

What Do You Do When There Isn't A Pastor Around?

Many of us have experienced it. I did, when I was diagnosed with a kidney stone at 1 AM one Sunday morning. Drugged and heading home around 3 AM, I remember the doctor's sage advice: "You better let someone else do the service for you this morning." With no back up pastor, what do you do? That's a question that gets asked in several situations. Someone asked it of the ACELC, in fact, and so we've put together a response. What do you do when there is no called and ordained servant of the Word available, i.e., in the case of an emergency, or when the pastor is on vacation or otherwise unable to fulfill his duties, or in situations of a pastoral vacancy and no called and ordained pastor is available for the conduct of services? We respectfully submit the following as a fraternal attempt to provide some guidance. Feel free to let us know what you think.

1. In accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we hold that there is one divinely instituted and mandated pastoral office in the Church and that this office is not occupied by every member of the congregation but by those men well prepared for it and properly called and ordained. Therefore, any public proclamation of God's Word in worship should and ought to be done only by such pastors. We affirm the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and encourage Christians to practice this priesthood in their homes and vocations, but such is not to be confused with the office of pastor in the Church. We assert that "no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call." (Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 14:23; Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 4:1; I Timothy 3:1-5; Titus 1:4-5; I Peter 5:1-3) (AC XIV; AP XIII, 11-13; AP XVIII, 13-14; TR 60, 74)
2. We also acknowledge that in many smaller congregations and in some areas of our Synod pastors who are properly called and ordained may not be readily available at the time of a vacation, emergency, or when a congregation experiences a pastoral vacancy. In such cases, must a congregation remain without the Lord's Word and Sacraments? If so, for how long? If not, how may these be provided, if a properly called and ordained pastor is not available?
3. We grant that, as our Lutheran Confessions state, "in an emergency even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another" (Smalcald Articles, *Power and Primacy of the Pope*, paragraph 67), and so the absence of a called and ordained pastor should never require leaving any in jeopardy of death without the benefit of Holy Baptism, Absolution or the comfort of the Gospel. However, such instances of bona-fide emergencies are so rare as to hardly qualify for inclusion in this discussion, and St. Augustine's example, as cited in the above article, was limited to two Christians adrift in an open and unfriendly sea, an extreme case, to say the least. We cite the above because the Church has never denied that the Lord's saving Gifts must be administered in such emergencies, even by laymen. However, the typical pastoral vacancy, illness or vacation does not pose such an extreme threat to the congregation's well-being.
4. Considering the climate of confusion in our Synod regarding the Office of the Ministry and its increasingly regular and non-emergency performance by those who are not called and ordained, we urge great care to avoid adding to the confusion. In a pastor's absence, the laity ought not be denied the comfort of God's Word. However, this need not be provided at the expense of confusing the right all Christians have to handle God's Word with the proper exercising of the Pastoral Office in providing Word and Sacrament ministry to the congregation.
5. In order to avoid confusion, we suggest that if a called and ordained pastor is not able to be secured in the absence of the pastor, it may be necessary that the congregation temporarily have benefit of God's Word through an ordained pastor, retired or on candidate status, even

though he does not have a call. We trust that such men, whenever possible, will prefer and agree that they should be both called and ordained. As a final, though less than ideal option, it may be necessary for the congregation to have benefit of God's Word through a layman or laymen chosen from among the men of the congregation. They may be known commonly as "lay elders" and be normally entrusted with the support and encouragement of regular catechesis and the conduct of services by the pastor. In the pastor's absence, they do not assume the role of "pastor-for-the-day" but serve as they do their own households, leading the family in confessing the Faith according to the Small Catechism, in prayer, singing, hearing and meditating upon God's Word.

The following may be printed in the bulletin or read at the start of the service for clarification:

We believe that God has established the Office of the Ministry for the sake of serving His people with the Gospel. In the absence of our pastor today, laymen do not take upon themselves the God-ordained responsibility of the Holy Ministry. Instead, our congregation's lay elders lead the family of believers in prayer in much the same way every father leads his household in the home. The pulpit is not used today and our lay elders wear normal attire since they are not assuming the role of, nor assisting the pastor in the Divine Service. They lead the family from the lectern in prayer, recitation of the Small Catechism, and the devout hearing and meditation upon God's Word using material prepared in advance by our Pastor.

6. The Sacrament of the Altar will not be celebrated in the pastor's absence nor will absolution be pronounced. "Lay elders" may use an order of prayer and devotion in which the congregation recites or prays the Small Catechism, as provided for by the LSB Service of Prayer and Preaching, though we regret the use of "Preaching" in that title, as it may lead to confusion.
7. The above suggestions are not ideal, but they may be the best we can manage when the pastor is absent. For vacancy situations, similar measures may also be necessary, but should be limited in duration, as the congregation will need to be served the Sacrament by a called and ordained servant of the Word as quickly as possible.
8. A congregation in which the Office of the Ministry has been vacated will avoid so-called interim ministries or temporary calls and instead look to God in faith to provide a faithful pastor to care for the flock as soon as He wills, through the processes established by the congregation.
9. With respect to pastoral vacancies, we agree that it is preferable that the man who serves a congregation be not only ordained but also called, in keeping with AC XIV.
10. Finally, we recognize that this is not an exhaustive treatment of all issues related to this topic, but hope it serves as a guideline in dealing with real-life needs in the congregation.

Submitted by the Members of the ACELC