

The Role of Retired Clergy in Lutheran Church–Canada

Commission on Theology and Church Relations
Lutheran Church–Canada

The following document, produced as advice to the Council of Presidents, is hereby offered with their consent to the whole church in the hope that it might answer the heartfelt concerns held by some retired pastors concerning their ongoing ministry. The structural changes suggested in the conclusion do not necessarily reflect the opinion or intention of the COP itself.

Concerns

1. According to CA XIV, “Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call.” Since retired clergy normally do not have a call to serve a specific congregation, the question has been raised as to the right of such clergy to continue to preach and administer the sacraments. While some retired clergy have been named “Pastor Emeritus” of particular congregations, it is not always clear just what that status implies. Is it simply an honorary designation, recognizing the work of a faithful servant of the Lord, or does it have the nature of a call, carrying with it the continuing authority of the office of the ministry?
2. Should all retired clergy who wish to continue to serve the Lord have a specific appointment/call to a local congregation? Must a pastor emeritus receive a permanent Diploma of Vocation if he is to carry out pastoral functions in a congregation? Or are they free to perform the functions of the office wherever they please?
3. The Lutheran Church–Canada Handbook Bylaw 5.45 is very brief: “A pastor or deacon who has retired after reaching the age of 55 or for reasons of total and permanent disability shall be eligible for retention on the roster as emeritus. Any unusual case shall be decided by the Council of Presidents.” How is this status to be granted? Is it just an automatic designation, or does a retiree apply for it? And what rights, privileges or responsibilities does it confer? What are the requirements for remaining on the roster in good standing? The Council of Presidents does not appear to have a policy on this matter.
4. In light of the above, it would seem wise that the Synod provide some clarification, for the sake of unity of practice on the part of both retired clergy and congregations.

Observations

1. In both LCMS and LCC it has been the common practice for retired pastors to preach and administer the sacraments as rostered members of the Synod. Our practice has been that emeriti serve vacancies, and are eligible to serve as Circuit Counsellors (4.11). There have also been instances in LCMS where an emeritus became District President, and there have been at least two occasions when emeriti have held office as Synodical vice-president while retaining their emeritus status. Emeriti are also eligible for Calls. By inference, then, one can conclude that it has been the understanding among us that emeriti continue to hold the office of the ministry.
2. That inference is also evidenced from the following example. In Ontario, where a provincial licence is required to perform marriages, retired pastors' licences were terminated by the provincial ministry a few years ago. The East District succeeded in having that decision reversed for its clergy on the grounds that retired LCC pastors are authorized to perform the usual functions of the office of the ministry, and thus should be permitted to continue to hold a licence to perform marriages.

Theological Rationale

Some retired pastors have expressed the concern: “Do I have a call?” or “Am I *rite vocatus*?” The following theo-logic compels one to answer “yes” to these questions.

1. Although in common practice we use the term “call” to refer to the action of the local congregation in choosing its pastor, this is a derived sense of the term. In biblical usage, continued in the Book of Concord, the “call” is primarily a reference to the action of God Himself. Martin Chemnitz writes, “speaking properly and on the basis of Scripture, the right to call and to send laborers into the harvest belongs to Him who is the Lord of the harvest, and it is good to note in Scripture that the right and administration of this call are ascribed expressly to the individual persons of the Trinity” (*Enchiridion*, p. 30).
2. In harmony with scriptural language, 16th century Lutheranism spoke of the call primarily as God’s action by which He places a man into the ministry, and generally used other language for the locatedness of that call (e.g. election, sending, placing). Thus, the call is “from God into the ministry”. “There is no legitimate or ordinary call to the ministry except from God, and it is twofold: either without means or through means” (Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, p. 30).
3. Only in the case of the prophets and apostles is this call from God “immediate” (without human mediation). Pastors receive their calls

“through the church” (ministers and laity acting together). “For a mediate call is as much from God as an immediate one, but they differ in the manner of the call” (Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, p. 31). The locatedness of the ministry is a vital component of the call, but does not establish its divine legitimacy.

4. The process of a mediate call into the ministry is described by 16th-century Lutheran writers as involving:
 - proposal of a candidate by churches that are capable of testifying to his suitability;
 - theological training by called theologians;
 - examination of competency by the church as a whole;
 - election (*electio* means “choosing”), sending, or designation of a place of service;
 - the rite of ordination by which Christ’s call is publicly attested and the office of the ministry conferred.

It is to this process that Melanchthon refers with the use of the traditional phrase *rite vocatus* “a rightly ordered call” or “a call conferred by rite” (CA XIV). Apology XIV confirms that both Melanchthon and his Roman opponents understood this as a reference to “canonical ordination” (though Melanchthon is not bound absolutely to the use of bishops or the use of a specific rite).

5. Thus, *rite vocatus* “rightly called” is not to be understood as a reference to the “call” in the narrow sense (one or more appointments to specific congregations or church entities). Rather, it is a reference to the call of Christ through the whole church into the office of the ministry. The pastor who by constraint of health or age chooses to retire from full-time ministry, and yet does not revoke that office, is therefore still to be regarded as *rite vocatus*.
6. The phrase which appears in our traditional formula of absolution, “I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word”, should be understood similarly. The term “call” in this context refers to the call into the office of the ministry, not the call to one specific location. As the absolution goes on to explain, the pastor absolves the flock not as a representative of the church through which he was called, but “in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ”. It is entirely appropriate for the retired pastor to continue to use this phrase.

Conclusions

1. Ordination is the final part of the process by which a candidate is made *rite vocatus* “rightly called”, and places him into the office of the ministry. It is assumed that ordination confers the office of the ministry for life,

and that the office is retained until specifically withdrawn, removed, or renounced.

2. Since emeriti continue on the roster of the synod, they are under the supervision of the District President. At the local level, they remain part of the circuit clergy and are under the care of the circuit counsellor.
3. When a pastor emeritus preaches and/or administers the Sacraments at the invitation of a called pastor or a congregation while a pastor is on holiday or sick, for example, it is understood that he is acting on behalf of the called pastor and is authorized to exercise the office of the keys on the particular day in that particular place.
4. In the case of emeriti serving vacancies, it would be wise, even necessary, that some kind of official action on the part of the vacant congregation should be taken. That would include at the very least a formal resolution of appointment by the congregation and a letter stating that fact, preferably reflecting the language of the Diploma of Vocation to the effect that “we entrust our vacancy pastor with all the responsibilities of the pastoral office” and stating the congregation’s acceptance of him as pastor and their obligations of support. (The letter would also delineate such things as starting date, remuneration, specific expectations.) While a formal Diploma of Vocation is not issued, such a letter makes clear that the pastor is called to carry out ministry in that place and for such a time as required. No formal installation would be required.
5. Since the ministry always has a location and a connection to the people of God in a particular place, emeriti must hold membership in and be under the pastoral care of a congregation of Lutheran Church–Canada and its called pastor. They are not authorized to preach and carry out the functions of the office of the ministry wherever they please. This means, to offer one example, that without the specific authorization of a congregation or other entity of the Synod, they would not launch a new mission or some other kind of “ministry”.
6. Distinct from the synodically rostered status of “pastor emeritus” is the position of Pastor Emeritus in the local congregation. It has been a custom for congregations to name their retired former pastor “Pastor Emeritus”, and the continuation of that custom is to be commended. Congregations, however, should clearly define what is meant by that designation. Is it only an honorary title, or do duties, rights and responsibilities go with it? If the latter, it should be spelled out and agreed upon between the two parties. It is not necessary for the pastor emeritus to receive a permanent Diploma of Vocation to assist the called pastor in duties such as celebrating the sacrament for the sick and shut-ins, preaching and presiding at the Divine Service occasionally, teaching a Bible class, etc., but it is recommended that the appointment clearly authorize such duties.

7. Occasionally a pastor emeritus is requested to assist a neighbouring congregation with specific duties on a more or less continuing basis, e.g., being responsible for shut-in ministry. In such a case, there should be a document of appointment.
8. Some structural/administrative recommendations:
 - a. Bylaw 5.45 should be rewritten in such a way as to clarify the status, including attention to:
 - i. how the retiree placed on emeritus status on the roster. (The current bylaw says that a retiree “shall be eligible for retention on the roster as emeritus”. Does the retiree request such status? Or is it automatically given?)
 - ii. the requirement for the individual to hold membership in a Lutheran Church–Canada congregation.
 - iii. what are the criteria for retaining that status. (Note that 5.47 includes such a paragraph regarding candidate status.)
 - b. Article XI of the LCC constitution does not explicitly include pastors emeriti in the list of advisory members of the synod, unless they are included under “2. Pastors not in charge of congregations”. We recommend that the CCMS be asked to look at this.
 - c. If an emeritus serves as vacancy pastor of a congregation, it is understood that he does not return to the active roster of the synod. But may he be granted voting rights at convention during the time of his vacancy service? This, too, should be given attention.
 - d. An emeritus could return to active status upon accepting a call, and later return to emeritus.
 - e. It is recommended that the Council of Presidents prepare several documents to implement the above recommendation:
 - i. A form of application for emeritus status
 - ii. A sample letter of appointment for congregations to use in naming a Pastor Emeritus.
9. It is interesting to note that the Lutheran Church in Australia has the practice of extending calls by the Synod or District to those retired pastors who desire emeritus status.