gathered for worship. I arrived just in time to overhear Audrey make the observation, “Doesn’t Steve just look like a little minister?”

Combining my name and the word minister in the same sentence was all but unthinkable at that point in my life. I had no idea how a person came to be a pastor, but I suspected it probably had something to do with burning bushes, angel messengers, and visions in the night. Looking back, however, I am convinced that the Holy Spirit’s call to
eternal union with Christ, the call to vocation such as a call to the office of ministry, and even the response to a particular congregation's Letter of Call are all tied up in some mysterious way with whatever it was Audrey saw that day in a robed, sixth grade boy carrying the symbol of the light of the world into the sanctuary of Almighty God as the people of God gathered for worship. There may not have been a bush, but there was a burning fire of God's passionate love and grace toward God's people which did not consume. Audrey may not have been the prototype of a winged, heavenly messenger, but her message could have come from no other source than God. As for a vision in the night, I was one of the people walking in deep darkness and I still am. But the light shines in the darkness and in the brightness of that light, Audrey was given to see a vision and to share it in my hearing at the very moment when it made an impression as deep and wide and long as the life God has given to me, the life God has called into eternal union with Christ, the life God has called me to devote to ministry with God's people, the life God has called through a Letter of Call into partnership with certain, selected congregations at certain, selected moments of my journey.

Audrey's vision was a first experience, a beginning of the journey from acolyte to pastor, a primary source for me on the way toward the time when I would be a pastor responding to God's call and to a Letter of Call. Developing even the rudimentary theoretical concepts which provide meaning for those terms would require considerable time and learning, an endeavor which continues for me to this day. One person's experience, however, as crucial as it may be for that one person, needs to be connected with and integrated into the larger and broader scope of the Holy Spirit's activity through the fellowship of faith as the Spirit calls all believers into eternal union with Christ and
provides for the proclaiming of that call through the office of ministry. To that end, it is appropriate to review and consider experiences and insights of others represented in selected literature as these are related to God’s call to human beings and God’s call to pastoral ministry, and as they are related to the pastor’s response to God’s call in general and the pastor’s response to a Letter of Call in particular.

Surveying a variety of sources related to these subjects, especially as these apply in some way to the pastor’s participation and experience of the call process, I found the materials tended to deal with issues and concerns that ranged from what might be broadly classified as spiritual perspective to practical insight. Under the major heading of spiritual perspective I further differentiated between the sources which related to the call common to all human experience and the uniqueness of the call which comes specifically to pastors and the distinctively pastoral response to that call. The major heading of practical insight is divided into those sources that pertain in general to the candidate’s participation and response in the call process and those devoted to discerning a partnership in ministry, matching the candidate with a congregation.

**Spiritual Perspective**

**The Common Call to Humanity**

For me, the journey from acolyte to pastor did not follow a straight line. Neither did the development of an awareness of the spiritual and practical matters involved in responding to a Letter of Call. If it had, the logical place to begin would have been with an understanding of the concept of God’s call.

Os Guinness provides a foundation for this in *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the*
Central Purpose of Your Life. What is particularly helpful is his clear and careful distinction between the primary call by God, to God and the derivative meaning of God’s call to vocation (1998, 29-31). Guinness does not limit his consideration of call to that of ordained pastors, but rather develops the concept of call as a frame for discovering the meaning and purpose of life for every human being. Particularly valuable in articulating a faithful concept of call is his description of what he terms the “Catholic distortion” (1998, 32-35) and the “Protestant distortion” (1998, 39-43). The first has resulted in a dualistic division of life and work into sacred and secular, higher and lower, effectively reserving calling as a holy and pious pursuit for priests, monks, and nuns while everyone else just has work. The second has not only tended to reverse the order, elevating the secular over the sacred, but also to sever the connection of life and work from its spiritual dimension. Under such influence, calling and vocation become no more than synonyms for words like work, trade, employment, and job, even for clergy who preach justification by grace alone through faith alone, yet whose lives and manner of living belie a belief in Guinness’ quote of Henry Ford, “Work is the salvation of the human race, morally, physically, socially.” (1998, 41).

The prerequisite for anyone, certainly including a pastor, to hear and respond to God’s call is to hear the primary call first and understand, as Guinness puts it, “We are not primarily called to do something or go somewhere; we are called to Someone. We are not called first to special work but to God” (1998, 43). Ours is a culture where the heresy of the Protestant distortion has become especially prevalent and powerful, calling us to work that exchanges our soul for nothing more than temporary wealth, power and fame. For all people, “A sense of calling should precede a choice of job and career, and the
main way to discover calling is along the line of what we are each created and gifted to be” (1998, 46). Guinness offers a spiritual perspective that can serve to equip the pastor engaged in the process of responding to a particular Letter of Call for hearing and discerning God’s call.

... It is wrong to treat God as a grand employment agency, a celestial executive searcher to find perfect fits for our perfect gifts. The truth is not that God is finding us a place for our gifts but that God has created us and our gifts for a place of his choosing - and we will only be ourselves when we are finally there. (1998, 47)

In the volume of *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry* devoted entirely to the theme of its title “Pastoral Vocation” Arland Hultgren differentiates the primary and derivative meanings of call by connecting and yet distinguishing God’s call to all people and God’s calling to the office of pastor. He affirms that pastors share, “... the call extended to all Christians through the gospel to accept the forgiveness of sins and to live out the new life in Christ. That is a *call* which precedes all other *callings* (vocations) which Christians may have” (1981, 1.4, 327). This permits him to locate the call to pastoral ministry within its larger context of God’s call to all the baptized, while at the same time making it possible to treat the call to pastoral ministry as unique.

God’s call is his gospel. And the call to the ordained ministry is a call to herald that gospel in the church and to the world. Here God’s call to all persons and his call to the pastoral ministry intersect, but they are not identical, and they should not be confused. (1.4, 329)

This acknowledged, however, there remains the task of clarifying the unique essence and character of the call to pastoral ministry. Though it intersects with God’s call to all, it is also necessary to specify how the two are not identical, how the call a person receives and to which she or he responds in a Letter of Call is distinctively unlike any other.
The Unique Call of Pastors

The distinguishing characteristic of the pastoral call, the thing that gives it a unique identity, according to Herbert W. Chilstrom, first presiding Bishop of the ELCA, is what he terms, "the irresistible call to preach the Gospel" (1981, 1.4, 331). Writing six years before the formation of the ELCA, from his perspective as Bishop of the Minnesota Synod of the former Lutheran Church in America, he suggests that the character of the pastoral call is not only distinct, but essential.

In the deepest sense there is no difference between the clergy and other Christians. Both stand under judgment and grace. But this does not mean that there is no difference in calling. The office of the ministry stands as distinct and essential to the life of the church. And when we look for qualified persons to fill that office we look for those who have, more than anything else, this irresistible call to preach the gospel. (1981, 1.4, 332)

Chilstrom admits his understanding of ordained ministry was superficially functional upon taking the office of bishop and that his experience as bishop brought him to see more depth and substance in the pastoral calling. Even though he notes that, "a theology of ordained ministry has never been worked out precisely in the Lutheran Church" he nevertheless proceeds to intensify his assertion of the essential character of the pastoral call by claiming, "the pastorate is the only indispensable order in Church life" (1981, 1.4, 334). While it may be something of an overstatement to claim indispensability, it is at least reasonable to see a value for the church in establishing the unique identity and maintaining the distinctive character of the pastoral call. Not only could this serve as a source of the "bedrock confidence" necessary for a person responding to the call, Chilstrom also sees it as protection against obstacles which might hinder or discourage responding to the call, such as the dilemma of low clergy morale.
I wonder at times whether the root of our problem of identity in the ordained ministry today cannot be traced to the trends of the last two decades. The accent was on the pastor as enabler and counselor rather than preacher, teacher and liturgical leader. This was further complicated by our attempts to broaden our definition of ordained ministry to include more who wanted to enter organizations tangentially related to the pastoral calling. In the end we lost something of our sense of being and direction. (1981, 1.4, 335)

For my part, I have to agree with Dr. Chilstrom that the antidote to the problem of clergy ambivalence and malaise will be drawn from greater clarity in the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the pastoral identity. But even more than a solution to a problem, I believe achieving such clarity can generate new energy and enthusiasm for responding to the pastoral call.

At the same time, even if the church and its pastors gain a clearer sense of identity, there remains the fact that responding to the pastoral call and conducting the office of ministry will involve living with an inescapable tension. Speaking of Lutheran pastors, but applicable at least to some extent to all pastors, Mark Ellingsen traces one source of tension in pastoral ministry back to the writings of Martin Luther, observing, “The fact is that Lutheran pastors are caught in a tension between two kinds of leadership expectations. They must be both facilitators and authority figures who stand over against the congregation” (1981, 1.4, 339). Even though the two leadership expectations conflict with one another, Ellingsen points out that the resolution of the conflict is not a matter of eliminating the wrong one and preserving the right one. He observes that the writings of Luther provide for both expressions of these conflicting leadership expectations, and that they also suggest the circumstances under which the exercise of each is appropriate.

As facilitator, authority to exercise the pastoral calling is granted through the congregation, the priesthood of all believers, a concept Luther derives from, among other
scriptural sources, 1 Peter 2.9. For the sake of good order the church sets aside certain of its own members and bestows on them the privilege of carrying out the public ministry of Word and Sacrament. Ellingsen observes that this understanding is of particular value in guarding against the abuses of clericalism common in the medieval Roman Church which gave rise to the Reformation in the first place. Further, “It implies a leadership style where pastors represent the congregation, facilitate its ministry, and see themselves principally as one of the congregation” (1981, 1.4, 345).

The second leadership expression of the pastoral calling evident in Luther’s writings, the authority figure, is dependent upon the divine institution of the office, as the church has traditionally found indicated in scripture passages such as 1 Corinthians 12.28. This sets the pastor apart from the laity, giving an authority that does not depend upon the people and in fact may find the pastor standing in opposition to the congregation. The authority figure becomes a necessary aspect of pastoral leadership in those times and circumstances when the church is not being faithful in carrying out its ministry and mission. As the Reformation progressed, occasions such as the turmoil in Wittenberg while Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg, the Peasants’ Revolt from 1524 to 1526, and the Saxon Visitation during the years 1527 and 1528 which necessitated the preparation of the Small Catechism, were indications of the universal priesthood’s inability to provide for the office of ministry or preserve good order in every circumstance. Ellingsen holds that Luther would emphasize, “the minister’s authority as derived from Christ when seeking to order the church’s ordinary, daily life, when a word of prophetic judgment or guidance was necessary.” (1981, 1.4, 346). Ellingsen concludes by making the claim,
Luther’s view is that pastors must live in a creative tension between standing over against the congregation at some points, and being one of the group in other ways. . . . Against clericalism and so in order to encourage the full participation of all Christians in the church’s ministry, the universal priesthood should be emphasized, and pastors must work at being part of their congregations, albeit as facilitators. But for regulating the ordinary daily life of the church, pastors may accept the authority they have, recognize that they have been set apart, and do so in good conscience and with ease. Contemporary ministry/theology demands a variety of styles, each for the appropriate circumstance. We seem to have Luther’s (and the New Testament’s) word on it. (1981, 4.1, 346)

In conjunction with the issue of the unique authority of the pastoral call and the tension inherent in the two components of that authority, is the issue of the exercise of its distinctive power. Quoting Christ’s promise that the disciples will be, “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24.49), Martha Ellen Stortz presents three views of power commonly associated with the pastoral call as it translates into actual service in ministry. For each understanding of power she explores two fields of meaning, first the institutional and second the theological. These three views of power are power over, power within, and power with (1989, 9.4, 329).

Power over, understood as “the ability to influence the behavior of others” is often and rightly maligned because, “Insofar as this ‘power over’ assumes the posture of absolutist domination and totalitarian rule, it is oppressive” (1989, 9.4, 329). At the same time, it is also the power which parents exercise in caring for their children, serving to protect, help, and teach. Stortz holds, “that ‘power over’ is not intrinsically maleficent . . . The question to this form of power is the question of its use: in a parent-child relationship, is ‘power over’ used to protect or to abuse” (1989, 9.4, 329)? Applied to the exercise of the pastoral call, she acknowledges that while power over does have a legitimate place, it is also given to three unhelpful expressions: the dictatorial Herr Pastor or Frau Pastorin exercising authoritarian domination, the Eternal Earth Mother or
Benign Father encouraging childish behavior, and the Compulsive Co-Dependent yielding to the seduction of the need to be needed (1989, 9.4, 330).

The antithesis of power over that exercises external control is power within, which refers to an internal control and self-directed behavior. Stortz suggests that this surfaces as a personal magnetism or charisma which is characterized by its creativity, dynamic energy, ability to bring about change, and respond to new opportunities. As examples of power within, she cites the radical Reformers and the charismatic movement and points out the uneasiness such power typically elicits when confronting established structures governed by authoritarian power. The exercise of power within can enjoy both popularity and effectiveness, though Stortz is careful to point out that it also “needs constantly to be tested and tried” to make sure the power of God’s Spirit isn’t replaced by the spirit of the believer. “At the same time, it is difficult to test – too often the bedazzled masses will be too mesmerized to ask for authenticity” (1989, 9.4, 331).

Power with, which Stortz also describes as the power of solidarity or numbers, is the power of a guild, a union, a grass roots movement or other association devoted to pursuing the group’s perception of common good. Belonging to the group provides access to power that none of the members would have individually. She points to monastic communities and the civil rights movement as historic expressions of power with. As for its implication for the pastoral call, Stortz claims, “A certain image of God forms and informs a ministry of ‘power with’: the image of God as Friend.” The mutuality and strength of numbers are assets of power with. But the problem comes with what Stortz calls,

the caricatures of leader as Buddy. . . . These caricatures surface when a group loses sight of its common purpose; all that remains is cloying intimacy or terminal process
with no product apparent and no end in sight. . . . In general, the friendship model of leadership often constitutes a denial of differences in power between leader and group; it also denies responsibilities that rest – and rest only – with the leader. (1989, 9.4, 332-3)

The subject of power is perpetually present and potentially problematic for every pastor in responding to the call and engaging in ministry. Stortz answers this challenge by posing what she terms, “Theological Understandings of Power”.

All institutional understandings of power are challenged when confronted with the gospel, for the gospel appeals finally to a power revealed in powerlessness, a strength made perfect in weakness: the power of the cross. . . . Institutional “power over” boasts of a God as Father and Sovereign, but the power of the cross shows God to be a Father who cares and suffers for having cared so deeply, a Sovereign who empties his power into and onto others. . . . Institutional “power within” boasts of God as indwelling Spirit, but the power of the cross reminds us that God’s Spirit is dangerously different from our own spirits or the spirit of our leaders. . . . Institutional “power with” boasts of God as the Friend we have in Jesus, but the power of the cross subordinates even this powerful friendship to God’s commandment to love one another. Thus, theologically seen and subverted through the power of the cross, these forms of institutional power form a trinity of metaphors for God that constantly keep challenging themselves. (1989, 9.4, 333-4)

It is crucial for the pastor responding to a call to keep in mind that power and the exercise of power, in one or more of its forms, will be involved in carrying out pastoral ministry. It is also necessary that this power be constantly confronted and challenged by the cross because, “each form of power is transformed in ministry, and each is transformed by the power of the cross. Finally, ministry must be a complex and conscious balancing act. . . . The task of service in ministry is not easy, but therein lies the challenge” (1989, 9.4, 336). I would simply add that the challenging task of service in ministry extends to the task undertaken by the pastor in responding to a call.

From a spiritual perspective, the unique identity and distinctive character of the pastoral call (Chilstrom) is amplified by considering two components of authority and the tension between them (Ellingsen) and further focused by considering the transformation
of power as its exercise is theologically reshaped in responding to the pastoral call
(Stortz). Still to be addressed is the matter of how a pastor is led to respond to the
pastoral call in offering ministry in a given context and under each set of circumstances
she or he encounters. This involves what might be termed the practice of the profession
of ministry.

However, Clyde J. Steckel points out that, “The question of whether ordained
ministers constitute a profession is an old question, but one which needs fresh
consideration in light of changing conditions” (1981, 4.1, 373). Styling pastoral ministry
as a profession has had both support and opposition in the church and debate between the
two positions has occurred,

... wherever the Christian community has designated established leadership positions
defined by functions which inhere in the office of the leader (e.g., priests, pastors,
teachers) in contrast to leaders who respond to the immediate demands of a situation or
who receive the gifts of the Spirit (e.g., prophets, evangelists). The emergence of an
established leadership rank marks a key transition from a movement to an institution.
As soon as leadership roles are institutionalized, all the typical professional issues are
confronted – recruitment, education, assessing qualifications, and professional
discipline. (1981, 4.1, 375-6)

Steckel’s work is particularly interesting because of his selection of two
transitional periods in the understanding of ministry as profession and the focus he
suggests these give to modern discussion of the question of pastor as professional. The
first transitional period he selects is the Protestant Reformation when priestly formation
of learning sacramental and moral formulas in the cathedral was replaced by scholarly
disciplines of biblical and theological study in the university. The second transitional
period occurs between 1750 and 1850 among the Congregational clergy of New England
and on the American frontier as permanence (the understanding that a minister’s call to a
particular parish was for life) gave way to professional mobility. Both of these transitions
fueled a movement away from an understanding of the pastor as one who professes the faith through a specialized church order toward a more secular concept of a professional vocation combining theoretical knowledge with practiced skill (1981, 4.1, 378).

Using the example of the pastoral work of preaching, which involves both the scholarly work of preparation as well as the skilled art of presentation, Steckel argues that in the modern context, “the ministry must be professional in its integration of fundamental theory and research with skilled application, and with the kind of skill development which is reflectively self-critical and which itself integrates a diversity of methods and theories” (1981, 4.1, 379). However, even though Steckel proposes pastoral ministry must be professional, he maintains as well, “that it is more than professional” (1981, 4.1, 379). In this area of the pastoral call which is “more than professional” he carves out three categories for understanding what is unique and distinct for pastoral ministry. These are calling, character and charisma. Calling, more than dedication to professional practice, indicates a divine grounding with final accountability to God. Character goes beyond the professional’s sense of ethical integrity to personal faithfulness in following Jesus Christ. Charisma recognizes that the abilities, skills, artfulness, and wisdom of ministry cannot be manufactured. Instead, these have their source in the Spirit who cannot be compelled, but freely bestows gifts for building up the community of faith (1981, 4.1, 380-1).

Sustained attention to the spiritual perspective of pastoral ministry is necessary in order to maintain an understanding that the pastor is responding to a divine call and not simply choosing to take a job. The spiritual perspective is also necessary in order to discern what is uniquely and distinctively pastoral in responding to that call, as opposed
to a confused and aimless amalgam of public speaker, activities director, social worker, human resource manager, public relations agent, fund-raiser, and dozens of other roles that could be and sometimes are understood to be the work of the pastor. These are the breath of life for the pastor responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call. At the same time, however, the realities of the pastor’s personality and skills, the system of clergy deployment through an institutional process, and the specific circumstances and expectations of a particular congregational context are the body into which that breath must be breathed if ministry is to be incarnate as a body soul. After all, breath without a body is no more than a ghost. But a body without breath is a cadaver. So, constantly keeping in mind the spiritual perspective, it is not only possible but necessary to consider practical insight for the pastor responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call.

Practical Insight

As an acolyte, not only was I completely unfamiliar with letters of call, call committees, call processes, and the rest of the terms and practices involved in bringing pastors and congregations together, I was only dimly aware of the larger Lutheran organization called the American Lutheran Church, of which our congregation was a member, and not at all aware of the national conventions which met to determine what those terms and practices would be. I knew nothing of district presidents, predecessors of today’s synod bishops, and clergy rosters, seminaries and their professors, first call congregations and multiple staff churches, flagships and clinkers, compensation guidelines and the difference between the employee and self-employed status for IRS and Social Security. Neither did I learn of these in the seventh and eighth grade catechism classes taught by our pastor every Saturday morning.
In my junior year of public high school, the teacher of our college English class assigned a career paper. Each of us was to research and write about a career she or he might be interested in pursuing as an adult. Even though I was not at all convinced God was calling me to pastoral ministry, I didn’t imagine there would be any harm in doing my paper on being a pastor. I did a little reading and conducted interviews with some pastors I knew. Most of what I learned had to do with the work of ministry from the perspective of a pastor. However, I did discover that those who would be Lutheran pastors needed a college degree to be admitted to four more years of study in a school called seminary, and that only after graduation from seminary was a person eligible for what was referred to as call and ordination. As near as I could tell, it was this call and ordination that somehow made a person a pastor. But how a particular pastor landed in a particular congregation, God only knew, and I was content to leave it at that.

During my college years I began to recognize that the call I was hearing was God's Spirit working to lead me into pastoral ministry. The call was not dramatic or pressingly urgent. It was more like a magnetic attraction gently drawing me toward something I couldn’t see clearly but nevertheless I could tell it was good and good for me from the brightness around it. One incident that does deserve mention came at just the right moment as a confirmation of my inclination to follow this leading toward seminary and into the service of Christ and his church as a pastor.

In the winter term of my first year in college I enrolled in a religion course which I failed. At the end of my junior year, I visited the seminary to explore the possibility of admission. I met with the Dean of Admissions, Dr. Ted Liefeld, now of blessed memory. At the end of our interview, I decided to alert him to the fact that my transcript would
include an F in religion, fearing that it might hinder or even prevent my entrance into seminary. I wanted him to hear it from me and I wanted to hear his answer in person. I can still picture him at his desk, listening intently as I put the matter before him. He leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and thoughtfully searched for a suitable response. In a quiet but serious voice he said, "Now let me see, you are planning to graduate from Miami of Ohio which is a state school. Is that right?" I nodded in affirmation, fully prepared to hear him say I was ineligible even to apply. Instead he started to grin and observed, "That sounds like more of a recommendation than a detriment to me!" It wasn't only what he said, but the joy with which he said it. With a word he turned what had been to me a disgrace and a disappointment, a scandal and a stumbling block, into a revelation of the very power and wisdom of God. In that moment Dr. Liefeld showed me the power of speaking a word that could bring light into darkness, a word that could replace fear and guilt with joy and confidence. I was convinced that should God grant it, I wanted to give my life to speaking such a word for people who needed it as much as I did. Dr. Liefeld's word, like the vision of Audrey, became a primary source for my understanding of God's call, a moment of grace when Christ went to work to communicate a decision made about me, a moment when once again, God took an acolyte by the hand to make sure he didn't trip or set the altar cloth on fire.

As I entered seminary, it would be an overstatement to suggest that I had even a rudimentary awareness of the Lutheran understanding of the call to pastoral ministry. What I did understand was how God had been at work in my life to bring me to the point where I was enrolled in seminary. I had even less of a notion about how the call process of what was, at the time, The American Lutheran Church brought pastors and
congregations together. I could not have begun to imagine the diversity and complexity of the systems used for the deployment of clergy by the various denominations and so begin to appreciate some of the variety I might and might not encounter as I stepped into that stream myself. Neither did I have any way of getting a sense of the lay of the land through which I would travel.

The Candidate and the Call Process

In a study dated by its title, *Too Many Pastors? The Clergy Job Market*, Carroll and Wilson analyze what seemed in 1980 an oversupply of clergy. They examine the factors contributing to the predicament at that time, consider consequences of oversupply, and suggest some strategies for clergy in coping with limited opportunities. For the most part it is an assessment of the clergy market place with little to distinguish it from any similar assessment of secular employment opportunities. In spite of its potential for practical application at the time, the absence of sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of the call often makes for disconcerting reading.

There is, however, an especially valuable presentation and categorization of the three methods of deploying clergy which provides a helpful set criteria for identifying and therefore making some sense of the variety of clergy placement practices (Carroll 1980, 33). The three methods are: open, restricted open, and closed. In the open method, characteristic of Baptist churches and United Church of Christ, among others,

The congregation is free to secure and employ whomever it wishes to have as pastor. The person selected is ordained (certified) by the congregation. The candidate is free to negotiate whatever terms he or she chooses and to accept or reject any offer the congregation may make. The adequacy of the candidate’s professional training is determined by the congregation.” (Carroll 1980, 33)

The restricted open method is used by Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans,
Reformed and others.

In the restricted open method the congregation is still free to call its pastor, but it can only consider persons who have been duly certified as eligible by the appropriate judiciary (for example the synod or presbytery). In these bodies the denomination determines who is admitted into the ordained ministry. This group decides if the candidate’s training is adequate and if her or his theology is appropriately orthodox for the communion. While laypersons may be involved in the process of examination, the clergy tend to determine who will gain entrance into the profession. (Carroll 1980, 34)

The third method, referred to as closed, is most nearly represented in Protestantism by the practice of the United Methodist Church and by the practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

In a closed method the denominational body has complete control over who is admitted into the ordained ministry. Only the clergy determine which candidates shall be accepted into membership of a United Methodist annual conference and shall be ordained. Once a candidate is admitted (after a probationary period), he or she is guaranteed an appointment as pastor of a congregation or to some other church position. This method operates like a closed shop union, with each member being assured a job. (Carroll 1980, 34)

This framework for categorizing the various methods for the deployment of clergy is applicable whether the culture believes it is experiencing an oversupply of clergy as in 1980, or the opposite seems to be true, as some assume in 2002. “Do We Have Enough Pastors?” is the title of an article in the June, 2000 issue of The Lutheran. Lori Eickmann considers the question from both statistical and anecdotal perspectives as well as examining factors such as congregation and community size, economic factors, seminary enrollment, graduating seminarian debt, candidate restrictions, ethnic and minority ministry needs, on leave, resignation, and removal from the roster. The variety of factors means that the problem, if that is what it can be called, of clergy shortage, if that is what it is, as well as the answers and solutions are not easily determined.

Eickmann resists the temptation to oversimplify by citing the experience of two synods.
One pastor a month expresses interest in coming to serve in the [Allegheny] synod. In contrast, the North Carolina Synod receives eight requests a month.

This example illustrates the complexity of the ELCA’s clergy shortage. While the ELCA isn’t facing a shortage churchwide, some synods are in critical need of pastors. (2000, 42)

Rev. Michael W. Foss, Senior Pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran in Burnsville, Minnesota, is more inclined to sound the alarm of clergy shortage and to attribute that shortage to increased fatigue, frustration, and burnout among pastors. He claims, “The crisis in the church is a crisis about leadership, and we’ve just begun to feel it” (2000, 1). After presenting some statistics that support this conclusion, Foss asks, “How do we attract more leaders when those leading are in trouble” (2000, 1)? By way of a solution to the crisis, “My suggestion is to blow up your formal structure, the age-old committees and boards, and create ministry teams with specific goals and objectives. . . . Then give the ministry away” (2000, 8).

At the beginning of this section, Dr. Liefeld’s reply to my question took into account the differences between a course in religion at a state university and the thrust of the church’s program of theological education in preparation for pastoral ministry. In the same way, for a pastor responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call, the three resources just considered serve to illustrate that such a response is not undertaken in a vacuum but in the wider context of currents running through church and culture. Carroll and Wilson’s book invites attention to the practical realities of market trends and the denomination’s practices in deployment of leadership resources. Eickmann’s investigation of clergy supply in the ELCA reveals the importance of attention to the variety of factors affecting the call process in any given period of time and the complexity of the interaction among those factors which makes putting too much stock in generalizations risky. The pastor
responding to a Letter of Call does well to determine which factors apply to her or his situation and incorporate those into her or his response. The note of urgency in Foss’ article and the radical, at least for Lutherans, suggestion that the solution to the leadership crisis of our times is a dismantling of traditional forms and practices in favor of a more dynamic team approach involving gifted and equipped laity is a very real part of the landscape. All these factors form part of the backdrop against which a pastor sorts out a response to the call.

In addition to the environment of the wider church and culture, a second aspect of practical concern for the pastoral candidate herself or himself in responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call is the candidate and her or his household. Sources which deal with such matters are fairly plentiful, though in the interest of presenting the nuts and bolts for participation in a call process, they typically have difficulty in maintaining any kind of spiritual perspective. Examples of this type of literature include my first practical ministry text in seminary, Lyle E. Schaller’s classic The Pastor and the People, Christopher C. Moore’s well-known Opening the Clergy Parachute, New Beginnings by Roy M. Oswald of Alban Institute, and Ending Well... Starting Strong an ELCA transitions resource by Herbert E. Anderson.

Schaller’s style of narrative case study built around Rev. Don Johnson is an engaging account of an idealized situation. He draws on principles which could be of great value to the candidate in the call process and in serving as pastor, except that pastors generally do not have the necessary background or access to expert consultants who do to make effective use of these principles. Unfortunately, Schaller does not provide good references for the sources of his insights on items such as pastoral priorities
and compensation, so unless the situation bears a very strong resemblance to Don Johnson’s case, it is hard to know how to proceed.

Moore’s self-help style is readable and provides a common sense, step by step outline which is especially appropriate in an open method of deployment. However, with the exception of the occasional biblical illustration, there is not much to distinguish it from a secular job search manual. The three parts of the book deal with getting ready for a move, exploring new possibilities, and special circumstances.

In the section devoted to getting ready, Moore discusses how the candidate can make the clergy placement system work for her or him, the best timing for a move, and the preparation of written materials. The second part provides insights and techniques for what he calls casing, then pursuing and securing a prospective position. The premise is that the candidate should devote the first year of the search to positioning herself or himself and the second year to marketing. However, the idea of a pastor spending the year prior to entering the call process devoting herself or himself to getting programs running, statistics looking good, and even losing weight so the candidate’s appearance and track record will be appealing to a prospective call committee smacks more of manipulating the process than being open to God’s call. The third part of the book considers special circumstances. Unfortunately, special is a euphemistic word for characteristics in a candidate which some call committees may be reluctant to consider. These include cases where the candidate is a woman, a minority, an older person or a person with personal circumstances, such as divorce, which might be regarded as undesirable. This section offers suggestions on how to turn a liability or handicap into an asset. Again, the overall feel of the material is much more like secular advice on how to
get the desired job than how to engage in a process of discerning God's call.

Oswald draws on the highly regarded research of Alban Institute to provide important insight into the dynamics of transition in workbook form. His suggestions and exercises for self-care and family care seem especially valuable and move this work beyond the realm of the secular job search guide book and into the area of spiritual consideration. Especially intriguing is the suggestion throughout the book which calls for the candidate to meet regularly with a partner, a group of pastors who are also in transition, or a consultant to provide assistance in processing the material. Personally, I am unaware of a single instance where such a partnership or group has functioned for pastors in the call process. The absence of any guidelines for starting and sustaining such a partnership or group, coupled with the lack of any other data in the workbook relating to the function of such a role in the call process, leads me to assume that these pairings or groupings or consulting sessions represent an abstract ideal which rarely occurs in practice.

Of this group of four sources, Anderson's approach most consistently incorporates attention to a spiritual perspective. Written as a series of essays, he begins with God's call to pastoral ministry and continues with a consideration of this particular call. He even addresses the question of how a pastor reaches a decision among competing priorities. The challenge is taking the general material of the essay and applying it with wisdom and understanding to the circumstances of a particular congregation.

For the pastor, gathering practical insight into the overall workings of the call process and the pastor's own responsible participation in that process as a candidate while maintaining a spiritual perspective would seem to be a significant challenge. A
probable lack of access to expert background in the process and a likely absence of a partner or a group would only serve to add to the difficulty. While there is certainly value in the written materials available, it must be concluded that these are inadequate if they are employed alone.

The Candidate and the Congregation

Another area where practical insight is desirable in the call process for the pastor responding to a call is the candidate’s assessment of the potential of the congregation itself and the potential of a good match for ministry between the pastor and congregation. As in the area of a pastor’s consideration of self and family, there is an ample supply of material available here. Examples of helpful resources include Joseph L. Umidi’s Confirmin the Pastoral Call, an article by Leith Anderson “Search Committees: A Strategy for Success,” Schaller’s The Pastor and the People, and Oswald’s New Beginnings.

Umidi maintains a fairly consistent attention to spiritual perspective which is evident from his consistent use of the word “confirming” rather than “deciding” in the title and throughout the book, and the admonition to pastors, “Pray for integrity of heart that has no personal agenda, no self-willed schemes, no self-centered goals. . . . Our goal is to join with God in what He is already doing.” (2000, 82). Another point of emphasis is looking for a good match, drawing on the relational themes of family and particularly marriage as metaphors. The book presents a fairly substantial quantity of anecdotal material describing experiences from both the pastor’s and the congregation’s viewpoint. Generally this material is used effectively as a lead in to the discussion of a practical insight for participating in a call process. With one section devoted to the call committee
and one to the candidate, there is also the hope that each party will spend some time in
the other's shoes and as a result, be equipped to participate in the process with greater
understanding and sensitivity.

Anderson's article presents some practical and specific suggestions for the call
committee. What occurs to me, however, is that it makes sense to take these suggestions
and turn them around as practical advice for the candidate, especially item four: approach
the process from the candidate's [read congregation's] perspective; and item six: be
thorough. In item six Anderson suggests pursuing secondary and tertiary references,
running a credit check, requesting medical and psychological assessments, and
remembering that research shows in over ninety percent of cases the future behavior and
performance of the leader [read congregation] will be an extension of past behavior and
performance.

The comments on Schaller's approach to the candidate's consideration of the
congregation are similar to those already mentioned with respect to this source. Again,
the encounter between Pastor Don Johnson and the St. John call committee is idealized to
the point of fantasy. In reality, the extent of insight gathered from this one fictional
meeting would require more time as well as more extensive expertise than most pastors
bring to a call process. An important question raised by the story of Pastor Don and St.
John is what is a reasonable accomplishment to expect from the group and candidate?
The list of twenty suggested questions from the candidate to the committee, for instance,
seems unrealistic even if the candidate were to pose only two or three for discussion
(1973, 34-5).

Oswald is mostly concerned with what follows the candidate's response to the
Letter of Call, which is certainly a part of the candidate’s response to God’s call. The main reason I have included his book in this section is his observation, “The first twelve months will set the tone for your entire ministry in your new parish. What gets set in motion in these opening months will have a far-reaching effect” (1989, v). In the course of this study, I have come to appreciate that it more likely that the statement should be revised by changing, “The first twelve months will set the tone . . .” to read, “The call process will set the tone . . .”

Before concluding an examination of source materials yielding practical insight, I believe it is necessary to give some attention to materials that deal with conflict and dysfunction as encountered in congregations by pastors. What are sometimes referred to as unhealthy congregations are, nevertheless, the very ones Christ Jesus died to save (Matthew 9.12) just as he died to save unhealthy pastors and the whole unhealthy world. What is crucial for pastors seeking to respond to God’s call and a Letter of Call is the ability to come to some awareness of whether the situation is best served by a general practitioner or needs a specialist, whether the ailment calls for two aspirin and a good night’s sleep or requires brain surgery. Of the many possible selections, I have chosen Andre Bustanoby’s article “Why Pastors Drop Out”, Norman Shawchuck’s How to Manage Conflict in the Church, and Craig L. Nessan’s article “Surviving Congregational Leadership.”

Writing as long ago as 1977, in days when some held that there was an oversupply of clergy, Bustanoby cites three studies that indicate a reason for concern in the church. Each of these studies reported an alarming number of pastors leaving or thinking about leaving parish ministry. Like a doomsday prophet predicting dire days
ahead, Bustanoby claims, “I do believe that the local churches must take a hard look at what they are doing to hasten the exodus from the pastorate” (1977, 16). The main concern in one of the studies, which he finds confirmed by his own experience with clergy leaving the ministry, is conflict. “Of prime importance is a unified leadership in the local church, leaders courageous enough to deal with dissent firmly and in love” (1997, 15). Without the support of the leadership the pastor is left to deal with the conflict alone. Often the pastor winds up isolated and on the spot, forced to choose between commitment to caring for members and commitment to the convictions of her or his calling. Bustanoby called attention to this concern a quarter of a century ago.

More recently Shawchuck, a twenty-five year veteran of consulting religious organizations in serious conflict wrote, “In recent years I often confront a new type of conflict in the church which requires entirely new theories and interventions, if they are to be managed” (1996, 7). He notes the increasing level of brokenness and the rise in addictions of people in American society. In his assessment, the condition of the culture will enter and affect congregations as people bring their problems to church seeking help and hope. According to Shawchuck, conflict of the new type is likely to exhibit characteristics of, “denial, confusion, self-centeredness, dishonesty, lying, ethical deterioration, spiritual bankruptcy, hoping for a quick fix” (1996, 8). According to his diagnosis the conflict comes from dysfunctional relationships and the effective response is likely to resemble the intervention of an alcohol or substance abuse recovery program. In his book, Shawchuck examines how dysfunction comes to expression, its effects in the congregation, and provides an overview of family systems theory as it yields insight for understanding dysfunction in congregations. Introducing the theory of intervention,
Shawchuck makes the point,

When dealing with a conflict that grows out of dysfunctional relationship in the congregation, as compared to normal conflict, all the rules change. The theories and processes that work well in normal conflict situations do not work in dysfunctional settings. Dysfunction calls for a different approach. (1996, 49)

This observation suggests a crucial, practical insight and a specific response for the pastor who receives a Letter of Call. First, the proliferation of dysfunction means the candidate should be very intentional in determining whether or not the calling congregation is suffering from dysfunction. If dysfunction is present, the pastor should accept the call only if she or he is trained in using intervention theory and has the endorsement of the bishop to engage in an intentional intervention process. Also valuable in such a circumstance would be a clear and binding agreement on the part of congregation, bishop, and pastor to engage a qualified consultant to assist with the intervention, before the Letter of Call is accepted. Otherwise, the Letter of Call should be returned or consideration deferred until steps are taken to deal with the dysfunction. In any event, the pastor should notify the bishop of the presence of any discovered symptom of dysfunction. This is for exactly the same reason as professionals are subject to mandatory reporting of physical abuse. Alcoholics understand that the dysfunction of alcoholism is a matter of life and death. The church has yet to fully grasp, but needs to do so, that for the congregation suffering from dysfunction the stakes are equally high.

The family systems theory is a valuable and powerful tool in understanding and carrying out pastoral ministry. Craig Nessen provides a good and brief summary of the basic concepts in his article, “Surviving Congregational Leadership: A Theology of Family Systems.” Even more important for the pastor, however, is his theological analysis of the theory and its concepts. So often, a new theory that originates in a secular
field is imported directly into the church without the necessary theological reflection and integration, usually to the detriment of the church. In this case, Nessan’s reflection not only considers the implications of family systems theory for theology, but also opens the possibility for expanding and extending the theory itself to the fuller depth available when connected with the true and abundant new life in Christ. By way of example, Nessan considers the theological theme of God and notes that the persons of the Trinity constitute a single system of self-differentiated persons. Sin, understood in classic theology as a broken relationship, can be understood in terms of the dysfunctional system in which the dysfunction is not attributable to the isolated problem individual alone, but the whole system of relationships. Salvation is God’s response to the dysfunctional system’s tendency to triangulate an innocent third party. In God’s hands, the ineffective behavior of triangulation is redeemed and perfected as in, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5.21). Likewise, when family systems theory considers scapegoating, blaming the innocent victim, theology requires us to name it for what it is: murder. Yet, theologically speaking, we are also required to acknowledge that through this death God accomplishes humanity’s atonement. Justification has the most to offer family systems theory, which holds that the goal of a healthy life is non-anxious presence. The way to a non-anxious presence according to family systems theory, however, begins and ends with examining and improving one’s own habitual ways of relating. According to the theology of the Christian Gospel, we are justified by grace through faith, a free gift, a true and lasting basis for genuine and enduring non-anxiousness. Nessan also deals with the theological categories of creation, anthropology, and church (2000, 393-9). The
significance of his work is to open the way for incorporating the use of family systems theory on a sound, theological basis and in the process, to sharpen our existing theological tools for sharing the Gospel.

A Primary Source Revisited

Certainly a pastor needs a strong foundation in both spiritual perspective and practical insight in order to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to God’s call and to a Letter of Call. But I doubt I will ever grow in wisdom to the point of reaching sufficient understanding for such a response, if indeed it is possible for anyone. So, how does a pastor go about responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call?

In the face of such a question, it is a priceless treasure to be able to begin and end not with my wisdom and strength but with the decision Christ has made for me and about me on the cross. That decision is a gift of grace with its primary source located and poured out in Word and Sacrament, again and again. It is a gift of grace upon grace sent as a confirmation of that decision in a word of acceptance from Dr. Liefeld for an apprehensive, prospective seminarian and in a vision given to Audrey for a little acolyte.

Confident that responding to God’s call and a Letter of Call is a matter of Christ’s decision and leading, I am content to continue to carry the symbol of the light of the world into the midst of God’s people gathered for worship, according to whatever gifts I have been granted, trusting the Lord still to hold my hand so I don’t trip or set the altar cloth on fire.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The ELCA clergy roster includes the names of 17,697 pastors (2002 ELCA Yearbook, 582). At least once in her or his life, each one has opened an envelope containing a Letter of Call and proceeded to make a response.

According to Spiegelberg’s phenomenological methodology (page 11 above) the general essence of what is involved in responding to a Letter of Call can be gained from investigating examples of their experience. In order to study the phenomenon of how an ELCA pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call, it was necessary to identify those ELCA pastors whose experience would be studied and how that experience would be accessed. This comprises the primary body of research conducted in this study.

Two additional research methodologies employed in conducting this study were document analysis and a survey questionnaire. The documents analyzed provided insight into the policies and practices involved in the ELCA call process. The survey questionnaire was administered to the deployed staff persons who serve the nine regions of the ELCA. The questionnaire was designed to identify any significant resources currently being provided for pastors or any intentions to provide resources for pastors in
the call process of which I might be unaware.

**Designing the Study**

The complex nature of the phenomenon and the depth of information sought in this study suggested interviewing (Marshall 1995, 78-86) as the appropriate methodology for obtaining relevant data. Specifically, the semistructured interview (Merriam 1998, 74) conducted as a person-to-person encounter (Merriam 1998, 71) provided the necessary direction as well as sufficient flexibility for exploring the experience under investigation.

In developing the interview guide, I reflected on my own experience with the call process and on conversations with other pastors about their experiences with the call process. The result was the identification of six areas for investigation. The first was an invitation to the interview subject to share an autobiographical summary of experiences with the call process. I selected this as the opening topic of conversation for the interview, following the principle, “it is a good idea to ask for relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of an interview” (Merriam 1998, 82). The next four topics addressed were: important considerations in the process, the most helpful insights and information gathered in the call process, the resources used in reaching a response, and the manner in which a final decision in responding to a Letter of Call was reached. The sixth area involved asking the subjects, on the basis of their experience, what might be included in the call process that would be helpful for pastors making a response to a Letter of Call.

I formulated sample questions to be used in the six areas for investigation and tested it by asking two pastors to respond to the six areas as if they were being interviewed (Merriam 1998, 82). This resulted in no significant revision of the interview
guide but it did serve to give me confidence in using the guide for the research interview as I had designed it.

**Defining the Sample**

Due to limitations which included time and cost, I determined to proceed by identifying a purposeful sample (Merriam 1998, 61) in order to select information rich cases.

In preparing to define the sample, I examined the ELCA clergy roster which lists 9,450 or 53.4 percent of the 17,697 rostered pastors as serving under call from congregations and 1,796 or 10.1 percent as serving specialized ministries under call from the ELCA Church Council or a synod council. Another 900 or 5.1 percent are on leave from call, including those on leave for graduate study, or on continuing disability. The remaining 5,551 or 31.4 percent are listed as retired from active service (2002 ELCA Yearbook, 582). In addition to those on the clergy roster, there are persons whose experience includes receiving and responding to an ELCA Letter of Call, but who have subsequently resigned or been removed from the clergy roster - 1,278 in the ten years from 1991-2000 (2001 Pre-Assembly Report; Report of the Secretary, Section II, page 14). However, the total number of persons who have resigned or been removed is not available. Thus, the total number of ELCA pastors and others with experience in responding to a Letter of Call who might have been selected to participate in this study included nearly 20,000 persons.

In consultation with my project advisor, I developed several objective criteria for selecting the sample. I decided to limit the sample to those pastors currently serving congregations who had ten years of experience in ministry and who had participated in
the call process in the past two years. Setting these objective criteria assured that the sample would include pastors with a perspective based on more than one experience with the call process and at least one experience with the call process which was relatively recent.

At the same time, these criteria eliminated consideration of anyone who had been on the clergy roster at one time but subsequently resigned or been removed from the roster. The criteria excluded the 8,247 pastors on the clergy roster who were retired, on leave from call or on continuing disability, serving in specialized, non-parish ministries under call from ELCA Church Council or a synod council. Also excluded were the 3,186 rostered pastors who had been ordained in the previous ten years (2001 Pre-Assembly Report; Report of the Secretary, Section II, page 14). Adopting these criteria reduced the number of possible subjects to 6,264 ELCA pastors minus those pastors who had not participated in a call process in the previous two years, a number which I was unable to determine.

For the sake of minimizing travel time and expense to each interview subject, I decided to limit the sample to ELCA Region 6, which encompasses the states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. This region includes six synods: Southeast Michigan, North/West Lower Michigan, Northwestern Ohio, Northeastern Ohio, Southern Ohio and Indiana-Kentucky. I made this decision out of practical necessity, yet with the realization that the introduction of a geographic criterion of convenience might impact the outcome of the study (Merriam 1998, 63).

Two final considerations in defining the sample involved determining the number of subjects and adding a subjective criterion. I decided to interview one pastor in each of
the six synods of Region 6. In order to identify the participants, I asked each of the six bishops of Region 6 to nominate three pastors serving in that synod who met the objective criteria I had established for the study. By asking for three names, I would be able to assure the anonymity of the interview subjects. The subjective criterion introduced was a request for each bishop to nominate pastors who, in their estimation, had participated competently and faithfully in the call process. In this way, I thought to draw on the expertise of the bishops for surfacing those pastors who would have more information rich insights to share.

Selecting the Sample

The first step in selecting the sample involved sending a letter to each of the six bishops (Appendix B) requesting the nomination of three pastors. In addition, I included a letter of explanation (Appendix B) describing the study and identifying the ethical standards to be observed in conducting the research (Babbie 1998, 438-44). This letter was signed by those to whom I was accountable in carrying out the research: my project advisor, the ELCA bishop of the synod in which I was serving, and the ELCA staff person deployed in Region 6.

In response to my request, all six of the synod bishops provided at least three names of pastors who met the designated criteria. From these nominations, I randomly generated a first, second, and third choice from each synod. I contacted the six who were first choice by telephone and each one agreed to participate in the study. I followed up the initial telephone contact with a letter further explaining the study, stating the questions to be addressed in the interview, and expressing appreciation for their willingness to participate (Appendix B). In addition, I enclosed a copy of the letter of
explanation and ethical standards. After allowing time for the mail to deliver the material, I telephoned each subject, confirmed her or his willingness to participate in the study and scheduled the interviews. All six interviews were conducted between December 26, 2000 and January 6, 2001.

Profile of Interview Subjects

The only criteria for selection were those already mentioned. No other criteria were suggested or, to my knowledge, considered by the bishops in making their nominations. Neither did I make any attempt in analyzing the data to account for demographic or other variables in the sample. Nevertheless, the reader should at least be informed of a few characteristics in the profile of the sample.

All of the subjects were between the age of forty and sixty years old. The six subjects included five males and one female. It is at least interesting to note that where my sample was 16.7 percent female, the ELCA clergy roster in 2000 was reported as 14.2 percent female (2001 Pre-Assembly Report; Report of the Secretary, Section II, page 14). Five of the subjects were married and one was not. All six of the subjects had children, though only one had children currently living at home.

Four of the subjects were first career pastors and two were second career. Three of the subjects were serving congregations which were located in a small city. One was serving a rural congregation, one a downtown urban congregation and one a suburban congregation. Two pastors were in solo positions, serving as the only program staff person. The only other staff persons were part-time support staff, providing secretarial or custodial services. Four were in multiple staff situations with at least one other, part-time program staff person, not necessarily an ordained pastor, serving the congregation in
addition to support staff persons.

The geographic criterion of convenience did have an impact on the profile of the subjects, in that even though the ELCA has eight seminaries, five of the six pastors interviewed attended the same seminary, Trinity in Columbus, Ohio. It should be noted, as well, that Trinity is the only seminary located in the geographic territory of Region 6 and it is also the seminary which I attended. As with age, gender, family, and so on, the seminary which a pastor attended was not a criterion for participation in the study or a factor considered in analyzing the data. It is, however, one aspect of the make up of this particular selected sample.

One characteristic of the candidates which I note, even though it did not seem to have an effect on the attitude of the subject or the material shared in the interview itself, was the fact that I was previously acquainted with four of the six pastors. Two of the pastors I met for the first time in conducting the interview. However, as I reflected on the interviews, the pastors who were new acquaintances seemed every bit as open and willing to share as the others while those who were known to me did not seem to be inhibited in their sharing because of our acquaintance.

**Conducting the Interviews**

When I contacted the pastors to schedule the interviews, I requested an hour and a half of their time and also specified the place where the interview was to occur. Five of the interviews were conducted in the church building and one was conducted in the pastor’s home. In each case, the pastor had seen to it that we would be alone, seated in comfortable chairs and that our time together would be free from interruption. Each participant had read and reflected on the information I had sent prior to our meeting and
was not only prepared but enthusiastic about the interview. In my opinion, the letter of explanation and ethical standards, the letter containing the interview guide and the telephone calls in preparation for the interview contributed to creating a comfortable, relaxed, and secure setting for the interview.

I made an effort to begin each meeting with a few minutes of pleasant, informal greeting and personal sharing. As we moved into the interview I repeated a request mentioned in the letter, asking her or his permission to tape record the conversation in the interest of accurate preservation of the comments. Without exception, all participants agreed.

After I turned on the tape recorder, we reviewed the topics covered in the interview guide and I asked if she or he had any questions about the material I hoped to cover. Again, I would credit the preparation with the fact that each was ready and eager to begin. I started the recorded portion of each interview by inviting the subject to share experiences with the call process. From time to time, I interrupted this narration with questions of clarification or questions designed to elicit further elaboration. Relating these experiences typically took the first hour and in the process of recounting their experiences with the call process the subjects often touched on many aspects of the next four areas to be covered. The topics of important considerations in the process, the most helpful insights and information gathered in the call process, the resources used in reaching a response, and the manner in which a final decision was reached were covered during the last half hour if they had not been addressed earlier in the interview. Near the end of the interview, I did make sure to allow time for each participant to share her or his thoughts in response to the question about what might serve to improve the call process.
In concluding the interview, I invited each of the pastors to pray, giving thanks for our time together, asking the Lord’s continued blessing, guidance and support for the pastor, the pastor’s family, the congregation and the ministry they shared.

Analysis of Interview Data

When the interviews were completed, I transcribed the recordings, designating each of the six transcriptions with a letter symbol, U through Z, for the sake of reference. I chose the last six letters of the alphabet because the synods of region six are designated by the first six letters of the alphabet and I wanted to avoid giving the impression that I was identifying the synod where the informant was serving. Then, I reviewed and reflected on the material from the interviews, in keeping with the principle that working with data in qualitative research involves an intuitive and inductive process, as the researcher looks for relationships between emerging themes (Taylor 1998, 140-161).

In order to familiarize myself with the data, I began by putting a mark in the margin beside any comment which seemed to have a bearing on the pastor’s process of reaching a response to a Letter of Call. Going back over these marks, I gave a label or title to as many as possible. Then, making a master list of these labels or titles, I began to combine them into larger groupings of related comments in preparation for category construction (Merriam 1998, 179-182). Reflecting on each grouping, the categories began to emerge and I formulated a tentative name for each since no other source had a classification scheme for categories of consideration in responding to a Letter of Call (Merriam 1998, 183).

At the same time, I went back over the transcripts and discovered that material I had previously overlooked occasionally gained prominence when I recognized how it fit
into a named category. This was especially the case with the category labeled “Trust in the Call Process Facilitator”. In several instances what first seemed an offhanded comment took on a new and added weight when considered in relationship to a larger category (Merriam 1998, 182-7). Finally, I set about the task of refining the data and giving more specific definition to the categories. This resulted in naming five major categories each with its own set of subcategories.

**Document Analysis**

To clarify my understanding of the ELCA call process and various issues related to the policies and practices surrounding the process, I conducted a document analysis of a variety of written materials. This analysis also provided insight to some of the thinking that informs practice.

The first task in undertaking a document analysis is to locate those materials which are pertinent to the study. I consulted with Marilyn Smith, ELCA Division for Ministry/Department for Synodical Relations staff member for Region 9 and Assistant to the Bishop Pastor Jack Eggleston, who offered valuable suggestions.

The following documents provided helpful information and background in describing the call process or an aspect of the call process.

The “Letter of Call” form itself is a document of basic significance for this study. Portions of the form are reproduced in Chapter 1. The form indicates some of the understandings of the ELCA with respect to a call to pastoral ministry.

*The Call Process, Southeast Michigan Synod, 1995* provided a helpful overview of practices and procedures currently in use in one ELCA synod. While the process is similar in many synods, there are significant variations in detail from synod to synod.
This diversity serves to emphasize the importance of pastors taking the opportunity to become familiar with the call process as defined by the particular synod in which they are seeking a call.

“Mobility Information, 2000” (Appendix A) is the most recent set of documents affirmed by the Conference of Bishops for all ELCA rostered leaders including pastors. The packet contains an “Availability for Call” form with an attachment for “Ordained Pastors” and a “Personnel Information for Synod Bishops” form. Noted on the document itself is the provision that the completed “Availability for Call” form may be copied by the synod staff and shared with call committees. It provides opportunity for the candidate to share personal and professional history, views of theology and ministry, references, and asks the candidate to complete a priorities and skills checklist. The attachment for “Ordained Pastors” asks for examples of work and experience in categories of ministry specifically stated in the “Letter of Call.” Printed on the “Personnel Information” form is the provision that it may not be copied, though a disclaimer asserts that some of the information a pastor provides on the completed form may be shared with call committees, based on the synod bishop’s judgment. The candidate may use this form to share with the bishop reasons for being available for call, characteristics of the call desired, synodical and collegial involvement, five year statistics in the pastor’s current congregation, compensation expectations, and any personal, financial, or legal issues that may affect availability for call.

The “Roster Information Form,” made up of “Forms A, B, and C” is used by seminary graduates and filed with the Department for Synodical Relations (DSR) - ELCA. “Form A” is basic background information. “Form B” is for communicating
preferences and restrictions. The “Candidate Information Form for Call/Search Committees – Form C” is similar to the “Availability for Call” mobility form with adaptations appropriate for first call candidates. When the first call candidate is assigned to a synod, these are forwarded by the DSR to the bishop of that synod.

“Congregational Mission Profile Information, 2000” (Appendix A) is affirmed by the Conference of Bishops for use by a call committee in representing the history, ministry, membership, community, and leadership needs of the congregation to a candidate. Unlike earlier editions, the current form specifically asks the call committee to report the tenure of the three previous pastors and comment on the reasons for leaving, the most significant conflict in the congregation in the past 20 years, and requests comments on any significant trends that appear in the current ELCA Congregation Trend Report. Part IV of the form asks, “Where is God leading us?” This invites the articulation of a vision for the future of the congregation. Part V solicits a description of the pastor being sought and includes a priorities and skills checklist which is similar to that on the “Availability for Call” form.

The following documents served as a source of general information about the office and practice of ministry in the ELCA. In addition, they provided insight into attitudes, values, and priorities which, at least to some extent, inform current ELCA practice with respect to the call process.

“Vision and Expectations – Ordained Ministers in the ELCA” is an official document, prepared by the Division for Ministry and adopted by the Church Council in 1990. In a preface commending it to the church, ELCA Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson wrote of the document, “It states both the vision for ordained ministry in the
life of this church and the high expectations its members have of those who serve in this ministry” (Vision 1990, 1).

The Candidacy Manual booklet and “Candidacy Process in the ELCA,” a single sheet flier, are produced by the Division for Ministry. The manual serves as a comprehensive description of the steps in the candidacy process for a person who would prepare to serve as an ordained minister of the ELCA. The flier illustrates the progression of the four steps leading to call which are involved in candidacy: entrance, endorsement, approval, assignment.

Ending Well . . . Starting Strong is a transitions resource produced by the Division for Ministry. It presents some helpful material for use by rostered leaders and congregation leaders at times of concluding one ministry partnership and preparation for beginning new ministry partnership. The material is instructive for gaining an appreciation of the ethical concerns at stake in transition. It also presents helpful wisdom for navigating the complex issues involved in transition. However, I would observe that there is an acutely painful discrepancy between the theory presented in this material and what, I would say, represents typical practice for both pastors and congregations in transition.

RELATIONAL AGREEMENT AMONG SYNODICAL BISHOPS OF THE ELCA presents the advice and wisdom of the conference of bishops with respect to the practice of collegiality among the bishops. The document deals with a variety of issues, including principles and applications for dealing with leadership needs, in particular regarding the call process. From this document, it is clear that while there is diversity among the synods in the administration of the call process, there is an intent on the part of
the bishops to uphold and support a spirit of unity, mutual respect, and collegiality in the midst of that diversity.

**Designing and Administering the Questionnaire**

A final aspect of the research conducted in this study was designing a questionnaire which was administered to the Division for Ministry/Department of Synodical Relations (DM/DSM) staff persons who serve the nine regions of the ELCA. The purpose of this questionnaire (Appendix C) was to identify types of help available to pastoral candidates in making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Surveying this particular sample gave me an opportunity to solicit first-hand information from across the ELCA about the types of help that might currently be available to assist pastors in the call process or types of help that might become available in the near future. For these first two items, I asked informants to indicate, by making a check in a box, if the available help was regularly provided to candidates as a matter of procedure. I also asked each informant to identify, in her or his opinion, what help was most useful for equipping a response to a Letter of Call, what persons she or he would suggest as good resources in conducting research, and an open-ended question for any insights, observations, suggestions, or reflections she or he might choose to share on the subject of the study.

In designing the instrument I drew on the characteristics of a good questionnaire as described by Lang and Heiss (1998, 111-6). Following their suggestions, I gave special attention to making sure that the information I was seeking could not be obtained elsewhere and that the questions were designed to gather only the information I was seeking. I took care to compose the questions and the directions for responding to the
questions so that these were clear, concise, complete, and unambiguous. I am indebted to Marilyn Smith, ELCA Division for Ministry/Department for Synodical Relations staff member for Region 9, for providing assistance in refining both the terminology and the questions. She also included the introduction of the questionnaire on the agenda of a meeting of the DM/DSR staff members so they could receive it in person along with a copy of the signed letter of explanation describing the study which I had sent to the bishops in requesting the nomination of pastors to be interviewed (Appendix B). I believe her personal presentation was the significant factor which resulted in receiving a response from all nine regions.
CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Some months ago, I joined a public, on-line meeting entitled “ELCA Call Process.” The invitation to the meeting reads:

Just about everybody thinks it stinks. The horror stories abound. Congregations seeking Pastors wait forever, while Pastors open to new calls wait and wait. Worse, each synod seems to handle vacancies differently. Is there a better way for ELCA Congregations to call Pastors (and Diaconal Ministers and AIMs)? Is there a better way for Pastors (and Diaconal Ministers and AIMs) to receive a call? Put your 2 cents worth in here. You can gripe and moan for awhile if you want. But maybe, just maybe, we can come up with something constructive? (Steven P. Tibbetts. ELCA Call Process, Message #0, May 13, 2001, Luther Link)

Pastor Steven Tibbetts, the meeting’s creator, makes the assumption that “just about everybody thinks it stinks.” His assessment of the extent of dissatisfaction with the process is certainly open to challenge. However, his invitation to consider the question of whether there might be “a better way,” has stimulated widely varied observations on the part of the meeting’s diverse participants. At the very least, it can be maintained on the basis of contributions by several of the meeting’s participants that there are some who resonate with the suggestion that the process stinks.

But the discussion is limited to consideration of the process itself, both in the meeting and in this study, so long as the issue is framed by the question, “Is there a better way?” Inviting suggestions for developing a better way tends to direct the focus onto the mechanics of procedure. As a participant in this meeting, I have suggested that in
addition to asking if there is a better way, it might also be beneficial to ask, “Is there a better question?” Indeed, I have noticed a tendency among pastors and congregations which seems to be born out in the meeting on the ELCA Call Process. That tendency, at least initially, is to seek a procedural remedy whenever frustration and disappointment with the call process are encountered.

In one sense, this study represents the search for a better question. In the previous chapter, I described how the study was developed and the research conducted. I now proceed to consider the information generated through the interviews conducted in researching the question, “How does an ELCA pastor make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call?”

**Categorization of Research Data**

In analyzing notes, interview tapes and transcripts, survey questionnaires and other materials from my research, I began looking for a way to arrange and organize the information I had gathered. Gradually, with prayerful reflection and patient review of the material, the most crucial aspects of a pastor’s response seemed to cluster around five basic themes or categories related to participation as a candidate in the call process. I have not found these categories identified in any other source, so I have used my own terminology in labeling them. The titles I have given the five categories are: 1) written materials; 2) first impressions; 3) additional insights; 4) trust of the Call Process facilitator; and 5) the candidate’s reflection, discernment, and final response. Three categories were further divided into subcategories. The following outline of the five categories and subcategories is provided as a guide to the organization of the material derived from the pastors interviewed in this study.
Category One: Standardized Forms and Other Written Materials
  Standardized Forms
  Other Written Materials
Category Two: Candidate’s Initial Impressions
  From the Interview with the Call Committee
  From Observing the Facility and Touring the Community
  From Other Interaction with the Call Committee
Category Three: Additional Insights
  Before Initial Impressions
    From within the Church
    From outside the Church
  After Initial Impressions
    From the Congregation
    From beyond the Congregation
Category Four: Trust in the Call Process Facilitator
Category Five: Candidate’s Reflection, Discernment, and Final Response

The findings of this study do not indicate that a candidate proceeds through these five categories as if they are sequential stages which can be undertaken in chronological order. The interviews with the six pastors of this study reveal considerable variety in the way responses to each of the five categories interacted as the pastor moved toward a decision in responding to a Letter of Call. In some instances, a pastor was confident in reaching a response even though one or more of the categories did not seem to enter conscious consideration. On the other hand, careful consideration of all categories did not appear to guarantee a pastor’s response would be good, wise, and Spirit-led. What can be maintained on the basis of the study’s research is that each of the five categories are mentioned by more than one interview subject.

The written materials of the first category are of two types: standardized forms and independently generated written materials. The candidate’s mobility papers and the congregational profile are the standardized forms. Independently generated written materials are any representation provided by the candidate or congregation of themselves or material written about the candidate or congregation from various sources. Candidates
may provide written material in response to request by synod or congregation. On occasion, it may be that the synod staff provides some description of the candidate to the congregation in written form. Written material through which the congregation represents itself includes bulletins, newsletters, annual reports, council minutes, mission statements, and so on. Sources of written material from other sources describing congregations would be ELCA yearbook statistics, community demographic reports, congregational trend reports, census data, and the like.

Category number two is labeled initial impressions. These are drawn from the candidate's actual, initial experiences with the calling congregation. Certainly, the primary source of first impression is the interview, but first impressions may also come from a site visit or tour, a dinner or fellowship time with the call committee on the occasion of the interview, provided of course such events occur. First impressions may also be drawn from interactions as arrangements are made in preparation for the interview or in handling follow-up details after the interview.

Third, the category of additional insight refers to considerations the candidate accumulates either before or after the initial interview with the call committee. Additional insight prior to the first impression can be drawn from the candidate's accumulated experience in the context of the church, such as an interview for call with another congregation or a synod sponsored workshop or seminar in preparation for participation in the call process. Other previous insight may come from outside the context of the church. In some cases, it may be that a candidate finds a related course of study or experience in an earlier career or employment to be a helpful resource. Additional insight subsequent to the first impression results from direct or indirect encounter with the
congregation. Direct encounter occurs when the candidate gains more extensive experience with the call committee, council or congregation following the initial interview. This can be in the form of second interviews with the committee, meetings with council or congregation, an encounter experience where the candidate comes to spend a period of time, say a week or two, living in the community, interacting with the congregation, perhaps participating in or even leading worship or preaching. Indirect encounter with the congregation occurs in the form of communication with previous pastor or pastors, area Lutheran pastors, pastors or other persons in the community who are acquainted with the congregation. Insights resulting from communication with bishop and staff, however, are considered in the fourth category.

Category number four involves the level of trust in the relationship between the candidate and the person or persons primarily responsible for facilitating and overseeing the call process. When the candidate feels confident that the facilitating person is familiar with the congregation there seems to be positive influence on the level of trust in this relationship. In the case of the most recent call process for all those interviewed, the facilitating person was a synod bishop or bishop’s assistant. However, there are ELCA synods in which the call process involves persons in addition to bishop or staff such as conference deans (ELCA pastors who serve a leadership role for a small group of congregations or pastors in some synods). Some pastors interviewed mentioned earlier experiences which included persons other than bishop or staff.

The fifth category involves reflection, including the various spiritual disciplines and exercises in discernment that lead to final response. Prayer, conversation with trusted friends and colleagues, consultation with resource persons, and contemplation are
included in this category.

The essential place and role of the pastor’s household in the call process has been specifically mentioned in previous chapters. Yet, it bears repeating and emphasizing here. This study assumes an active involvement and participation of spouse, if there is one, in the call process. It is also assumes that there can be an appropriate consideration for minor children or any other household members, again if present. To varying degrees, the participants did refer to the household’s involvement and participation in several of the five categories, most frequently the fifth. Often, the family or a family member played a significant role in the pastor’s discernment.

It is worthy of note that respondents were candid in sharing instances of their failure to give adequate consideration to one or more members of their family. However, it was equally apparent that these pastors understood experience to be their teacher, so that such failures were occasions for them to grow in their understanding of how to make sure they gave an appropriate place to their family as they participated in the call process.

Because of the crucial role of family throughout the call process and in the final response to a Letter of Call, I considered the possibility of identifying family as a sixth category. Finally, however, family matters did not seem so much a distinct and separate category as they were more or less interwoven throughout the whole process.

Two further comments should be offered with regard to the reporting and analysis of data that follows. First, I have used exact quotes from the interviews except where doing so would compromise confidentiality or the anonymity of the respondent. In those instances where it has been necessary to change the wording of a quotation, italic type designates the altered word or phrase. Second, also in the interest of maintaining
confidentiality and preserving anonymity and as a means of simplifying references to responses from respondent, I use the masculine third person pronoun throughout the rest of this chapter in referring to interview subjects, even though the respondent may in fact be a female pastor.

Category One: Standardized Forms and Other Written Materials

Standardized Forms

The old saw claims, "no job is finished until the paper work is done." In the ELCA call process of today, it might be said that no process can get underway until the paper work, specifically the candidate’s mobility form and the congregational profile work, is done. All the pastors interviewed in this study had filled out and filed mobility papers in preparing to participate in the process resulting in their current call.

Of the six, three pastors had participated in a call process earlier in their ministries without completing and filing mobility papers with the synod bishop. One pastor’s description of a process about a quarter century ago, is a delightfully quaint reminder of a simpler time. It also provides some enlightening insight into what the call process in general, and mobility forms and congregational profiles in particular, intend to facilitate today.

Basically, the bishop’s assistant called me on the phone and said, “Have you ever thought of moving into a rural setting?” I said, “That’s interesting. I’d always thought I’d like to try that.” I was always a city boy, you know. That was just a conversation on the phone. So he said, “I’m going to take your name somewhere.” And that was it until he shoved upon my doorstep about six months later with a call in hand. No interview. No nothing.

... I saw the sheet of paper, of course this is going back a few years, he took down to that rural church, and there were five or six of us on that sheet of paper, about a paragraph on each of us... And they voted on the information and the assistant to the
bishop’s words ... and then I went down and checked the place out. Now that’s the decision-making process.” (transcript, interview X, p. 1)

One of the purposes of standardized mobility forms and congregational profiles is to assist those charged with oversight of the call process, as well as congregations and pastoral candidates, in discerning if there is the possibility of an effective and satisfying partnership between a given congregation and candidate. In the situation described above, for instance, had the pastor been closed to the possibility of serving in a rural setting, there would have been no point in the two parties exploring the matter. As it turned out, the bishop’s assistant was able to facilitate what eventually resulted in a happy outcome for all parties involved by means of a telephone call to a pastor, a piece of paper with several paragraphs, and a meeting with a congregation’s call committee.

Today, for many candidates, availability for call is affected by an increasing diversity of circumstances, often referred to as restrictions. The mobility forms provide an opportunity to specify restrictions that prevent a candidate from considering certain situations and thereby saving time and energy which would otherwise be wasted in fruitless interviewing.

Another pastor remembers graduating from seminary and being more or less assigned to a congregation by the bishop, rather than called by the congregation. There was no interview, no mobility papers or congregational profile. Even the formality of a Letter of Call followed the bishop’s assignment. “A call was issued and the first time I saw the place was when we were driving there with our U-Haul” (transcript, interview Z, page 7).

Among the pastors interviewed, mobility forms and congregational profiles were not highly regarded as a source of helpful information and insight in the call process. To
the question, "Did you find helpful information on the profile?" one pastor responded, "Yes and no. I guess I have to say yes and no. There's information there, but it's not extremely helpful" (transcript, interview V, p. 8). Another pastor wondered about the process used in developing the forms. "Do they have anybody who's ever served in a parish that's doing this? Do they field test this stuff? Do they actually go out to people out here in the pews" (transcript, interview W, p. 4)? In a gentler spirit another respondent observed, "I must say, I remember filling out those mobility papers and wondering at the time, was all of this necessary. If there is something I might try to trim down a bit it's those mobility papers" (transcript, interview Z, p. 15). One of the more colorful observations was, "There's a reason why Jesus came in the flesh. Let's not forget that. And the paper work is only the swaddling clothes at best - or some other paper product needed at a manger" (transcript, interview W, p. 13).

Yet, it was this pastor who offered a pertinent observation as to the value of the exercise of preparing mobility forms when he said, "The best sense I can make of going through the hell of filling out our mobility paperwork is it's a way of testing the spirits. Am I still called to this place or am I called elsewhere" (transcript, interview W, p. 6)?

Except for suggesting that the exercise of preparing written forms was beneficial in testing the spirits; most responses tended to reflect either a frustration with the exercise of filling out a written form or a reservation as to the ability of such a form to represent a candidate or congregation in a satisfactory manner. However, one comment warrants special attention, raising the question of whether the written forms may not be, in fact, detrimental to the very process they are designed to support.

The forms can help to breed disrespect for the office of pastor. Because no longer are you looking at this one [pastor] who is coming in as the representative of God, the
one who is to perform the public acts of the congregation, the one with this sense of
divine call from God, the one called to come and speak on behalf of God. Instead,
we’re hiring someone to produce. So, what it is [sic]? Show us your game plan, coach.
How are you going to build our team, coach? We’re losing a greater meaning other
than the physical obviousness of what takes place. How does this fit in with God’s plan
for the salvation, healing of the world? What is the theology? We reduce it to
producing a winning team as opposed to the theology that says there is something
greater than producing a winning team that we’re about. And so the process itself helps
to contribute to eliminating that factor from the equation. I don’t think it’s deliberate,
but it contributes to eliminating [respect for the office of pastor]. (transcript, interview
U. p. 6)

I am inclined to agree with the pastor who concluded, “Designing the perfect
paperwork process is like designing the perfect confirmation curriculum. It ain’t never
gonna happen” (transcript, interview W. p. 13). Still, the evidence generated in this study
suggests that assessment and evaluation of standard forms needs to continue and that
special attention may need to be given to the question of whether or not these forms
actually serve the call process or are in fact a detriment to the process and the office of
ministry itself.

Other Written Materials

In addition to the standard forms for candidates and congregations, several of the
pastors interviewed referred to making use of other written material. “I always wanted
whatever I could get and I was more interested in bulletins and newsletters and annual
reports than I was the stuff they sent to the synod” (transcript, interview X. p. 3). Later, in
the same interview, the pastor returned to the subject of other written material and
admitted, “I snoop a lot. I try to get time in the church to pick up a newsletter, whatever I
can find that’s laying around that I can read” (transcript, interview X. p. 9).

In some instances, the congregation itself provided materials for the candidate
and requested additional written materials in return. “They sent me gobs of information,
their financial reports, their committee structure, their council structure - the fact that here they still are using a constitution of a predecessor body in which I'm the president of the congregation” (transcript, interview Z. p. 3). In returning to the subject of other written materials later in the interview, the pastor suggested that the abundance of material provided by the congregation was accompanied by an expectation that he would supply significant written material, in return.

They just sent me gobs of stuff. They had videos they sent. They had their congregational reports. They disclosed all their financial data. They disclosed all their various ministries and the individuals who were involved in those ministries. They had their directory to send to me. They literally sent me everything they had. They sent me a variety of bulletins of their services and so I was almost overwhelmed with materials, which was of course, then very helpful in terms of answering their questionnaire, which was extensive. (transcript, interview Z. p. 11)

One pastor mentioned referring to reports available through the ELCA. “I look at things like benevolence. Benevolence tells you a lot, really” (transcript, interview V. p. 8). He described looking at congregations of similar size and comparing annual budget and benevolence statistics. Upon discovering a congregation which reported a higher percent of annual income devoted to mission his response was, “Hey, that tells me something. . . . That’s putting your money where your mouth is” (transcript, interview V. p. 8). And continuing, “That tells me there’s health” (transcript, interview V. p. 9).

Not all of the pastors mentioned consulting other written material as part of their approach to participating in a call process. Those who did, gave no indication that they had received any special training for interpreting the data or that they consulted with a resource person to test the intuitive readings they drew from the material. Rather, the value of perusing such material seemed to be the general sense of the congregation’s character and ministry imparted as the candidate read through these sources.
While a couple pastors mentioned being asked to provide additional material to represent themselves to the congregation, none made any reference to a call committee seeking or receiving written representation of the candidate which did not originate with the candidate himself. In defining the category of other written material, I was prepared to include information which might be provided to the call committee by another source, such as the synod office. An example of this type of written material surfaces in the public, on-line meeting “ELCA Call Process” mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. “Finally, a bishop’s assistant in Ohio let slip that my forms were being circulated with a cover letter from my bishop stating that no other bishop should offer me anything” (Michael Harnois. ELCA Call Process, Message #57, May 16, 2001, Luther Link).

Again, however, none of the pastors interviewed in this study mentioned being aware of such a thing for any of the call processes in which they participated.

Some pastors seem to draw general impressions from sources I have identified as written material. It is not indicated that they have made use of it in a disciplined or critical manner. It may be that the feel for the congregation which can be obtained from these sources represents a helpful aspect of the call process for the pastoral candidate. At the same time, there may be merit in developing a systematic approach to deciphering with greater clarity the meaning to be derived from both the standardized forms and other written material.

Category Two: Candidate’s Initial Impressions

From the Interview with the Call Committee

The pastors responding to this study attached significant weight to the encounter
with the call committee represented by the interview. One of the pastors described a call process at an early point in his ministry when he was interviewing at two congregations, simultaneously. In contrasting his experience with the two congregations, the decisive aspect of the interview stands out clearly.

If I was going to go by paperwork, I would have said I want the call to congregation A. But then there was the interview. And here's that mix, that chemistry, the presence of the Spirit. We interviewed at congregation A first and then we interviewed at congregation B. In fact, we had to go right by the church [building of congregation B] to get to congregation A. And when we did the interview at congregation A it was a cold night and it was a cold interview. . . . And when we went to congregation B it was just the opposite. We had the best darn time and great feeling about the place and when we got the call, I guess that makes the decision-making process that much easier because you got this experience that says, "OK this is a good deal." (transcript, interview X. p. 3)

On more than one occasion the interview experience provided sufficient insight to conclude there was no call from God to partnership between a congregation and a candidate. Asking one pastor to put his finger on the feeling he had gotten from an interview that there was no call for him to a ministry with the congregation he replied, "[It was] almost an outsider feeling, like you're not being received into the family. And they may have felt the same way the other direction" (transcript, interview V. p. 6).

In his first call process out of seminary, at a point in the history of an ELCA predecessor body when it was all but mandatory for a seminary graduate to accept a first call, one pastor related how the interview experience led him to do the unthinkable and return the call, even though to do so might mean an extended wait until his next chance to interview with a congregation.

And when you're asked in the call process, "How do you feel about not preaching on the main festivals of the church?" I said, "That's OK." I assumed there's a Sunday before Christmas or after Christmas or a late service, that somehow we might switch around. And the look on the senior pastor's face told me, "No, they're telling me I'm not going to preach at all, except when he's on vacation and he can't find a seminary
professor to come.” And I said, “That’s not what I’ve spent the last four years doing. That’s not my sense of call.” (transcript, interview W. p. 2)

The question had come from a member of the call committee. The senior pastor was present for the interview only to observe. Still, the “look on the senior pastor’s face” communicated the message which was determinative in that particular decision. The same pastor went on to relate his second experience of interviewing after graduating from seminary. Comparing it with the first interview he said,

“What made the difference there, while the pastor had been there 25 years, I knew I was the associate pastor, but I was preaching every other Sunday. I at least had a chance... to make my voice be heard. He [the senior pastor] would listen to me. He would say yes or no, but he would listen. And I had a chance to talk.” (transcript, interview W. p. 3)

The impression from his first interview was strong and clear. He would not be a partner in ministry with the senior pastor or the congregation but, to use his phrase, “just the senior pastor’s flunky.” In the second interview, the impression was just as strong and clear. He would be a partner in ministry. He would have a voice and his voice would be heard.

Another pastor describes how he came away from an interview with a sense of having connected with the call committee. This was evident in his choice of words as well as the general meaning and spirit of his comment. “It was the right match, that it’s where God was calling me. My talents [were] what they were looking for; my enthusiasms what they wanted” (transcript, interview Y. p. 3). When I asked if he could point to any specific indication of the rightness of the match he experienced as God’s calling, he said,

Well, for instance, ... one of the last things I said to them in my first interview, I said, “If you can just take my dossier... look at what you’re looking for in a pastor, what gifts and skills and compare it to my dossier. It’s a very good match.” They
wanted someone with a great enthusiasm for children. Children's programming. Evangelism. Adult Teaching. Evangelism was the really big one. (transcript, interview Y, p. 3)

This response seems particularly significant, since it is the most specific instance among those interviewed of a pastor drawing confirmation of God's call from a matching of items on the mobility form and the congregational profile. Yet, it is also an instance of a call committee failing to represent the congregation accurately. (The issue of the call committee's representation of the congregation is addressed in Category Three: Additional Insights. Before Initial Impressions, From within the Church and After Initial Impressions, From beyond the Congregation.) In this case, while evangelism was identified as a priority on the profile, in practice the congregation proved quite resistant to the pastor's evangelism initiatives and eventually, the pastor was asked to make himself available for another call.

Several pastors mentioned the experience of coming away from an interview with the disturbing impression that there was a significant discrepancy between themselves and the call committee at a deeper level than the mobility form and congregational profile. Specifically, they sensed that difference with respect to understanding the very nature and purpose of the interview. The committee conceived what it was doing in a way that was not only different from, but actually in tension with the candidate's assumptions about the interview. One pastor's observation suggests this occurs when the question of whether a congregation calls or hires a pastor has not been resolved.

If you're a call committee, whether you realize it or not, as far as I'm concerned, as a pastor I'm interviewing you at the same time you're interviewing me. I don't think the call committees always figure that out. You know, I don't think they realize. They're shopping for a pastor. They'll use that kind of terminology.

... I'm looking for a call committee that's wanting to be as spiritual and concerned and caring of me as I'm trying to be to them. Too often it's more of a job interview.
They'll even say, the church is a business. They call it a job. Or we're going to hire somebody... They don't seem to have a good sense of what the call is. (transcript, interview X. p. 6)

Given all the potential pitfalls and opportunities for misunderstanding, nevertheless pastors still placed a great deal of weight on the impressions gained in the interview. Most were keenly aware of the need to interpret what they heard and saw in the interview, as well as what was left unsaid.

It's the congregation that says, "Youth is our number one priority," yet when you get in there you try to find somebody who wants to work with the youth, no, nobody wants to do that. It's their number one priority, all right. What they're really saying is "Are you going to be our youth leader?"... Each person around the table in a call committee has at least one of those things that they really want to hear an answer to. But they rarely ask the direct question. (transcript, interview V. p. 8)

While there was an awareness of the need to interpret the experience of the interview, there was also a desire to be more equipped for the task. One pastor shared this desire to receive resources, specifically from the synod staff. At the same time he described his thought process as he determined the meaning of insights derived from interviewing the committee.

I'm not sure the synod does much for pastors in saying, "Here are some things that you ought to look at or ask and so forth." I do have things I ask, too. It's not just that they ask us. And I'm not sure we have a good guideline as pastors. Maybe [provide a resource of] the kinds of things we should be asking congregations... I like to ask them things they look forward to doing, what their dreams and goals are for the future, whether they have a mission statement, whether they follow it. Again, not direct questions...

I think that's what you're trying to discern when you ask these questions. What is the spirit in these congregations? And maybe that's the feeling you get that you can't put your finger on. You wind up getting the feeling there's a good spirit or not a good spirit here. (transcript, interview V. p. 9)

Clearly, for the pastors in this study, the personal interaction gained through the interview was influential and in some instances even decisive in responding to a letter of call. However, it is equally clear that the pastors were aware of the potential for
discrepancy between the call committee’s representation of the minister being sought for the congregation and the actual expectations which would be encountered as pastor. In several instances, the pastors were also cognizant of their limited, even non-existent equipping for discernment of such discrepancies.

From Observing the Facility and Touring the Community

Several pastors interviewed in this study mentioned the value of first impressions drawn from what they could sense by simply looking at the building and facilities of the congregation and the community in which the congregation was located. Especially insightful was the way one pastor intentionally connected this looking outward at the church and community with a looking inward at the sensing and feeling going on within himself, recognizing the spiritual dimension of the prompting in the interaction between the two.

If you can, go down there to that church. Don’t tell anybody that you’re coming. Just kind of walk around. Walk around the building. Check out the community. Drive around. Be open. What am I feeling now? (transcript, interview X, p. 8)

Another pastor related a specific example of engaging a person in the community in conversation and how that served as a source of first impression. I think it is worth noting that in this case, the person was one encountered randomly by the pastor during his visit in the community. However, as his comment suggests, intentionally seeking out people of the community for conversation may be an untapped source of insight and impression.

If you’re coming a long way for a call, you sort of drive around the community. It’s fun, if you have the time to ask somebody. “Do you know where the congregation is?” We asked at the hotel where we stayed and it was in a neighboring town. It was kind of neat. She’d actually heard of the congregation. She had a relative in the church or something. If you could come in a day ahead of time, you could learn a lot about a
congregation. (transcript, interview V. p. 8)

The same pastor was able to draw an impression from the worship books in the pews racks of the sanctuary. In turn, the impression served to prompt a question of clarification about the congregation’s practice in making use of the worship resources they had available.

I like to get a sense of their worship experience. . . . And I don’t always ask it as a direct question. But to get a feel of openness to something new or different. When I went to this congregation I saw a hymnal other than the Lutheran Book of Worship. I thought well, they’ve come a ways. But they’d only used it to sing from, but no liturgy. (transcript, interview V. p. 9)

One of the most interesting observations by a pastor which led to a first impression, that was later confirmed, involved noticing a picture and being able to recognize and interpret what he saw as an indication of an habitually repeated dynamic in the relationship between the senior and associate pastors of the congregation.

There’s a picture. I wish I had a copy of it, of the old senior pastor and the former associate/assistant, who then became the senior pastor. It’s a picture of the Ladies Aide Society in the church basement, in about the 50’s. The ladies are all there in their church dresses and the senior pastor is sitting there with his hands on his knees in his coat and in the front row with the officers in the chairs and all the members standing behind them. In the back row behind one of those ominous pillars in the church basement, all the ladies are in front of that except maybe for a couple on either side of it. Standing behind that with only his head sticking out is the assistant pastor. I thought that picture says it all. (transcript, interview W. p. 5)

It can be granted that the distinctiveness and diversity of each congregation and community would make it impossible to compile an exhaustive catalogue of indicators present right under the nose of a pastoral candidate. Still, the wealth of insight and impression available to the keen observer prompts the thought that this may be a promising area of investigation and inquiry.
From Other Interaction with the Call Committee

One source of first impressions which I had not anticipated, but which was unmistakably identified by the respondents in this study, included interaction with the Call Committee in preparation for or subsequent to the interview and site visit. Though the pastor credits good preparation on the part of the call committee, it is at least possible that a telephone conversation may have contributed to a positive interview experience.

Even the phone call setting up the interview felt good. I came over for the interview. They had done a practice interview with the interim pastor who was there. They had prepared well. Obviously they had worked with synod. . . . It was a very relaxed interview. Basically each person asked the questions that were germane to their area. (transcript, interview V. p. 6)

A second pastor reported a similar experience. He recalled a telephone conversation with a member of a call committee at a point when he had been available for call and waiting for an indication, as he put it, “that the wheels were turning.” His colorful imagery suggests that the phone conversation itself had an effect on his attitude going into the interview.

Late one night this fellow called – thickest southern accent you ever wanted to hear . . . – and it was like hearing the voice of an angel himself, ‘cause this was the first time we’d had any contact with anybody. (transcript, interview W. p. 8)

In dealing with another call committee, the same pastor related a negative experience in its handling of an item as seemingly insignificant as reimbursement of mileage expense following the interview. This aroused a suspicion that a serious discrepancy existed between the words and actions of the committee. In reflecting on how to interpret the experience, he stopped just short of describing it as deceitful.

I had to write and ask for my travel stipend for the interview. And what they offered me [as compensation] on the call was below district minimums. I said, “There’s something wrong here. I’m not sure exactly what. But what they’re saying and what they’re doing does not seem to match.” (transcript, interview W. p. 2)
Trial sermons, occasions when the candidate preaches to the congregation considering him or her for call, are discouraged in the ELCA. However, on occasion, a call committee will take the initiative to meet and interact with a prospective candidate, prior to scheduling an interview. Usually, this involves a delegation from the call committee visiting the pastor’s current congregation to gain experience of the pastor’s personality and style in leading worship.

It was in June when representatives of this congregation came to see me. And they listened to me preach and watched me lead a worship service at the congregation where I was currently serving as pastor. And they also had a sense then of the congregation of which I was a part. (transcript, interview Z, p. 5)

In this case, because the pastor had been informed of the delegation’s visit, he was able to take the opportunity to be up front in addressing a significant issue that may have had an effect on the committee’s discernment in issuing a call.

In fact, the day that the people came over to hear me preach, I knew they were coming and there was a text that called for, you know, the breadth of the people of God to be considered in inclusivity. And I had at the congregation I was currently serving made a pretty firm stand in support of one of our members who’s a lesbian, who now is a graduate of the seminary and has been open about it and in consequence went not the route of ordained ministry. But gained sufficient respect in the seminary community to be given a memorial Award for continuing education beyond seminary. And I went out on a limb on that. And the day that those folks came over I thought, OK this text allows for the inclusion of reference to that, not the person in particular, but reference to inclusivity and I made sure it was in the sermon, because I figured I don’t need to move and you’d better know me and I’d better know you. (transcript, interview Z, p. 8)

Not only does a visit to the pastor’s current congregation provide an initial impression for the call committee in determining whether or not to pursue an interview with the candidate, for one pastor this encounter represented God’s involvement in the process as indicated by the scripture passage he associated with the experience.

But there is a passage I cling to from Jeremiah, where the Lord says, “I have plans for you, not to hurt you or to harm you but to give you hope.” Three members of the call committee actually came out [to the pastor’s current congregation, a distance of
about 500 miles]. I felt it real important that they were actually able to see my sitz im Leben. All of them weren’t able to come out on one weekend. It wasn’t necessary. It would have been too much of an expense. Otherwise they wouldn’t have heard me preach! They don’t believe in that here, in this synod. (transcript, interview Y. p. 14)

Without exception, the pastors in this study indicated that it was the interview with the call committee which provided the most invaluable impression of the congregation as they sought to discern God’s call. On occasion, insights from observing the facilities and touring the community as well as experiences with the call committee prior to or following up on the interview did affect the pastor’s impression in a positive or negative manner. However, these seemed to be secondary to the impressions drawn from the interview and were generally considered in conjunction with the interview. When these were consistent with the interview they tended to be seen as a confirmation of either the positive or negative impression. As with the written material, it may be that pastors would benefit from being equipped, in some fashion, to recognize, read and interpret the various types and sources of first impressions.

**Category Three: Additional Insights**

The third category is by far the most broad and diverse of the five identified. For that reason, I chose to divide the material chronologically into insights before and after the initial impressions with the calling congregation. Then, I divided the material again, according to the source of insight. Insights prior to the initial impression are separated into those drawn from within the context of the church and those drawn from sources outside the church. Insights after the initial impression are separated into those from further, direct encounter with the congregation and those which come indirectly, from sources other than the congregation itself.
Before Initial Impressions

Even when a candidate is participating in the call process for the first time, she or he brings a set of assumptions, perceptions, and expectations from a wide variety of sources. In developing this category, I imagined these could be divided into two primary groups. In the first group would be those formulated on the basis of experiences in the church or an expression of the church, such as previous congregations or seminary, informal conversations with colleagues, or educational events sponsored by the wider church. The second group would be for insights from outside the context of the church. Because of the growing number of pastors who come to parish ministry from another career, I suspected it was at least likely that these prior experiences would influence participation in the call process.

From within the Church

While I had anticipated the respondents might mention a variety of sources in gaining additional insight, there were in fact, only three that surfaced in the interviews. These were the seminary, personal experience, and conversation with colleagues.

It is to be expected that a candidate would gather insight into the call process from the seminary experience. One pastor, speaking of his first call, related a perception imparted by seminary professors that superceded input he gathered from the interview.

I think they drilled into us so much, “You take this call or it’ll be a long time till you ever see another,” that you didn’t really want to ask any kind of questions [at the interview with the call committee.] (transcript, interview V. p. 2)

However, because he felt a lack of experience in discernment, he was willing to abide by the seminary professors’ axiom. In reflecting on the outcome, even though that particular call process may not have resulted in the best partnership for ministry, he was
not sure he could have made a better response on his own.

At that point, you don’t know a whole lot, even though you’ve done an internship and all that, you really don’t know a lot of things to look for, a lot of questions to ask and that sort of thing, so you just kind of go along. It was not a bad call, but in some ways it was not a good call. (transcript, interview V. p. 1)

The same pastor noted that accumulated experience in interviewing served him well as he approached subsequent interviews.

Well, past experience comes into play. Maybe a lot in the substance area. You know from their questions what they’re really asking because you’ve had some experience at it and you hope you can get them to talk about what they’re really asking. . . . Sometimes I say, “Why do you ask that?” (transcript, interview V. p. 7-8)

Another insight drawn from personal experience and mentioned by several respondents was the question of how accurately a call committee represents a congregation in the call process. In some instances, because of the very nature of the persons likely to be involved in serving on a call committee, there seems to be an almost innate possibility that there will be significant divergence between the committee and the congregation.

My biggest thing, where I think we fall down is our naiveté where we think that call committees represent the congregation. And I don’t know that there’s really a way to represent the congregation on a call committee. Call committees, I have found, in my experience . . . are much more mission driven, open to new possibilities and all those wonderful things a pastor wants to hear. Much more open to it than the rest of the congregation is in reality, so I don’t think they’re in touch with where the congregation really is and that’s where I think the mismatches come in. (transcript, interview Y. p. 16)

Another assessment, however, appreciates that the call committee may be aware of the differences between their portrayal of the congregation to the candidate and the congregation’s self-understanding. The possible reasons for an intentional distortion might range from the call committee’s somewhat self-serving desire to present the congregation in a manner they believe will be more appealing to a genuinely sincere
conviction that the committee’s vision represents what the congregation is called to become. While he did not have a means of verifying the congruity between call committee and congregation self-understanding, one pastor did relate the necessity of confronting the matter.

They’re only hurting themselves when they do that. I would ask a call committee occasionally, OK, now this is where you’re at. Do you feel that’s where your congregation is? (transcript, interview X. p. 9)

In addition to intentional distortion and innate differences between call committee and congregation, one respondent suggested call committees are sometimes beset by unrealistic or irrational thinking. He came to this insight from conversation with a pastor who related an experience with a member of a small, rural congregation in the call process. The member had become enamored with the idea of calling a pastor from an inner city ministry, even though the smaller congregation would not be able to meet the salary requirements. As the pastor related the story, the member pressed his appeal with the call committee by making two points.

[First,] "Once he starts preaching the people will love his preaching and we’ll fill the church. They’ll all come running in here and we’ll have all the money we’ll need.” And the other one was, “Once he gets out in the country and he finds out how reasonable it is to live here, he will willingly give up all that big salary. He will give us back the money and say, “You can pay me less. I don’t need it, for the privilege of being in this congregation.” (transcript, interview U. p. 7)

For a number of reasons, it would seem that taking these impressions at face value, does not represent the wisest course. At the same time, one respondent identified a limiting dynamic in sorting out and evaluating these impressions through conversation even with other resources, especially colleagues. He suggested this dilemma stemmed from a perceived necessity of maintaining confidentiality throughout the process.
So, I went ahead with the process, you know, this time being in prayer and discernment, talking with friends, clergy friends. But you know, it's such a secretive thing, you have to be careful what you're doing. (transcript, interview Y. p. 3)

The comment resonated with me as an appropriate insight for candidates to keep in mind through all aspects of the call process. “You have to be careful what you’re doing.”

*From outside the Church*

If the limited number of sources for insight from within the church struck me as unexpected, the complete absence of any mention of sources from outside the church was surprising. I had anticipated some reference to secular disciplines or experience, especially since two of the six respondents were second career pastors. There were, however, no such references.

*After Initial Impressions*

Once the interview and other introductory experiences with the congregation are completed, the candidate is free to seek more extensive insight into the particular context where she or he may be called to serve. As mentioned above, I have separated these into insights which come from further, direct encounter with the congregation and from indirect inquiry of informed sources outside the congregation.

*From the Congregation*

Instances of a candidate choosing to engage the congregation in dialogue beyond the initial interview were not all that frequent among those interviewed in this study. However, when such an opportunity was incorporated into the call process, the
respondents felt it provided valuable insight for the final discernment. One pastor shared how he chose to meet for a second interview with the congregation council.

That's another thing I did. I met with the call committee for the first interview. The second time up there, I met with the council. I just felt I wanted to meet with more than four or five people. So, I met with the council. There was good leadership. There were good folks there, and I knew they had what they needed. (transcript, interview X. p. 4)

Another pastor mentioned a second meeting which occurred at the congregation's request rather than as a result of his initiative. In this case the meeting included the call committee, council, and other congregational leadership.

They called us to come back for a second interview with an expanded group of people and issued the call. . . . The group was picked - a leadership group. (transcript, interview V. p. 6)

At this second meeting the pastor heard an observation which proved to be a source of confirmation for his discernment with respect to the call he eventually received from that congregation.

They had a very diverse group of people at that first interview who in the past had usually not agreed on too many things unanimously. I had people tell me they couldn't believe that this group of people agreed. And I just said, "That's God-given." (transcript, interview V. p. 6)

Conversely, the benefit of a closer, more reflective, second-look is suggested by the pastor who admitted that in the single interview he had with the congregation he failed to identify some of the crucial issues that would need to be faced upon accepting the congregation's call. To be sure, he would have had to meet with the right people and ask the right questions and even then, a second encounter by itself, may not have been sufficient means to surface the issues that needed to be addressed.

They lost the institutional memory inherent in the twenty-some year senior pastor and secretary, which really made this place work. But there weren't any structures in place to maintain the training of new lay persons as they come on to the various boards
and committees and such. And so, it’s not working. It’s designed to say “no”. I did not see that in the call process. I saw senior pastor. I saw big church, big salary. I saw working with the staff. . . . I said, “Alright, they’ve had an interim.” But I interpreted that according to what I understand as an interim. Basically somebody that comes in, takes names, kicks butt, gets this place organized. No, they had a retired pastor who kept things moving because certain people of power and influence in the congregation did not trust the associate pastor to keep things going during the interim. And the associate pastor basically walked in here for three days a week. He’d give a three to five minute sermon on Sundays. And then go home. And he’d go to the hospital and lead a Bible study and that’s it. (transcript, interview W. p. 11-12)

The experience related by a pastor who spent an entire week with a congregation as a candidate gives a compelling witness to the value of an extended opportunity for interaction with the congregation.

The long and the short is I was here in August. . . . was here for an entire week; met with committees, different groups, preached that Sunday and the congregation voted that Sunday. And I’m almost positive that I knew before I left that I was called. (transcript, interview Z. p. 2)

He esteem the value of the week highly for both himself and for his wife. At the same time he recognizes that such an experience, while providing an opportunity for greater depth of insight, still does not by itself guarantee a completely accurate reading of the congregation.

It was very beneficial to be able to meet with the people as I was able to do during that week. And my wife was here for part of the week. And she needed to go back for some of her responsibilities and then came back for Saturday and Sunday.

But it was very helpful too, in terms of sermon preparation for Sunday, simply because I had a chance to have some sense of who these people were and wasn’t just, then talking to a room that I had absolutely no idea of what they were like. So, it was beneficial in a lot of regards. Interestingly though, you still don’t learn everything. (transcript, interview Z. p. 2)

Later in our interview, he captured an essential aspect of the purpose of the call process and how in his case, even though the time on site required him to take a week of personal vacation, that time provided a significant contribution in furthering the purpose.
The call process does have a very important part in the binding and the bonding of the people. And the week that I spent here, though it was pretty exhausting and though I had to go back and work at the congregation I was currently serving (my responsibilities still were there) it was very valuable. I met some people that I really liked. I knew theologically we were pretty much on the same plane. (transcript, interview Z. p. 5)

Additional opportunities to become acquainted with the congregation seemed to provide the candidates with a greater sense of confidence in making their discernment. It is at least worth noting, however, that in each instance where a candidate spent time with the congregation beyond the first interview and initial impression, he was led to accept the Letter of Call.

From beyond the Congregation

Spending more time with the congregation or portions of the congregation is one way of widening and deepening a candidate’s insight. The pastors interviewed believed there was also a need to search beyond the congregation and its self-representation for perspective. The primary reason for this was, again, a reservation about the reliability of the call committee’s portrayal of the congregation and its ministry needs. As one of the pastors expressed and several echoed, “Call committees are not necessarily reflective of the congregation.” (transcript, interview U. p. 1)

The disparity between the call committee and the congregation may be unwitting or it may be intentional. Either way, it can be a most disappointing discovery for the candidate who is led to accept a call and begins ministry with a congregation on the basis of an understanding derived from the call committee only to find that the reality in the congregation is completely different. One pastor related a particularly painful experience from early in his career. As he interviewed with the call committee for the position of
associate pastor, he raised the issue of the inadequacy of the housing the congregation intended to provide him and his family. He accepted the call committee’s assurance that the housing issue would be addressed only to find out later that the congregation’s leadership refused to honor the call committee’s word.

The call committee said one thing, “We can either buy the house or we’ll build you a house. We’ve got the land. Let’s just get you here and get you started.” And I believed it. And I think what they did – there was a call committee of ten - I think they put everybody who wanted a second pastor on the call committee. The council had twenty-five people on it. And everybody who didn’t want a second pastor was on the council. And they as much as told me, “We’re the council. The call committee has been disbanded. We’re the council. We run this church. We bought a house. You’re in it. That’s it.” (transcript, interview W. p. 6)

Another pastor, speaking of a previous call to a congregation, encountered a lack of common understanding in the area of program ministry, specifically evangelism. The congregation desired to see an increase in the number of members. The call committee presented that desire as part of congregation’s profile. But the reality of the changes which would be involved in growth had not been fully processed, by the congregation or by the call committee.

Evangelism was the really big one. This is where ultimately I got screwed. . . Now, this is what I think we need to get into, Steve. I think that we have to get into, as we discuss, the difference between what the call . . . all call committees put forth versus what does the congregation really want. Yes, they were representing the congregation in that they . . . in the sense of evangelism, that they wanted to grow. . . They had fewer and fewer people coming to church and the church was aging, aging, aging.

So, they wanted new members. The dilemma is, what kind of new members? And what ideas do those people bring? . . . The sixty, seventy, eighty year olds wanted people to come in with their mindset . . . wanted them to have young children, but have the mindset of a sixty year old, as far as what church is all about. So, in that sense, yes, the call committee did represent that part accurately. The thing is the congregation didn’t understand what it meant. (transcript, interview Y. p. 4)

Even though the pastors interviewed did recognize that it might be helpful to verify and validate impressions gathered from the call committee, there was little mention
of any intentional effort at such confirmation. None mentioned seeking out preceding pastors for consultation or any encouragement to do so. Neither was there any reference to seeking input from community ministers or area Lutheran pastors. One pastor was aware that other pastors were possible resources when I asked directly, “How do you determine when the call committee is representative?” He said, “That’s hard. That’s where you might want to talk to some of your neighboring pastors, your synod people, and get the stuff that’s in writing” (transcript, interview X. p. 9). But he did not say he had ever used such an approach. Only one pastor made specific reference to consulting with a neighboring Lutheran pastor, though it seems that the reason he felt free to do so in this situation was more the result of previous acquaintance with the neighboring pastor than an attempt to gather independent, objective verification of his own impressions.

Here I did check out colleagues because a college friend is a pastor just down the road. So, when I was looking at this [congregation] I called him up and said, “Hey, what do you know about these two churches?” I got some of his impressions. (transcript, interview W. p. 13)

The pastors in this study were aware of a variety of sources available in gathering insights and confirming impressions for the task of discernment. Those most frequently utilized, however, seemed to be those sources which were readily available from their experience within the church and from direct encounter with the congregation.

Category Four: Trust in the Call Process Facilitator

The ministry of oversight, whether exercised by the bishop in person or by the bishop’s designated representative, was seen by the pastors interviewed in this study as a crucial factor, second only to the interview with the call committee as determinative in the call process. In those instances where the pastor expressed a feeling of confidence
that both she or he and the congregation were known and understood by the bishop and staff, the call process seemed to proceed with a greater sense of assurance on the part of everyone involved. On the basis of his experience, one pastor credited the quality of the relationship between candidate, congregation, and bishop or staff person as being the essential ingredient in bringing about a good match for ministry.

The key to making any system work is still going to be the personal relationships between candidates . . . developing personal rapport between them, the synod office in its oversight responsibility and the synod office rapport with the various congregations and their call committees. If you don’t establish that sense of rapport, you’re going to have problems all along the way . . . Anybody can write good resumes, can interview well, and be lousy pastors. Or there could be – in one situation - might be a good pastor and someplace else be completely over their head or under-used or over-worked . . . The synod office needs to have a sense of who are the people we’re working with. As well as who are the congregations we’re working with.

Of the five calls I’ve had the three most positive ones have been where there’s a sense of personal rapport between myself and the person at the synod office and the synod office and the congregation. (transcript, interview W. p. 13)

This pastor supported his observation by referring to a simultaneous experience with two synods as a first call seminary graduate, in which one bishop and staff were successful in fostering this “rapport” while the other bishop and staff were not.

I felt there was much more conversation, not only with the bishop, but also the synod staff that was directly responsible for the call process in Synod A . . . I felt there was interpersonal relationship there . . . As opposed to Synod B. I didn’t talk to the bishop in Synod B until after I had gotten the call. The personal contact made the difference. It’s a sense that I was known and they helped me know the congregation. So, I kind of went in forewarned, forearmed. (transcript, interview W. p. 3)

In describing how this “rapport” came about, he credited the time spent with bishop and staff where the agenda was just getting acquainted.

The synod staff person who had responsibility for the process came to seminary and met for an hour or two with each candidate assigned to that synod - one on one time with us and spouse and got to know us . . . He spent a good part of two days and all he did was spend time with us and then he took us out to dinner . . . So when we called in [to the synod office] we were known . . . We didn’t get treated like the guy trying to sell light bulbs over the phone . . . He knew where we were and that sense of being
interconnected, being part of church that it's not just a job placement agency. Yes, we have policies and procedures and our steps we go through, but we are also church in the midst of this. We are caring for both the candidate for call and a congregation that is seeking a pastor. (transcript, interview W. p. 4)

Another pastor recounted interviewing with a congregation where the preceding pastor left in the midst of congregational conflict. In spite of the difficulty such a situation typically presents for the next pastor, the bishop's knowledge and understanding of the context and the bishop's openness to represent this to the pastor as a candidate proved most useful in the pastor's discernment in the call process and assisted him in identifying the type of ministry he would share with the congregation.

There were people who loved him [the previous pastor] and others hated him and others who knew there was something going on but weren't quite sure what. I was told this up front by the bishop, so I knew what I was going into – basically a healing kind of situation. (transcript, interview V. p. 4)

The level of trust and confidence in the bishop and staff can be a matter of particular consequence for the pastor considering a move from one synod to another. As the following comment suggests, when a pastor comes into a new synod, the level of trust and confidence in bishop and staff may be enhanced as the bishop and staff find occasion to express personal care and concern as well as openness and hospitality to the pastor coming in from outside the synod.

I really like the staff people, and I've had great support since I've been here. My sister died after I moved here and the bishop himself called. He didn't have to do that and obviously, the bishop's assistant talked to me. But anyway, very open to new ideas, eager to get new people in from outside the synod, so very positive. So, then I interviewed. (transcript, interview Y. p. 12)

Timely and supportive involvement of bishop and staff in bringing both candidate and congregation together, nurturing the potential partnership between the two, can serve as an important source of encouragement to a reluctant candidate.
I had an opportunity, because I was contacted by the bishop so early in the game, even before I thought it was possible for me to be in the game, I had in essence, well, you're talking early June or July, I had in essence would you say, seven months to start thinking about this place. (transcript, interview Z. p. 11)

With a high level of trust in the bishop and staff the candidate can accept that it is possible to be in the game and the process can proceed. Confidence in the ministry of oversight can also serve to reduce the tension and anxiety of the process for both the candidate and the congregation, especially at those points where the timing of the process seems to drag, unduly.

Well, I thought it got to be a bit laborious. And I began to wonder a little bit about some of that. As far as my relationship with this congregation, the synod bishop must have done a very good job in terms of letting the people here know who their candidates were. (transcript, interview Z. p. 15)

Overall, the pastors interviewed regarded the ministry of oversight provided by bishop and staff as a very valuable role in the call process. It was also evident that they placed great weight on being able to put their trust in the bishop's and staff member's partnership throughout the process. At the same time, the pastors understood the task of oversight to be distinct from the work of an employment agency. There was an awareness that the bishop and staff related to both candidates and pastors, though one pastor had a sense that the wider church, whether through bishops and staff or other expressions of the church, might provide more assistance, equipping and support for pastors as they participate in the call process.

The congregation is helped by the synod quite a bit now. I don't think they used to be. You know, how to interview, what kinds of questions to ask. . . . I'm not sure the synod does much for pastors in saying here are some things that you ought to look at or ask and so forth. . . . I'm not sure we have a good guideline as pastors. (transcript, interview V. p. 9)

At the very least, this observation would seem to warrant further investigation in
order to determine whether it is desirable and possible to provide a call process resource or training for candidates. One aspect of such an investigation should include the determination of the appropriate expression of the church for conducting such training. Because the synod bishop and staff are responsible to provide oversight to the process and because the level of trust is such a critical consideration in the call process, it may well be that a call process resource or training for pastors would best be entrusted to an expression of the church other than the synod bishop and staff.

Category Five: Candidate’s Reflection, Discernment, and Final Response

In describing reflection, discernment, and response to a letter of call, the ELCA Division for Ministry advises candidates, “to examine yourself, to pray, to seek God’s guidance, to talk with people you trust, to consider your gifts and your potential” (“Are You Being Called?” ELCA Division for Ministry). The pastors in this study approached the considerations of the fifth category in keeping with this advice. At the same time, they each did so in their own unique manner.

Some the most profound insights of faith in this study were generated by the pastors as they shared their experiences in reflection, discernment, and final response. Also, it seems worth noting that family considerations, or in some cases the failure to consider family, were more commonly mentioned in connection with this category than any other.

Self-examination was evident in the process of discernment as recounted by those interviewed. I was moved by the pastor who courageously offered the honest reflection, “I don’t think my decision to come here was the wisest decision I’ve ever made” (transcript, interview U. p. 4-5). The challenges and frustrations of ministry with the
congregation he was currently serving were clearly weighing heavily on him. Yet, he was able to give an inspiring affirmation of faith to the presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit through the process that brought him to the congregation and empowered the ministry he was called to share.

In spite of everything that has happened, both my spouse and I perceive why I’m here, what I have brought to this place. Even the local funeral director has said to me more than once, “I’m glad you’re here. They need somebody like you.” So in the midst of this whole process, we can still see the Holy Spirit at work, though I’m not sure for whose benefit. (transcript, interview U. p. 4-5)

Each of the pastors understood that there was much more to discerning God’s call than simply maximizing their satisfaction or meeting other, personal or professional preferences. As one of the pastors understood it, the task of discernment involved an exercise of imagination in seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance as he considered his particular gifts and potential in relation to the calling congregation.

You don’t go to a congregation because of what’s there, you go because of what you think you can do with what’s there to make it better. I’ve always wanted to make sure the materials were there – the people, and resources, to grow a church – I didn’t always care about what was there, but what was there that I could work with. And I have to say, it’s been a disappointment – ... there were way too many pastors who could only see what was already there and they wanted most of it in place before they went. ... I would walk around a church if I were considering the call there, I would walk around that building and walk around the church and drive around the town and kind of absorb and bean count – what can we do? Is there something to work with? The people here, the community, etc. (transcript, interview X. p. 4)

This pastor also expressed a basic axiom that should be self-evident, but nevertheless bears explicit statement not only when taking stock of gifts and potential, but throughout the entire call process.

There is no perfect church. There is no perfect call. It’s always going to be a risk. It needs to be a risk to be valid and to be real. God doesn’t call us to safety. God calls us to servanthood. (transcript, interview X. p. 6)

The element of necessary risk makes faith and prayer indispensable during
reflection and discernment of the Spirit’s guidance. Because there is so much at stake in the process, not only for the pastor, but for the pastor’s family, it makes sense that the family would actively and appropriately participate in this part of the process, no matter what their involvement in the process may have been up to this time. The place of prayerful interaction with spouse and children, Holy Spirit and spirit of the congregation surfaces in the following sentences as one pastor described how he went about seeking guidance for his response.

A lot of prayer. A lot of discussion with my spouse because I value very much her insights. . . . Obviously, they’re not calling my spouse, but they’re getting her. It’s a decision that affects her. And when we’ve had children, we certainly talk with them about it, . . . though we never decided not to go because of a child. . . . It’s more focused on if that’s where God wants you to be. It’s always been a sense of doors opening, from the initial phone call. . . . It was more than friendliness, it was honest caring, desire for things to work well. (transcript, interview V. p. 6-7)

The interaction with spouse and children during the process of reflection, discernment, and response takes its own unique form for each family. Another pastor described how it worked in his experience.

I didn't particularly look to move. I had things I thought I could still do in the congregation where I was pastor at the time. And initially there were a lot of doors that I thought were closed to keep me from moving: Our children, other calls, or feeling of a call still to where I was. And then the doors that I thought were closed, opened. Issues surrounding our children were resolved. My spouse had a very good job where we were. She helped develop what they call the family information network, which is . . . now state-wide . . . she had a prominent role there. But she was at a point where she thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to step down. . . . So, all these things that we thought would keep us from moving, basically ended up showing us that it was possible to move. And through that, she and I really came to the conclusion, well there's something bigger here than us. (transcript, interview Z. p. 9)

One of the pastors related an instance where he was not as sensitive to family issues as he might have been, especially regarding children. This example suggests the importance of giving adequate consideration to the children, as they can be subjected to
significant stress if they are not appropriately involved in the process, particularly the final response.

I remember the call to another church. Our kids were in the choir at the time on the Sunday I announced the decision. And I had not told them. They didn’t know if they were going to another church or not until I made the announcement in church that Sunday. I said, I told the congregation I was going to stay in this church and a whole lot of people were in tears and my kids were just basket cases. And I didn’t realize what I had been doing to them until that day. So the next time and every time after that . . . well, at that time the oldest one was in junior high. But after that, they all became a part of the process because that was something I shouldn’t have done to them. (transcript, interview X. p. 8)

Several pastors described the guidance of the Holy Spirit at work in their discernment, especially as they recalled, reviewed, and reflected during personal prayer and contemplation on the impressions and insights from the call committee and congregation. Though they were articulate in expressing themselves, there was also a sense that mere words were inadequate to communicate the full range and scope of the Spirit’s involvement in and effect on the process leading to a response.

I can’t narrow it down to whether it was things or people. I guess it would be people, relationship things, because things you can usually work out. A feeling of being really one in something. That’s what the whole business of pastoring is, relationship. So if you don’t have a feeling that you can have a good relationship, you probably shouldn’t be there . . .

But it isn’t just the interview, I think it’s the prayer, the contemplation, the discussion. You come to get some sense of what that pastorate might be like in that place with those people. (transcript, interview V. p. 7)

In a similar vein, using slightly different words:

One of the reasons I’m here is that I really felt something special about an interview where you can go in and in a matter of three or four days - it just jelled . . . That interview, you can usually tell . . . You can have a second interview, as well. It might take two. There ought to be some chemistry there . . . To me it’s the work of the Holy Spirit, but you can call it chemistry. (transcript, interview X. p. 2)

However, some pastors indicated that they were careful to keep the experience of the interview and subsequent reflection on that experience separate and distinct. They did
not jump to an immediate conclusion during or immediately after the meeting with the call committee. The value of maintaining a time for deliberation was pointed up in the following comment.

I always wanted time for prayer and meditation and reflection. You know, God’s time to intervene. You know, if it needed to happen. How do you discern? I’m always looking for signs. (transcript, interview X. p. 2)

Signs seemed to be taken as an indication or prompting and understood as a type of guidance originating in the Holy Spirit. Such signs were assumed to unfold according to the Spirit’s timing and were mentioned as a part of the discernment process by some. For one pastor the feeling that a variety of considerations and concerns were coming together in a satisfactory manner was a sign of the Spirit’s leading toward a new call. “The last transition we made, it was like taking the box of jigsaw pieces, dropping them on a table and they all fell into place” (transcript, interview W. p. 12). For another the sign was a feeling that obstacles were being removed. Summing up his experience he said, “It just seemed impossible to move. But those things that made it seem impossible to move all of a sudden, disappeared. Not all of a sudden. Over a period of time” (transcript, interview Z. p. 9).

The subject of signs raises the question of interpreting them accurately as opposed to misreading their meaning. I was impressed with the response of the pastor who turned to faith and prayer rather than to an arbitrary method for verifying the sign. He put his trust not in the sign but in God’s determination to guide him through the process. In response to the specific question of whether it might be possible to get the wrong message from a sign he said, “I guess that’s what you pray, that you’re led to the right
decision. Both. We didn’t just pray for ourselves, that we’d make the right decision, we
prayed for the congregation” (transcript, interview V. p. 7).

One aspect of the process leading to a response as described by the ELCA
Division for Ministry was mentioned less frequently than I had hoped. But the
infrequency was not unexpected, given the nature of pastoral ministry. The all but
missing ingredient was consultation with trusted colleagues and friends. In one instance,
a pastor attributed his reluctance in pursuing such conversation to his personal style of
reaching a response. His concern was that other voices would add confusion rather than
clarity to the question, at least for him. He did not, however, dismiss the potential value
others might find in seeking out conversation with trusted friends and colleagues.

Watch out, because I know when I pick out tiles or whatever, the more options and
the more salespeople I talk to the more confused I get. I’m a person who needs –
everybody makes decisions in their own way. Some people need a lot of partnership
and a lot of people involved and a lot of conversation and others, pretty much just want
to go off. I gather the information and I just kind of want to do it myself and make a
decision. I guess that’s just the personality difference in the way we try to discern the
spirit because that’s always a hard thing to do. (transcript, interview X. p. 8)

One pastor who did make specific reference to engaging others in conversation
and found that the experience brought clarification. He described deliberating in a call
process, earlier in his ministry.

I went out to my home state, Steve, and I did a lot of praying and then I started
talking to my friends out there - not clergy - friends and family members and it just
came clearer and clearer to me that God was calling me to this place. So, when I got
back from my vacation, I called up the bishop at home and I told him and then his wife
[name] in the background, went, "Yesss!" So, I accepted the call and resigned from
the congregation I was serving at the time. (transcript, interview Y. p. 6)

It should be noted that this pastor did acknowledge the importance of exercising
good judgment in selecting those conversation partners who would be most helpful in
discernment. As he described a subsequent call process, he shared that he found a need to
seek out a different group of people than in the previous call process. The pastor sensed, perhaps accurately, that his friends and even the bishop might have difficulty in being open to a response that would put a geographic distance between them.

The process of prayer, discernment, talking with close friends – now my close friends [at the time of this interview] - I was more on my own on this one than in the previous call because my close friends [in close geographic proximity as he deliberated on the call] couldn’t sort out that I was going to move a great distance. Even my own bishop was concerned about my going so far. (transcript, interview Y. p. 13)

For the pastors interviewed reflection, discernment, and final response to a Letter of Call did involve making use of self-examination, prayer, seeking God’s guidance, conversation with trusted friends, consideration of gifts, and potential. The combination of these and the extent to which each pastor made use of them was unique and personal, though again, the resource of conversation with trusted friends seemed largely untapped or even avoided.

**Concluding Thoughts on Results and Analysis of Data**

As I assess the overall spirit of the subjects interviewed in this study, I doubt any one of them would be numbered among those who claim the ELCA call process stinks. I believe they would, however, be quick to observe that the process has its limitations and drawbacks, perils and pitfalls. Like pastors and congregations, the process is not perfect. At the same time, the five categories for consideration identified here and the experiences related by those interviewed make it clear that a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is not simply a matter of perfecting the call process. Rather it seems that pastors, indeed all participants in the call process, would benefit from intentional equipping, support, and guidance in each of the categories of consideration.

The following questions regarding the equipping of pastors in each category arise
from the analysis of data in this chapter and are considered in the next chapter.

Can a more systematic approach be developed for understanding the information presented and the meanings to be derived from written material? If so, how can candidates be equipped to draw on such a resource?

Can a candidate’s skills and abilities for interviewing be strengthened, not only in presenting herself or himself to a call committee and congregation, but also in determining how accurately the call committee represents the congregation? Are there ways to improve the candidate’s observing and interpreting what she or he observes?

What additional, appropriate sources of impression and insight are available to the candidate? How can candidates be equipped to draw on sources they might otherwise neglect?

How can the level of trust between candidate and bishop be maintained, supported, nurtured, strengthened? Is training in the call process to be developed and provided to candidates? If so, how and by whom?

How can candidates be equipped, supported, and strengthened for reflection, discernment and reaching a final response to a Letter of Call? What could be done to facilitate developing the resource of mutual conversation?
CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

How does an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) pastor make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call? This study began with a formulation of the question which served as the problem statement. In shaping the research that would guide the project, it was necessary to set the problem statement in its larger context by providing a general description of the practice for deployment of rostered leaders in the ELCA referred to as the call process. The next aspect of the project was the selection of an appropriate method for examining the question. Adopting the phenomenological method served to focus the study on the essence of a pastor’s experience in responding to a Letter of Call and also to shape the research questions that would be pursued.

One pastor’s experience in responding to a Letter of Call served as the point of departure for addressing the theological, biblical, and confessional foundations of the question. Distinguishing the primary meaning from a derivative meaning of call and identifying two biblical metaphors for understanding the relationship into which human beings are called by God expanded the theological context of the question pursued in the study. Grounding the question of this study in God’s call to humanity gave rise to four
theological assertions on the basis of scripture and the Augsburg Confession: God instituted the office of ministry for faith; pastoral ministry can be a work of faith; a proper call serves faith; and responding to a Letter of Call is an expression of faith.

In reviewing literature and other sources related to the question of how a pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call, I considered first the primary source of my own experience in hearing God’s call to ministry. This led to an examination of selected sources as these contributed spiritual perspective and practical insight for responding to a Letter of Call. A spiritual perspective explored both the common call to humanity and the unique call of pastors. In terms of practical insight, attention was given to the pastor’s participation as a candidate in relation to the call process and to the pastor’s interaction as a candidate with a particular congregation.

The interplay of theological and scriptural foundations, spiritual perspective and practical insight, informed and guided the application of the research methodology in designing the study, defining and selecting the sample, planning and conducting the interviews, analyzing the data and selected documents, designing and administering the questionnaire.

In analyzing the data generated from the interviews, five categories of consideration emerged which included: written materials, initial impressions, additional insights, trust of the call process facilitator, and the candidate’s reflection, discernment and final response. Written materials were subdivided into standardized forms and other written materials. Initial impressions were those drawn from the candidate’s actual, initial experiences with the calling congregation including the interview, site visit, and fellowship time with the committee as well as interactions involved in preparing for the
interview or following the interview. Additional insights prior to initial impressions with the call committee were distinguished by whether they originated within or outside the wider church. Additional insights after initial impressions resulted either from direct or indirect encounter with the congregation. The level of trust between the candidate and the call process facilitator for the respondents in this study was primarily a matter of the level of trust between the pastor and the bishop or bishop’s staff; since bishop and staff were also call process facilitators in the experience of those interviewed. Reflection and discernment which led to final response included a combination of prayer, self-examination, and seeking God’s guidance through disciplines which were personally selected and practiced by the pastors.

Findings

How does an ELCA pastor make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call? The findings of this study indicate that the short answer to the question is simply, by faith.

According to the theological assertions of Chapter 2, responding to a Letter of Call proceeds from the Holy Spirit’s work of creating and sustaining God’s people in faith. For people who believe and trust that we are justified by grace through faith it would be remarkable if a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call was anything other than an expression of faith. Indeed, it is to be expected that any who share such a conviction would affirm that we live all our days justified by grace through faith, that we seek to respond to every initiative of the Holy Spirit’s call in our lives justified by grace through faith.

At the same time, it would be a misrepresentation of those interviewed in this
study to reduce the profound simplicity of such a faith response to a simplistic, shallow decision to accept or return a particular Letter of Call. For the informants in this study, responding to a Letter of Call by faith necessarily proceeded from living each day by faith in Christ. Thus, responding to a Letter of Call by faith was not an isolated incident. It was part of a larger stream of experience, bathed in grace, and drawn toward a fulfillment of God’s will and purpose by the gravity of the Holy Spirit’s power and guidance.

In the course of analyzing the interview data, this study found that insights from each of the five categories of consideration made a contribution to the discernment of a good, wise, and Spirit-led response of faith to a Letter of Call. However, it bears repeating that while each of the categories were mentioned by more than one respondent, all of the categories were not necessarily present in the responses of all respondents. Neither were considerations from these categories employed in a sequential or chronological manner.

What was present for all was a clear sense of the Lord’s presence and peace, communicated in the midst of the uncertainties and insecurities of the call process. The understanding that living by faith always involves risk, and responding to a Letter of Call by faith is no exception, suggests that risk is actually an essential element in God’s call, in a congregation’s Letter of Call, and in a pastor’s faith response. The support of a trusted bishop or bishop’s assistant often played a crucial role in the candidate’s participation in the process. Though pastors interviewed in this study frequently expressed a desire for confirmation in the form of a sign, they indicated that they understood discernment to be more a matter of time devoted to prayer and reflection than
dramatic intervention. There was an appreciation that responding to a Letter of Call by faith involved a sense of inner confidence for embarking upon a journey with a congregation toward an unseen future, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7). In reviewing the findings of this study, it is evident that part of what was unseen by the pastors, and therefore taken by faith, often included their own understanding and experience of the call process itself. Occasionally, the pastors felt they were relying on their own assumptions and impressions of how the process worked, even though they were not always altogether sure of how to proceed in the call process.

This study also found instances where faith took precedence over sight in what was discerned from the written materials and in what was accepted as a representation of the congregation by the call committee. Comments expressing frustration with Mobility Forms and Congregational Mission Profiles were among the most commonly mentioned criticisms of experience with the process. Other frequent criticisms referred to the perceived failure of call committees to provide an accurate picture of the congregation.

To investigate how an ELCA pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call, this study pursued four research questions. The first of these asked, “What background and skills did the pastoral candidate bring, personally and spiritually, to the process of making a response and from what source?” This study found none of the pastors made reference to a particular background or skill. Yet each one drew heavily on previous experience with the call process and common sense insights gained through that experience. Though the pastors did not claim it was a refined skill, nor did they claim to be practicing any kind of scientific or objective discipline, there is certainly skill involved in gaining an impression of a congregation through reading the Congregation Mission
Profile and other written materials. Likewise the ability to look at a facility and a community to determine not only what is present, but what might be possible in partnership with the people represents a skill. Skills of listening and observing during an interview, a site visit, and other encounters with the congregation and community were evident in the responses of the pastors interviewed.

The second research question sought to identify, “What preparation and resources were provided to pastoral candidates for making this response by seminaries, synods, regions, or other expressions of the church?” This study found little reference to pastors receiving any kind of intentional preparation for responding to a Letter of Call through the wider church, though desire for some kind of preparation was expressed. As for resources available through the wider church, the pastors interviewed consistently mentioned the synod bishop and staff.

Because the study sample was limited to pastors with more than ten year’s experience in ministry, it was at least possible that some resources might have been developed more recently and the respondents would be unaware of their existence. The primary objective in creating and administering the survey questionnaire to the ELCA Division for Ministry/Department of Synodical Relations staff persons deployed in each region was the attempt to identify any resources, especially any newly developed resources, available for pastors in responding to a Letter of Call. In reference to such resources, informants responding to the questionnaire mentioned transitions seminars, mobility consultations, and senior seminarian resource seminars. The transitions seminars and mobility consultations are not new resources. Neither are they primarily intended as a resource to pastors responding to a Letter of Call. The transitions seminars typically
involve pastors who have already accepted a Letter of Call and are in the early stages of ministry in a new setting. The purpose of these seminars is to assist pastors who are in the initial stages of beginning ministry in a new congregation or ministry setting. The mobility consultations involve pastors who are open to call but are experiencing difficulty in receiving a Letter of Call or are not finding opportunities to interview for a call. These consultations give the pastor an opportunity to meet and interact personally with bishops or staff assistants from several synods. The purpose of these consultations is to give bishops and staff assistants a clearer understanding of the pastor so her or his name may be presented to congregations in the call process which are well-suited to the pastor’s gifts and skills for ministry. The senior seminarian resource seminars were mentioned by deployed staff representing three ELCA Regions. These innovative efforts which provided background, insight, and resources related to the call process were offered at the ELCA seminaries in Columbus, Gettysburg, and Columbia for graduates preparing to enter the call process as First Call candidates. They represent a newer approach to equipping candidates which is not available on a church-wide basis. None of the pastors interviewed in this study were familiar with this resource.

The third research question of this study asked, “What information and impressions gathered in the Call Process itself were involved in making a response?” This study found that the pastors interviewed drew information and impressions from diverse sources but tended to concentrate on experiences of personal interaction, in particular with the call committee. Insights from a trusted bishop or staff assistant were welcomed and given considerable weight. While they paid attention to information from written material, the pastors typically placed greater stock on impressions gained through
the experience of the interview and other encounters with the congregation. First impressions were not necessarily determinative though these sometimes played a significant role in discernment, especially when confirmed by additional insight.

The fourth question of this study was an attempt to identify, “What resources and information were most useful to the pastoral candidate in making this response?” This study found that the most useful information and resources involved faith and interpersonal communication which was honest, trustworthy, and accurate. The helpful resource which informants mentioned most frequently was communication with and support of a spouse and, to a lesser degree, close friends. Support, insight, guidance, and honest conversation with bishops and staff assistants were also identified as a valuable resource. At the other end of the spectrum, this study found that the pastors interviewed did not regard standardized written material as particularly helpful and that they were concerned about instances where a call committee’s representation of the congregation and its ministry needs were not accurate. Ultimately, however, it was the resource of faith, supported and strengthened through prayer, which was most useful in discerning a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

Conclusions

How does an ELCA pastor make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call? In keeping with the findings of this study, my primary conclusion must be that faith is at the heart of a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Yet, faith is not only at the center, it is also the native element, the ocean in which a person seeks to immerse her or his good, wise, and Spirit-led response to all of God’s initiatives. The occasion of a decisive response of faith which holds significant consequence for a
person’s life is often the product of a lifetime devoted to faithful response in ordinary situations that arise day after day. This is as true for the pastor responding to a Letter of Call as it is for any disciple and follower of Jesus Christ called to respond in faith. The disciple’s response in faith to the challenges and opportunities of each day is preparation for the truly demanding response which may one day be required. This is what Christ referred to when he said, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16.10). The statement is descriptive, not imperative. It is not so much a command as it is our Lord’s insight into the way of faithfulness. Thus, when a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call is one of faith it should not be surprising to find that the response is built on a foundation of faithful responses throughout a life of discipleship.

As with a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call, I believe it can be stated as a conclusion of this study that the entire call process is a faith process. This is not to say, however, that the call process will be conducted as a faith process in every instance by all participants. On the contrary, some pastors participate in the call process as a means of getting a job, advancing their career, or escaping an unpleasant situation. Some congregations engage in the call process to hire a pastor, get a dynamic leader who will grow the church, or bring in someone who will keep members happy. Some bishops and staff assistants oversee the process to fill empty slots, grease squeaky wheels, or dole out political favor. The call process has been and will continue to be used, at least by some, as a means to human ends rather than an opportunity to discern the unfolding of God’s gracious purpose for the church. The call process is subject to exploitation or even outright abuse by any of the various participants. Yet in spite of human frailty, I believe on the basis of this study that it is possible to affirm God is able to use the process as it is
currently employed to bring pastors to a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call and to lead the people of faith into satisfying and fulfilling partnerships in ministry which are capable of bringing glory to God and serving God’s mission in the world.

In addition to the two primary conclusions of this study, which state that faith is central in a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call and that the entire call process is essentially a faith process, there are three secondary conclusions which warrant mention and comment. While these secondary conclusions also acknowledge the centrality of faith for the pastor and the process, they recognize as well the dynamic character of faith which has the capacity to change an individual believer, even an ordained believer, or an entire community of believers through daily repentance and renewal for new life in Christ. Acknowledging the dynamic character of faith permits the affirmation of current process and practice while at the same time allowing for revision and in some instances even calling for reform of process and practice.

First, I have concluded that responding to a Letter of Call should not be understood as a matter of making a right or wrong decision, but as a matter of following in faith as Christ leads us along the way. Sorting out and weighing the various considerations and factors involved in responding to a Letter of Call does not yield the one, correct answer. It should not be understood as a decision in which tossing a coin gives a fifty percent chance of being right. Instead, the process of discernment will yield a sense of confidence and conviction shared by pastor and congregation. In making this response Christ leads pastor and congregation not only for the moment of response, but into the partnership of ministry they will share into the future. In many instances, the pastor may be able to respond in faith and follow Christ by accepting the Letter of Call or
by returning it. In other words, whether a pastor’s response means continuing a current
ministry or beginning a new ministry, the pastor and the current or the new congregation
can set their course on following Christ and carrying out the mission to which they have
been called. In such cases, the rightness of a response is not determined solely by which
choice is made, but grows from the commitment of pastor and congregation to proceed
together in the confidence and conviction of faith that God will bless their partnership in
ministry from that day forward. In summarizing his advice to pastors on deciding
between competing priorities, Herbert Anderson observes, “The decision inevitably
involves discernment among competing loyalties and priorities. Usually there will be
more than one good choice” (9, italics added).

Second, I am persuaded that the emphasis which synod bishops and staff
assistants typically place on confidentiality during the call process is certainly appropriate
to a degree, for both the pastor and the call committee. Nevertheless, it needs to be
balanced with guidance and encouragement for the participants to take up those
conversations which can assist the pastor and the call committee in the discernment of a
good, wise, and Spirit-led response.

In reporting on a recent, non-scientific, reader survey conducted by The Lutheran,
Elizabeth Hunter found that confidentiality, often understood as secrecy, was identified
as a problem on the part of call committees and pastors’ spouses as well as candidates.
Under the heading “Shhhh, don’t tell” a call committee member was quoted as saying,
“The need for secrecy was not understood or necessarily agreed with.” (Hunter 2002, 38).
A pastor’s spouse was even more pointed in commenting:

Synod directives on confidentiality can make candidates and spouses less than honest.
. . . The fact that interviewing has to be done in such secrecy makes lying inevitable,
How do you explain being delayed on “unscheduled” trips when the church secretary says, “What are you doing in [that town]?” (Hunter, 2002, 38)

Though Hunter reported that pastors generally felt protected by the confidentiality, she did mention one pastor who confessed feeling, “‘dishonest somehow’ for ‘playing secret’ with my former congregation” (Hunter 2002, 38).

In addition to appropriate confidentiality, pastors as well as call committees stand to benefit from an opportunity to engage in ethically appropriate conversations with persons who can provide valuable insight in the discernment process. These persons will come from a variety of settings and may include trusted colleagues, counselors, preceding pastors, neighboring ELCA pastors, community pastors, and leaders. Then, rather than being isolated, left to her or his own highly personal and subjective reflection, the pastor who is equipped to seek such support and insight will be assisted in the challenging task of making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call as well as participating in the entire process as an expression of faith.

Third, I am convinced that responding to a Letter of Call is a time of stress for a pastor in the ELCA. Indeed, the entire call process is a stressful time for pastors and their families, for call committees and congregations, for bishops and staff assistants. It is a time when all participants in the process are highly susceptible to a level of anxiety that ranges from moderate to intense. This is in spite of the Lord’s clear admonition in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life” (Matthew 6.25a). As a general principle, I believe it can be stated that the higher the level of anxiety, the more challenging it will be for a pastor to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

Related to this conclusion is a factor which, I believe, contributes to the anxiety
experienced as pastors respond to a Letter of Call. This factor is the sense of urgency to get a new church which is felt by some pastors for various reasons. The complimentary anxiety in some call committees is the equally pressing sense of need to get a new pastor. When such feelings are present, they contribute significantly to the general level of anxiety experienced by all participants in the call process and at the very least stand in opposition to a pastor’s efforts to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

For at least some pastors, more than they need to get a new call in six months, they need to be renewed in their openness to living and serving by faith. For at least some call committees and congregations, more than they need to get a new pastor before autumn arrives, they need to discover that people of faith live by trusting God’s good timing as well as God’s good providence. For bishops and staff assistants, for all participants in the call process, and the whole church, more than we need to shorten the time it takes for pastors to get a call, to reduce the time congregations must wait between pastorates, and to find a solution to the so-called clergy shortage, we need to be asking and reflecting on what God is at work to accomplish in us, among us, and through us as the body of Christ. Only then can the partnerships which result from extending and accepting a Letter of Call be devoted to the ministry and mission of Christ.

There is a strong undercurrent of desire running through our culture, fueled by human pride that wants to manage and control our circumstances. It is charged with a vain and self-centered determination to bring about desired outcomes according to timetables of our own devising and which call for hasty, if not instant, results. The word of the prophet is especially suggestive for all, but certainly it speaks to pastors seeking to
make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith (Habakkuk 2.2-4)

To be sure, there is a need to give attention to refining and revising and, in some of its aspects, reforming the call process, especially for a culture on the run. At the same time, there is an equally pressing need to equip pastors more and more with a new heart and a right spirit of faith for responding to a Letter of Call. Though not contained within the scope of this study, nevertheless, it seems just as clear that there is a need to equip congregations and call committees, bishops and staff assistants more and more with a new heart and a right spirit for participating by faith in the call process. More than seeking to change the process, the dynamic character of faith is at work to change us.

Recommendations

For Pastors

How does an ELCA pastor make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call? This study has found and concluded that faith is the distinguishing characteristic of a good, wise, and Spirit-led response. Therefore, the primary recommendation of this study is that pastors seek to respond to a Letter of Call by faith. Of necessity, a variety of considerations enter into the process of discernment. Still, it is incumbent upon the pastoral candidate to make sure that faith is foundation for her or his response to a Letter of Call. Faith that trusts God’s presence to guide, equip, sustain, sanctify, and bless a partnership between congregation and pastor must be the soil out of which the flower of ministry blossoms and grows. It is only from the seed of faith that the fruit of ministry
will be good, wise, and Spirit-led.

This foundational recommendation leads to four additional recommendations for pastors. These are related to the five categories identified in analyzing the data and to the questions posed at the end of the preceding chapter.

First, with respect to written materials, it has already been noted that pastors have reservations about the value and usefulness of standardized forms. However, it is not likely that Mobility Forms or Congregational Mission Profiles will be eliminated from the call process in the near future. Therefore, I recommend that for the short term pastors seek advice and assistance in preparing Mobility Forms and in interpreting Congregational Mission Profiles. A bishop or staff assistant, a competent counselor or trusted colleague can be a good advisor in preparing Mobility Forms as well as providing a source of accountability for a pastor’s self-assessment. Resource persons who can help interpret Congregational Mission Profiles should also be sought out and consulted, no matter how confident the pastor may be in her or his listening and observing skills.

Second, in the categories of initial impressions and additional insights, the desire for assistance in developing and refining interview techniques has been noted. However, I recommend that pastors go beyond the matter of mere technique. In addition to gaining confidence in presenting themselves, I believe pastors stand to benefit from considering models and methods of exploring partnership that go beyond a single interview. These include intentionally structured experiences selected from a variety of options. Some of these options include: taking several days to experience the community, spending a week in residence with the congregation, scheduling an overnight leadership retreat, or creating other opportunities for getting acquainted in significant ways which can be built into the
call process with a particular call committee or congregation. One of the implications of this recommendation is that the cry for uniformity and standardization of the call process being raised by some in the ELCA must be resisted. Instead, fostering freedom and flexibility which permits a customizing of the process can serve to give a particular candidate and congregation the confidence that they are entering into a partnership in ministry which promises to be good, wise, and Spirit-led.

Related to recommendation number two is the observation that pastors stand to benefit from sharpening their overall skills in looking and listening as they discern the potential and possibilities for partnership in ministry with a particular congregation. Disciplined attention to what and how the candidate accumulates information as well as giving thought to how she or he interprets what is seen and heard provides important material for consideration when the time comes to respond to a Letter of Call. Again, the pastor needs to seek a trusted and competent resource person who can provide a perspective in addition to her or his own reading of the call committee, congregation, and God’s call.

Third, the category of trust in the call process facilitator is a crucial element in the call process and I am convinced it will become even more so if, as research cited in this study suggests, an increasing number of congregations find themselves suffering from dysfunction. Therefore, I recommend that, at the very least, pastors become familiar with the vocabulary of systems theory and take occasion to discuss any specific indications of the presence of dysfunction in the congregation with the bishop or staff assistant who serves as call process facilitator.

At this point it should be explicitly stated that I believe there is a crucial
distinction to be made between the often pejoratively used label “dysfunctional congregation” and the descriptive diagnosis “congregation suffering from dysfunction.” The distinction and its significance can be illustrated by comparing the difference in labeling a youngster “a problem child” versus diagnosing the same youngster as “a child who has a problem.” The label implies that the only salient feature of the congregation’s identity is dysfunction and that the congregation itself is a problem. There is room in the diagnosis, however, to acknowledge that dysfunction is one of many characteristics present in the congregation’s complex, corporate personality.

Competent pastoral ministry is as valid and valuable in a congregation suffering from dysfunction as one which enjoys healthier congregational life. However, in order to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response in accepting a Letter of Call to serve with a congregation suffering from dysfunction, the pastor must be able to enter into that ministry as fully aware of the circumstances as possible. The pastor needs to have confidence that she or he brings the requisite gifts and skills for offering effective ministry in that context. Finally, the pastor must be able to draw on the assurance that she or he has the support network necessary to maintain balance, focus, and personal health in sharing ministry with the congregation.

With respect to the third recommendation, I am aware of a tendency among pastors to suppose that the office of bishop can and should be expected to exert some kind of authority to help a congregation suffering from dysfunction to get better. However, I propose that all participants in the call process, and pastors in particular, come to terms with the nature of dysfunction and grant that it is the one suffering from dysfunction who must be willing to take the steps toward health and wholeness. I believe
that it is only as each participant in the call process non-anxiously accepts appropriate responsibility for her, his, or their own health and well-being that the necessary level of trust can be preserved and strengthened and misplaced trust and mistrust resulting from unmet expectations can be avoided. Certainly, this means that a call process which does not result in a satisfying match for ministry, while truly lamentable, is accepted by all participants as one possible outcome. Part of the risk involved in extending and accepting a Letter of Call is that the process will fail to bring about a satisfying match for ministry. This does not necessarily mean that the pastor, the congregation, or the bishop can be assumed to be guilty of failure or wickedness. All parties should guard against drawing such a conclusion prematurely.

Fourth, the faith upon which a pastor will draw in making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is supported and sustained by the spiritual resources of prayer and reflection, conversation and consultation, especially with trusted family and friends. Therefore, I recommend that pastors seek to be equipped and strengthened in these skills and disciplines. In particular a healthy, confidential peer group serves to further these objectives. However, it is not necessary for a pastor to wait until entering the call process to develop and enhance the practice of prayer and reflection in seeking God’s guidance. Seminaries are and can become even more of a valuable partner in this aspect of pastoral formation. The pastor’s use of continuing education and constant attention to nurturing supportive relationships among colleagues in ministry also serves as an antidote to the detrimental lone ranger complex which is still at work among clergy. The contemporary version of this malady seems more subtle than it did a generation ago, more resistant to attempts to neutralize its effect, and highly likely to exert a negative
influence upon the pastor engaged in a call process.

For the Wider Church

Clearly, the wider church has a stake in supporting pastors in making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. My first recommendation to the wider church, specifically to synodical and regional expressions of the church, is to develop, sponsor, and promote a series of continuing education events for equipping pastors to participate in the call process in general and for responding to a Letter of Call in particular. I believe that pastors experience frustration and dissatisfaction with the call process, at least in part, due to a lack of understanding of the process and an absence of resources designed to increase understanding. By providing opportunities for pastors to address issues related to the call process the wider church will be making significant contribution to a pastor’s good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

A synod, a regional, or multi-synodical group with responsibility to provide support to rostered leaders will develop the series and offer it to pastors. As a series of separate units, pastors select the unit or units which are deemed to be most helpful. The topic of a particular unit determines how it is structured. Some units may be half-day, some full day, some multiple day, and still others a series of days over the course of several weeks. The goals of the series are to equip pastors for reflecting on God’s call, to offer insight into the church’s process for matching pastors and congregations, and to provide effective tools for the pastor to use in discernment.

The title of the series must be carefully considered. As an example, “Confirming God’s Call” emphasizes that the event is open to all pastors. It must not be the case or even the implication that participants are currently in the call process or else pastors who
are hesitant about disclosing that they are available for another call will be reluctant to take advantage of the opportunity. Another potential benefit of keeping the series open to all pastors is the possible, indeed desirable, outcome that the event serves to confirm a pastor’s current call. It also acknowledges the insight that the best time to gain understanding of the call process is when the pastor is not personally subject to the stress and anxiety it tends to produce.

Topics addressed in the series will include theological and biblical foundations as well as the spiritual and practical aspects of God’s call. Separate units are devoted to equipping pastors to deal with the five considerations involved in the call process: written materials, initial impressions, additional insight, trust of the call process facilitator, and final response. Additional units in the series are developed as deemed appropriate. One of those additional units will deal with seeking God’s guidance through prayer and reflection, and through conversation and consultation. Another will consider the call committee interview in a manner which goes beyond techniques. Still another will examine various options for exploring partnership in ministry with a congregation. Practical matters such as unique details about the call process in a synod sponsoring the event or using salary guidelines to prepare a compensation package can be the topic of still other units. Also, learning to identify a congregation suffering from dysfunction must receive special attention so that pastors who do not have the gifts and skills necessary for serving such a call are better equipped to realize and consider their limitations in certain contexts. One advantage of developing such resources as continuing education events is that continuing education funds are available to cover the costs of a pastor’s participation. The primary issue in implementing this recommendation is equipping leadership support
committees with the vision and energy to develop and provide the series.

A second recommendation for the wider church, specifically addressed to the Department of Synodical Relations (DSR) and the Conference of Bishops, is an encouragement to reassess and redefine the overall role of standardized forms in the call process. This reassessment will go beyond a revision of the forms themselves to a renovation of the manner in which the forms are used. I believe the primary value of the Mobility Form is as an exercise in self-assessment and therefore an on-going aspect of a pastor’s self-care. The representation of a pastor to a particular call committee must be prepared separately from this self-assessment. Therefore, in revising the role of standardized forms, I recommend that the Mobility Form exercise be divided into two parts.

The first part becomes an opportunity for the pastor to use much of the current Mobility Form with a competent counselor who provides honest feedback and helps the pastor reach a more accurate and honest understanding of her or his call and gifts for ministry. This provides accountability for the pastor’s self-assessment which is not present in current practice. The first part of the Mobility Form exercise must be confidential, between the pastor and counselor. If confidentiality is not assured, it is likely that the pastor’s self-assessment will undergo a certain cosmetic editorializing when the intended audience is expanded to include a bishop and a prospective call committee, even with the benefit of an accountability consultant. Issues which need to be addressed in implementing this recommendation include the identifying of competent counselors, funding, and an acceptance of the practice by pastors and bishops.

Part two of the Mobility Form exercise occurs for the pastor who discerns an
availability for call. An outcome of part one of the Mobility Form exercise is a second form, ideally reduced to a single sheet, like a resume in a secular context, which is shared with bishops and prospective call committees. On the basis of this form and the bishop's recommendation the call committee determines whether to carry the conversation with a particular candidate to the next step of the call process. When a call committee prepares to interview a particular candidate, the committee may request the candidate to prepare a more extensive written representation of herself or himself addressing ministry and leadership skills, theological and doctrinal issues, personal and professional practices and other pertinent matters appropriate and applicable to the context. This means that the candidate will be responding to items which matter to the particular call committee with whom she or he is exploring the possibility of partnership in ministry, thus emphasizing the relational aspects of the process rather than the functional attributes on a shopping list. Issues to be addressed in implementing part two include the willingness of the DSR and Conference of Bishops to revise current practice, the equipping of call committees for responsible participation in soliciting written material from prospective candidates, and a greater willingness on the part of all involved in the process to accept and honor the role of the bishop in suggesting names of candidates to call committees.

A third recommendation for the wider church is the equipping and promoting of what I will refer to as confidential peer groups. These would serve as a means of providing support for pastors engaged in the call process. A trained facilitator is connected with a small number of pastors who are or intend to be in the call process. These pastors live close enough to meet once or twice a month and are willing to make a commitment to the group. The group covenants to spend quality time together in
fellowship, Bible study, prayer, conversation, and support for a specified term such as six or eight months, renewable by mutual agreement. As the group becomes acquainted and builds trust, the various considerations involved in the call process, especially in the categories of initial impressions and additional insights are addressed and processed. One strength of this recommendation is that by drawing on the combined resources of the members of the group it takes advantage of the adage that we are our own best teachers. On occasion, an additional outside resource person might be engaged to bring the insight of a certain background or expertise. But in instances where a resource person is not available, the support of a group can make its own, valuable contribution to the pastor in the call process. One weakness of this recommendation, which requires attention if a confidential peer group is to make a positive contribution to the call process, is the potential of such groups to become unhealthy or even dysfunctional in the absence of a competent facilitator. It is possible, for instance, to envision the necessity of disbanding a group that cannot manage to keep a positive, productive focus. Because the facilitator of the group plays a key role in the shaping and sustaining of a positive spirit, the identification and possibly even the certification of facilitators is an issue to be addressed in implementing this recommendation as well as issues of funding, accountability, and availability.

Related to this recommendation, in instances where it is not possible for a pastor in the call process to join a confidential peer group, I suggest as an alternative the identifying and equipping of a pastor’s call consultant who provides the pastor with information, consultation, and support throughout the call process. This stems from the recognition that no pastor should expect or be expected to navigate the call process,
especially its spiritual and practical complexities, alone. Rather, each pastor should
expect and be expected to draw on the diverse gifts present and available in the various
expressions of the church for making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to God's call
and a Letter of Call. A pastor's call consultant helps a pastor gain the necessary
information and insight for addressing issues involving the congregation's expectations,
role clarification, organizational dynamics, staff support, compensation, involvement of
the family, personal and professional considerations, as well as the dependability of the
call committee's representation of these expectations. An important attribute of the
pastor's call consultant is that she or he not be a member of a synod staff, though there
should be accountability to the office of bishop. This allows the pastor's call consultant to
function solely as a support to the pastor. The issue of funding such a ministry is again a
matter requiring further attention.

A fourth recommendation for the wider church is addressed to bishops and staff
assistants. As this study has shown, the bishop and staff can play a crucial role in
bringing together a pastor and a congregation for exploring the possibility of God's call
to a partnership in ministry. One of the most determinative elements in that role is the
trust placed in the bishop and staff by the candidate and the congregation. In addition, I
submit trust is more likely to be given and nurtured when the bond with bishop and staff
is relational rather than functional. Drawing on the parent-child metaphor of family
relationships, one of the most powerful tools available to parents for shaping an attitude
and spirit of trust in a child is focused attention. Likewise the marriage metaphor
illustrates how the giving of focused attention to one another is a potent influence in
building and sustaining trust between spouses.
Therefore, I recommend bishops and staff develop intentional and innovative initiatives for giving focused attention to the congregations and pastors of the synod. In this way, bishops and staff become more well acquainted and build trust with congregations and pastors. Ideally, these trust-building initiatives will be undertaken when the congregation and pastor are not engaged in a call process and thus, not as likely to be affected by accompanying stress and anxiety.

One means for bishops and staff assistants to give focused attention to congregations and pastors is what I will term a Bishop’s Visitation. While the term is my own, I attribute the basic concept to Marilyn M. Smith (interview with the author, 2 April 2002). During a Bishop’s Visitation, the bishop or staff assistant participates in worship and congregational life for a specified period of time, preferably a month. The bishop or staff assistant is present on Sundays with the congregation and pastor for all worship services, fellowship activities and education ministries. On the final Sunday the bishop or staff assistant preaches and presides at the sacrament. In addition to Sundays, throughout the month of the Bishop’s Visitation the bishop or staff assistant devotes a least two days each week to experiencing other aspects of the congregation’s and pastor’s life and ministry. The visitor will make it a priority to be present for additional worship services, committee meetings including at least one meeting of the council, week day education ministries, confirmation instruction, servant and social ministries, visitation ministries, and significant, individual time with the pastor, the pastor’s spouse, and family.

The most significant issue involved in implementing this recommendation is restructuring the priorities and schedule of bishops and staff. In the synod where I am rostered, for instance, the bishop and three staff assistants serve over 130 congregations.
If each of these four people conduct five Bishop’s Visitations per year it will take six years (the bishop’s term of elected office) to visit the congregations of the synod. I am not presuming to suggest how the already demanding schedule of bishops and staff might be restructured to accommodate the addition of five major time commitments each year. Certainly, it will mean eliminating, reducing, or reassigning some of the duties and functions currently attached to the office of bishop. However, the potential for building trust in an initiative such as the Bishop’s Visitation is well worth the investment, if only for the sake of strengthening the call process. In an age when the distance between the congregational and synodical expressions of the church needs to reduced and interdependent partnerships need to be strengthened, initiatives from the office of bishop designed to build trust will doubtless yield dividends in many aspects of the life of the church.

In concluding these recommendations to the wider church, I submit that the value of providing support to pastors who are or who will be seeking to make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call is sufficient to warrant the investment of the best time, resources, and abilities which pastors, congregations, synods, seminaries, and the wider church have to offer. I realize that simply recommending Bishop’s Visitations, pastor’s call consultants, confidential peer groups, revising the role and use of standardized forms, and continuing education events does not guarantee implementation and that there are issues which need to be addressed in order to do so. Still, I believe the goal is worth the effort.

For Further Research

In studying how an ELCA pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a
Letter of Call, I focused on the experience of pastors within current variations of the call process as practiced in the ELCA. It was not my purpose to consider the larger picture of clergy deployment practices. However, I believe it is time for the ELCA to engage in a church-wide study to conduct a review and evaluation of the entire call process from theological as well as practical perspectives. A church-wide study of the call process is all the more timely, given two crucial issues which the church is currently facing with respect to the matching of congregations and clergy for partnership in ministry.

The first issue is sometimes referred to as a clergy shortage. I would argue it is at least possible that the issue is more a matter of clergy deployment than shortage. If the issue is clergy shortage, then the implication is that more persons are needed to fill the ranks of clergy. On the other hand, if the issue is clergy deployment, then it is quite likely that a more suitable call process has a role to play in alleviating the sense of shortage experienced in some places due to ineffective deployment.

The second issue involves the public awareness of and outcry against the scandal over clergy sexual abuse precipitated by recent revelations of the Roman Catholic Church. Tragically, such shameful abuse is not a new phenomenon in the church and neither is it confined to Roman Catholic priests. But the widespread attention and sense of alarm generated by reports of criminal behavior on the part of clergy make it imperative for the church to respond in a public and decisive manner. It is also paramount that the church take this opportunity to respond in a faithful manner. Without doubt, there will be substantial support for and even insistence upon a reactionary response that makes gaining admittance to the ranks of clergy more restrictive than it is now. Certainly, the process used to certify persons as fit for ordained ministry will need to be refined as the
church takes every possible measure to prevent persons who would use the good office of pastoral ministry as a cover for perpetrating criminal behavior. On the other hand, the church dare not risk giving the impression, either to prospective candidates for ministry, to members in general, or to the world around us that only those persons can be pastors who are without sin. If such a thing ever does become the case, the church will indeed begin to suffer from a shortage of clergy! Again, a process that helps to bring about good, wise, and Spirit-led matching of pastors and congregations for partnership in ministry will be necessary if the church is to respond effectively and faithfully to this issue.

The church-wide study of the call process should address the full range of practices currently in use in the ELCA synods and also in First Call candidacy. All expressions of the church must be involved in such a review and reevaluation if the revisions and reforms adopted are going to serve the Lord and the church well. Oversight for this study is properly entrusted to the Conference of Bishops but the research should include significant input from diverse sources including ELCA deployed staff, seminary faculties, synod bishops and staff, pastors, persons who have served on call committees, and people familiar with deployment practices which are different from the ECLA. The ELCA does have experience in conducting such major church-wide studies which involve broad dissemination of materials for study, reflection, deliberation, and response. I propose viewing this as a major study and setting aside the time, resources, and expertise to do justice to the significance of the subject matter.

Two recommendations for further research compliment this study of how ELCA pastors make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. First is a study devoted to how ELCA congregations make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response in
extending a Letter of Call. Second is a study of how bishops, staff assistants, and other persons who facilitate the call process provide good, wise, and Spirit-led support and guidance for candidates and congregations. The outline of this study may well be suitable for a similar study which investigates the call process from the perspective of congregations and synod bishops and staff.

Finally, I recommend that further research be devoted to identifying and counteracting the anxiety which seems so prevalent in the call process overall and which can powerfully impede pastors in the pursuit of making a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call. Of all the factors that can negatively affect the call process and a pastor’s response to a Letter of Call, anxiety is the one I am convinced is most diametrically opposed to the essential element of faith. As previously noted, anxiety is an enemy that plagues not only pastors but also their spouses, call committees, congregations, bishops, staff assistants, and the whole church. From my perspective I suspect that one culprit which contributes mightily to the anxiety experienced in the call process is the failure to distinguish between appropriate confidentiality and unhealthy secrecy. It is my prayer that this study’s description of how an ELCA pastor makes a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call may contribute to lowering the anxiety experienced in the call process by beginning to strip away some of that secrecy. At the same time, I believe there is more for the church to do before faith is elevated above anxiety as the dominant influence in the call process.

Still, above all, I believe we can continue this course in confidence trusting that in opening the envelope and responding to a Letter of Call, as in all things, God is calling us into an eternal union with our Lord from which nothing will be able to separate us.
APPENDIX A

CONGREGATIONAL MISSION PROFILE

MOBILITY FORMS
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Congregational Mission Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I - CONGREGATION INFORMATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. **Congregation**
   - **Congregation ID Number:**
   - **Congregation Name:**
   - **Address:**
   - **City:**
   - **State:**
   - **Zipcode:**
   - **Church Phone:** ( ) -
   - **Fax Number:** ( ) -
   - **Synod:**

2. **Congregation Council Chairperson**
   - **Name:**
   - **Address:**
   - **City:**
   - **State:**
   - **Zipcode:**
   - **Home Phone:** ( ) -
   - **Work Phone:** ( ) -
   - **Preferred Contact Phone Number:**
     - Home
     - Work
   - **Preferred Contact e-mail address:**

3. **Call Committee Chairperson**
   - **Name:**
   - **Address:**
   - **City:**
   - **State:**
   - **Zipcode:**
   - **Home Phone:** ( ) -
   - **Work Phone:** ( ) -
   - **Preferred Contact Phone Number:**
     - Home
     - Work
   - **Preferred Contact e-mail address:**

**Date:** //
4. List three events or developments that are important from the history of your congregation. Please indicate the dates. If you have a short, concise congregational history, please attach it.

(For example: significant anniversaries, building programs, merger, worship service added, ministries, musical groups and choirs formed, staff or pastoral positions added or revamped, lengthy pastorates, pastoral interims, intentional interims, restructuring of Congregational Council or board, mission development, house mission church, relationship with Lutheran agency or organization, organ purchase.)

5. There are historical or internal issues in any congregation about which a candidate should be aware. Please describe:

a. The length of time your three previous pastors served and their reasons for leaving.

b. The most significant conflict in your congregation in the last 20 years and what the congregation has learned from that conflict.
6. Review the congregations's current ELCA Congregational Trend Report and Demographic Zip Code Report. This report is available on the internet at www.elca.org/re, or by calling the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation at 1-800-638-3522, ext. 2990. Comment here on any surprises or especially significant trends. Please attach a copy of the report to this profile.

(Please attach the most up-to-date membership and attendance information available.)

7. Congregation constitution was last updated:  /  

(Comment on reason for update.)

8. Most members live within what distance of the church building?

a. Estimate, to the nearest whole number, the percentage of congregational members who live within the following distances of the church building:

1/2 mile from church: [ ] % 1/2 - 1 mile from church: [ ] %
1 3 miles from church: [ ] % more than 3 miles from church: [ ] %

b. Estimate, to the nearest whole number, the percentage of congregation members who use the following modes of transportation to come to church:

walk or take public transportation: [ ] % drive personal vehicles: [ ] %
Part II - MINISTRY PRACTICES AND STRUCTURE

Describe the congregation's present program and practices in worship (time, type, style, frequency of communion), education (adult, youth, confirmation), evangelism (calls and guests), and special ministry (CROP Walk, after-school tutors, etc.).
(Comment on how ministries are organized - by committees [ad hoc or standing], task forces or as special projects.)

10. Describe the service ministries of the congregation, its community involvement and ecumenical partnerships.
(For example: food pantry sponsor or contributor, build shelter for low-income residents in the community, house counseling office, addiction-related groups or other organizations.)

11. Describe the congregation's present staffing. Please include volunteers responsible for parish printed communications, supervising education programs, building maintenance or other regular tasks.
(For paid staff: note whether part-time or full-time; whether members of the congregation, relationship to members, if any; and length of service.)
12. Construction date of church building: / /  Date of last renovation: / /

Is any building program projected? □ Yes □ No  If yes, when?: / /  

Please describe existing building issues which may need to be addressed and the current extend of handicapped accessibility. Also use this space to describe the condition of any church property, its insured value and any outstanding debt on it.

13. Briefly describe the congregation’s stewardship practices. What process is used for determining annual income projections? What is your current commitment (percentage of offerings) to ministry beyond the congregation (synod, churchwide, other ministries)?

(For example: describe how stewardship is encouraged; pledge Sundays; how offerings are allocated.)

14. Please attach a current spending plan for the congregation. Additionally, briefly describe savings, endowments, or investments and how these funds are to be used.

(Comment on how use of financial resources reflects the congregation’s mission.)
15. Describe synod and churchwide activities in which members have participated.
   (For example: synod or churchwide assemblies, synod or churchwide council, synod committees, global mission events, Women of the ELCA, stewardship or evangelism seminars, seminary events and youth gathering or youth leadership training.)

16. How does this congregation, as an integral piece of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, see itself as a partner with the synod and churchwide organizations?
   (For example, how has the congregation become involved in synod and churchwide activities and why? What does it mean to be a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? If there is no involvement, as best you are able, explain why that might be so.)

17. Describe the larger community in which the church building is located and list the resources of your information.
   (For example: gender percentages, race, marital status, media age and income; types of employment; quality of education, cost and types of housing, tax rate and recreational activities.)
18. Describe three distinct attributes of the community the congregation serves.
(For example: urban, suburban, small town or rural; growing, stable or declining economy; racially diverse or not, quality of education opportunities, single or two-income families, many single or elderly people.)

19. List four primary businesses or industries in the community.
(For example: note source of tax base and local economy, primary employers; note whether people commute to other locations for employment.)

20. What trends in the community should be addressed by the congregation in the next five years?
(For example: impact of population shifts, domestic violence, day care, youth services or recreation, homelessness, new construction, inflated housing prices or decline of housing stock.)

21. What opportunities for ecumenical cooperation have you found in your community?
(For example: cooperative worship, youth events, food pantry, women's shelter or homeless shelter.)
Part IV - WHERE IS GOD LEADING US?

2. In the past five years, has the congregation conducted a process to review its ministry and goals?
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No    If yes, briefly outline the process used to develop these.
   (For example: Who led and participated? How was input sought? Were open meetings held and how many? Were decisions made by committees or a task force?)

23. What is the current vision or mission statement of the congregation?
   (Comment on whether this mission statement accurately reflects the current understanding of the mission of the congregation or if it may need to be reevaluated.)

24. During the next one to three years, what are the top three mission priorities for the congregation which, if accomplished, hold the most promise for the continued development of your ministry?
   (For example: outreach to increase membership; service to the community; building program; adding staff or pastors; restructuring of committees or boards; stewardship or evangelism programs.)
25. What is your congregation excited about?
(For example: list events or activities that generate interest and participation.)

26. Position title: ____________________________

27. Please list the expectations for this position.
28. Ministry Priorities and Skills. Please rate the following based upon your priorities and the perceived necessary skills for the leader you seek: (5 is the highest)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority (1-5)</th>
<th>Skill (1-5)</th>
<th>Ministry Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Four areas of most essential need</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worship Leadership</td>
<td>Place high value on carefully planned and well-conducted worship services.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social Ministry</td>
<td>Enable persons to become aware of community needs and participate in action and advocacy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Children's Ministry</td>
<td>Teach and relate to preschool and elementary age children.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ministry to Youth and Young Adults</td>
<td>Teach, work and relate well with high school youth and young adults.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching Adults</td>
<td>Teach and lead adults in faith development.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Provide oversight of the organization and work of staff, committees, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community Work</td>
<td>Motivate persons to cooperate in community activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecumenical Work</td>
<td>Stimulate cooperation in local inter-church and inter-faith programs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Inspire and motivate persons in developing and using individual and group resources in the service of the church.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>Reach out with the Good News of Jesus the Christ.</td>
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<td>Visitation</td>
<td>Support and nurture persons by visiting with them in settings other than church functions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Preaching</td>
<td>Hear both law and gospel as it applies to the lives of people.</td>
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<td>Ministering in Crisis</td>
<td>Support persons in the midst of crisis.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Assist persons facing problems or decisions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant in the Larger Church</td>
<td>Provide leadership to programs of the ELCA through the synod and church-wide organizations as well as other affiliated institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priority 1-5 (5 is high)</td>
<td>Skill 1-5 (5 is high)</td>
<td>Ministry Area</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Four areas of most essential need</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Financial Management</td>
<td>Work with accounts, figures and budgets.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inter-personal Climate</td>
<td>Exhibit and inspire a spirit of community.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recruit and Equip</td>
<td>Enlist, equip and motivate leaders to carry out the work of the organization.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpreter of Theology</td>
<td>Communicate a comprehensive understanding of the Bible and Christian theology from a Lutheran perspective.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Innovator</td>
<td>Envision and implement new approaches, activities and projects.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Utilizing Conflict</td>
<td>Analyze and utilize conflict situations to strengthen community life.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>Engage in visioning, long-range planning, and goal setting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sharing Leadership</td>
<td>Work mutually with volunteers and colleagues in a staff situation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family Life / Self Care</td>
<td>Expect the pastor to, and allow time for, cultivating home and personal life.</td>
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<td>Study Habits</td>
<td>Expect the pastor to, and allow time for, following a regular schedule of reading and studying.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spiritual Discipline</td>
<td>Expect the pastor to, and allow time for, maintaining a disciplined life of prayer and personal devotion.</td>
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<td>Small Groups</td>
<td>Plan, cultivate and support small group ministry.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Creatively relate to youth to teach the faith and inspire commitment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transformational / Redevelopment</td>
<td>Understand and embrace the need to change and to reach out in a new community context.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Musical and Artistic</td>
<td>Enjoy and use music and the arts to invite and enhance worship.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
29. Compensation and professional expense reimbursement.

Range of base salary: $ __________

Range of base salary including housing allowance: $ __________

In addition to base salary, we have been providing: (Check all that apply.)
- Parsonage
- Housing Equity Allowance
- Social Security offset
- Continuing Education of 14 days and synod recommended minimum allowance of $ __________
- Four weeks vacation, including four Sundays
- Car allowance or Mileage allowance
- Health and pension through the ELCA Board of Pensions
- Other: (Please explain briefly below.)

Other: ____________________________________________

Total compensation and professional expense package: $ __________

Please comment on how these figures compare to your synod's compensation guidelines.

References

Please list two people outside of the present membership whom a candidate might call for further insights and impressions of the congregation or ministry setting.

Relationship: __________________________ Name: __________________________

Address

City: __________________________ State: __________ Zipcode: __________

Phone ( ) - __________________________ e-mail: __________________________

Relationship: __________________________ Name: __________________________

Address

City: __________________________ State: __________ Zipcode: __________

Phone ( ) - __________________________ e-mail: __________________________
Complete this form and send to the synod office for distribution.

**Bishop's signature**

**Bishop**

**Date**

**Synod**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. **Personal Information**

   **Name:**
   **Address:**
   **City:**
   **State**
   **Zipcode**
   **Home Phone:**
   **Work Phone:**
   **Preferred Contact:**
   **Preferred Contact e-mail address:**

   **Synod:**

   **Date of**

2a. **Education**

   - **College:**
     - **Institution, Location**
     - **Degree / Major**
     - **From - Date**
     - **To - Date**
   - **Seminary:**
   - **Post Grad.:**

2b. **Recent Continuing Education**

   (from the past five years.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Title</th>
<th>Institution / Place, Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
c. Describe your commitment to Continuing Education and life-long learning.

---

d. Language proficiencies, both written and spoken.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Skill level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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3. Vocational History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company/Title</th>
<th>Location (City, State)</th>
<th>From - Date</th>
<th>To - Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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4. Describe your church or community volunteer involvement.

---

5. What are your hopes for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?
6. Core convictions. (This I believe about life, theology, and sense of call.)

7. Please describe how you view your ministry in each of the following areas. Comment on your practices. (From the Rite of Installation.)

   a. Study of Scripture and Use of the Means of Grace.

   b. Faithful service. (I serve faithfully by...)

   c. Holy living. (I live out my faith in this way... )
### 8. Ministry Priorities and Skills

Please rate the level of your priorities and skills in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Ministry Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Worship Leadership</td>
<td>Plan and conduct worship services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 =High</td>
<td>5 =High</td>
<td>Social Ministry</td>
<td>Enable persons to become aware of community needs and participate in action and advocacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Children's Ministry</td>
<td>Teach and relate to preschool and elementary age children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ministry to Youth and Young Adults</td>
<td>Teach, work and relate well with high school and college age persons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching Adults</td>
<td>Teach and lead adults in faith development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Oversee the affairs of the organization and work of staff, committees, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community Work</td>
<td>Represent the church and motivate persons to cooperate in community activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecumenical Work</td>
<td>Stimulate cooperation in local inter-church programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Inspire and motivate persons in developing and using individual and group resources in the service of the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>Reach out with the Good News of Jesus the Christ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visitation</td>
<td>Support and nurture persons by visiting with them in their homes and places of employment.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preaching</td>
<td>Proclaim law and gospel as it applies to the lives of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ministering in Crisis</td>
<td>Support persons in the midst of crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Assist persons facing problems or decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant in the Larger Church</td>
<td>Provide leadership to programs of the church in the synod and the ELCA.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Management</td>
<td>Work with accounts, figures and budgets.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-personal Climate</td>
<td>Exhibit and inspire a spirit of community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit and Equip</td>
<td>Enlist, equip and motivate leaders to carry out the work of the organization.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpreter of Theology</td>
<td>Communicate a comprehensive understanding of the Bible and Christian theology from a Lutheran perspective.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovator</td>
<td>Envision and implement new approaches, activities and projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilizing Conflict</td>
<td>Analyze and utilize conflict situations to strengthen community life.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>Map out objectives, plan overall organization strategy, and design programs.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Leadership</td>
<td>Work mutually with volunteers and colleagues in a staff situation.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life / Self Care</td>
<td>Cultivate home and personal life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Habits</td>
<td>Follow a regular schedule of reading and studying.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Discipline</td>
<td>Maintain a disciplined life of prayer and personal devotion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small groups</td>
<td>Plan, cultivate and support small group ministry.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Creatively relate to youth to teach the faith and inspire commitment.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational / Redevelopment</td>
<td>Lead a declining congregation into hope and new life.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical and Artistic</td>
<td>Enjoy and use music and the arts to invite and enhance worship.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. List and describe your four best leadership skills from the list in question # 8.

1. An example of this ability is:

2. An example of this ability is:

3. An example of this ability is:

4. An example of this ability is:

10. Describe how persons and events shaped your approach to parish ministry.
11. Describe your experience as part of a team. Also comment on your involvement with collegial groups. (For example: ministerial, cluster, conference, synod, intra-congregational staff or member team.)

12. Describe your immediate family.

13. Describe your approach toward self-care. (For example: prayer and study, Bible study, support groups, spiritual direction, recreational activities, family life or travel.)

14. Describe your personal stewardship.
15. Other needs, concerns, et cetera.

**References:** (Name, relationship, mailing address, telephone; include two lay persons.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Address:</th>
<th>City:</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Zipcode</th>
<th>Phone:</th>
<th>e-mail:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>City:</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Zipcode</td>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td>e-mail:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Bishop Name:</td>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>City:</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Zipcode</td>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td>e-mail:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Pastor Name:</td>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>City:</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Zipcode</td>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td>e-mail:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

☐ I am willing to provide references from within my current congregation as requested.
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Availability for Call

ORDAINED MINISTER

As an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, you are called to fulfill the office of pastoral ministry by exercising the following, as stated in the Letter of Call.

Please give examples of your work or experience in each of the following areas:

a. Preach and teach the Word of God

b. Administer Holy Baptism and Holy Communion

c. Lead in worship

d. Proclaim the forgiveness of sin

e. Provide pastoral care

First and last name: ____________________________

Ordained
f. Speak for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed

h. Impart knowledge of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its wider ministry

i. Endeavor to increase support given by a congregation to the work of the whole church

j. Equip a congregation for witness and service

k. Guide a congregation in proclaiming God’s love through word and deed
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Personnel Information for Synod Bishops

This form is not to be distributed to call committees (depending upon synod practice).
Complete this form - preferably typed - and send to your synod office.

Date submitted __________________________

Name ___________________________ Region ______ Synod _______

Address ___________________________

street ____________________________ city __ state __ ZIP __________

Telephone ___________________________

day ______ evening ______

Date of Birth ________________________

E-mail _____________________________

Roster:  □ Ordained Minister  □ Associate in Ministry

□ Diaconal Minister  □ Deaconess

Roster Status:  □ Active  □ On leave  □ Retired

Social Security Number ___________________________

Describe the reason you are presently available for call.

........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................

Your readiness to move is:  □ critical/urgent  □ desirable  □ open

I request that this form be distributed to the following synods:
(List the synods to which this form will be sent for consideration.)

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Describe the ministry setting (be as specific as necessary) that would call forth your best gifts, and for which you are ready to recommend yourself.  
(For example: urban, suburban, rural or small town location; if non-parish position list type of agency or organization; title of position; ministry focus.)

My involvement in synodical and churchwide service has been:  
(Discuss service you have provided to God’s people at the conference level, synod, or churchwide expressions.)

My understanding of my call to build up collegiality and examples of my efforts are:  
(Describe ways you have supported others in ministry such as pericope or support groups or involvement with conference or church-related agencies or organizations.)

Additionally, what significant factors will affect your consideration for a new call? Are there any limitations? (For example: full or part-time, salary, housing, family needs, etc.)

Beginning date of service in most recent call: ____________________.
Statistics and faithfulness are not automatically related, but facts assist in examining a ministry. For those whose most recent call is not to a congregation, skip this section and the question that follows.

**Congregation I.D.**  
(See ELCA Yearbook or contact synod office)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Now</th>
<th>3 years ago</th>
<th>5 years ago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baptized Membership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Worship Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church School Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Operating Expenses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synod and ELCA Mission Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Mission Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Mortgage Payment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What factors have influenced any changes as indicated?  
*(For example: discuss changes in demographics, challenges or conflicts, mergers, staff additions, or endowments.)*

What would be helpful to you from the bishop’s office in the call process?  
*(For example: periodic updates, feedback on interviews, or face-to-face meetings with synod staff.)*

Current compensation and professional expense reimbursement.

a. Amount of base salary $__________ Year: ____________

b. Housing or equity allowance $__________ Parsonage: ☐ Yes ☐ No

c. Social Security offset $__________

Continuing education allowance $__________

Other allowances: $__________

Defined compensation (total of a, b, and c above): $__________
Please explain other relevant financial considerations. (For example: child support, extraordinary medical expense, spouse’s needs for employment.)

Initial defined compensation you would prefer to receive in your next call:

Minimum: $ _______________ Desired: $ _______________

Have you ever been charged with or convicted of the commission of a felony? If yes, please explain.

☐ Yes  ☐ No

Have you ever been accused of or disciplined for sexual misconduct, child or spousal abuse, or financial improprieties? If yes, please explain.

☐ Yes  ☐ No

Are you personally committed to living in accord with Vision and Expectations (ELCA) for rostered persons in the ELCA? If no, please explain.

☐ Yes  ☐ No

Is there additional information that would assist a bishop in recommending you?
(Use this space to describe any other factors not covered to discuss your life and call.)
APPENDIX B

LETTER REQUESTING BISHOP’S NOMINATION

August 5, 2000

Dear Bishop (Rimbo, Lohrmann, Miller, Stuck, Halloway, Olson)

Grace to you and peace in this season of Pentecost as the Holy Spirit continues to call out a chosen people into the light of God's new day.

I am pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree through Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Findlay, Ohio. My purpose in this letter is to request your assistance in identifying the research sample for my final project. The study I am conducting addresses the question:

_How does an ELCA pastoral candidate make a good, wise, and spirit-led response to a Letter of Call?_

My research proposal includes an interview with one pastor from each synod in Region 6. The criteria for selecting the persons to be interviewed are pastors who have:

a) at least 10 years' experience in serving congregations;

b) accepted a call within the last 2 years; and

c) participated faithfully and competently, in the estimation of the synod bishop, in the call process.

If you, or a member of your staff who works with pastors in the call process, would identify 3 pastors in your synod who meet the criteria for the research sample, you may use the enclosed suggestion form and self-addressed envelope to return your suggestions to me by August 31, 2000.

I am requesting 3 names from each bishop in our region to assure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. In addition, by providing 3 names, there will be alternate respondents if any of those suggested choose not to participate in the study.

Please note, I am also enclosing a copy of a letter of explanation for this study, signed by those to whom I am accountable in conducting my research.

Finally, I would value your prayers for me and for this study in seeking the light of the Holy Spirit's wisdom and guidance, that we may be strengthened as the church, a chosen people, called out to live in God's new day. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely, in Christ's service,

Steven B. Schick
Doctor of Ministry Candidate
Bishop's Nomination

I suggest the following for consideration in the research sample as pastors who have:

a) at least 10 years' experience in serving congregations;
b) accepted a call within the last 2 years; and
c) have participated faithfully and competently, in my estimation, in the call process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Congregation</th>
<th>City, State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
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</table>

signed: ____________________________

Bishop or Assistant to the Bishop of:

______________________________ Synod
LETTER OF EXPLANATION

July 1, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter affirms that Steven B. Schick is conducting research for a Doctor of Ministry Project through Winebrenner Theological Seminary, Findlay, Ohio with my knowledge and approval.

The research project is to investigate how an ELCA pastor responds to a Letter of Call. Specific areas of inquiry include: how the pastor uses spiritual disciplines; how the pastor identifies and interprets information and insights gathered in the Call Process; how the pastor's background, skills and other resources are employed in reaching a decision, and what help and resources are provided by various expressions of the wider church.

All respondents' participation in this project is voluntary. Respondents are assured of anonymity and confidentiality in the presentation of the final report. Respondents will have the opportunity to verify statements when the research is in draft form. Respondents who wish, will receive a copy of the final report.

Dr. Leslie L. Lightner,
Director, Doctor of Ministry, Winebrenner Theological Seminary

Rev. Robert A. Rimbo,
Bishop, SE Michigan Synod, ELCA

Ms. Marilyn M. Smith,
Coordinator, Region VI, ELCA
LETTER TO RESPONDENTS

November 27, 2000

Dear Pastor,

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Findlay, Ohio. My purpose in this letter is to request your assistance in conducting research for my final project. The study I am conducting addresses the question:

How does an ELCA pastoral candidate make a good, wise, and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call?

I asked each bishop of region 6 to identify several pastors I might interview and your name was among those suggested. I selected you at random from these suggestions to assure the anonymity and confidentiality of each respondent.

I would like to schedule a two hour interview with you to discuss your insights into making a decision in responding to a Letter of Call. I will contact you by telephone December 7 or 8, to see if you would be willing to participate as a respondent in this study. If so, we can schedule a time to meet at your convenience.

The topics I want to discuss during our interview include:

a. a summary of your experience with the call process;
b. considerations you believe to be most important in the call process;
c. information, insights and impressions you find helpful;
d. resources from your background and experience you use in making a decision;
e. how you proceed to a decision when you receive a call;
f. what might be included in the process to assist you in making a decision.

I am enclosing a copy of my letter of explanation for this study, signed by those to whom I am accountable in conducting my research.

Finally, I would value your prayers for me and for this study in seeking the Holy Spirit's wisdom and guidance, that we may be strengthened as the church, a chosen people, called live in God's new day. Thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to talking with you by telephone next week.

Sincerely, in Christ's service,

Steven B. Schick, Doctor of Ministry Candidate
1374 Crestwood Lane, Howell, Michigan 48843
phone: 517-546-3381
APPENDIX C

DEPARTMENT OF SYNODICAL RELATIONS QUESTIONNAIRE
Good, Wise and Spirit-Led
A Questionnaire for ELCA Deployed Staff
(Division for Ministry/Department for Synodical Relations)

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how an ELCA pastoral candidate makes a good, wise and Spirit-led response to a Letter of Call.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify types of help available to a pastoral candidate for equipping such a decision.

1. In which region do you serve? (circle one) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. When did you begin serving as deployed staff? __________________________ month __________________________ year

3. What help is available to assist pastoral candidates in making a decision in response to a Letter of Call?

   NOTE: This may be available prior to or during the candidates participation in the call process. The help may be available in print, video or other media; it may be presented to individuals or groups, through seminars, workshops or consultations; it may involve mobility, interviewing, completing mobility forms, reading congregational profiles, or other aspect of the call process.

   a. Please list types of help available to candidates in any synod of your region.

   □

   □

   □

   □

   b. Please mark an "X" in the □ beside any of the above which is regularly provided to candidates in your region.

4. Are there any types of help being considered for assisting candidates in any synod of your region?

   a. Please list types of help under consideration.

   □

   □

   □

   □

   b. Please mark an "X" in the □ beside any item above for which a plan of implementation has been developed.
5. In your opinion, what help (persons, disciplines, resources, materials, programs) are most useful for equipping a candidate to make a good, wise and spirit-led decision in responding to a Letter of Call?


6. Are there persons in your region who, in your opinion, have important insights into the subject of this study? If so, please list their name, location and phone or e-mail so that I may contact them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>City, State</th>
<th>Phone or e-mail</th>
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<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>


7. Do you have any insights, observations, suggestions or reflections on the subject of this study you would like to share with me? If so, please write them here or contact me at the address, phone number or e-mail below.

Thank You.

Steven B. Schick
1374 Crestwood Lane
Howell, MI 48843

telephone: 517.546.3381
e-mail: TLC@gfn.org
WORKS CITED


203


n.d. Candidacy process in the ELCA. Chicago, IL: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.


Eickmann, Lori. 2000. Do we have enough pastors? The Lutheran, June, 42-5.


Foss, Michael W. 2000. A renewed call to discipleship. Changing Church Perspectives, July-September, pages 1, 4, 8.


____. 1999. *Relational agreement among synodical bishops of the ELCA.* Chicago, IL: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.


____. 2001. Transcript: Research interview V. Howell, MI.

____. 2001. Transcript: Research interview W. Howell, MI.

____. 2001. Transcript: Research interview X. Howell, MI.


