

Background and Reflections on the Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Commissioned by the Joint Anglican-Lutheran Commission

At its fifteenth biennial Convention, held in July 2015, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) authorized a highly circumscribed policy to regulate the licensing of lay members to preside at local celebrations of holy communion in situations where no provision of ordained ministry is possible. The new provision is known as the Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries.¹

This notion is foreign to mainstream Anglican tradition and culture, and may give rise to discomfort and incomprehension on the part of some in our church. The purpose of this brief is to explain the context, background, and rationale of the policy, and its place in Lutheran sacramental theology, in order to help Anglicans understand where it is coming from. It will also provide examples of how similar scenarios have unfolded in two other Anglican-Lutheran full communion contexts, in an effort to demonstrate what this development means—and does not mean—for our full communion relationship in Canada.

The policy

The new ELCIC policy affirms that the normal means by which word and sacrament ministry is provided in congregations is through a called and ordained pastor. In situations where regular access to a pastor is not available, a variety of other options for supplying an ordained minister must first be explored. Only in those cases where all other options for the provision of sacramental ministry have been exhausted would lay presidency be considered.

In such a case the synodical bishop would consult with the congregation, the synod council, and the other ELCIC bishops. The local bishop could then license lay leaders (preferably more than one) to preside at the proclamation of the word and the eucharist within the community on a strictly limited basis. Candidates would be licensed for one year (renewable), for ministry only within their own community, under the oversight of an ordained pastor, and with training both prior to and after licensing. These ministers would be clearly distinguished from ordained pastors in their public appearance: they would not wear the vestments nor use the title of a pastor.

The process

The process leading to this decision began in 2012 with a request in from the ELCIC's Saskatchewan Synod that the church consider the question of lay presidency in underserved areas. The matter was referred to the denomination's Faith, Order, and Doctrine Committee (FOD), a body which includes a representative of the Anglican Church of Canada. This was FOD's exclusive task from the fall of 2012 until early 2015.

¹ The full text of the policy is included as an appendix.

The committee began this work by soliciting theological responses from the church's bishops, seminaries, and clergy scholars, as well as input from their Anglican full communion partner. Approximately 30 submissions were received and reviewed. Historical documents bearing on the issue, particularly in the context of Anglican-Lutheran relations, were also reviewed.

In a second round of consultations, a four-week study session on Lutheran understandings of ministry and sacramental theology was prepared and all ELCIC congregations were encouraged to participate. A total of 185 responses from congregations and individuals were received and reviewed by the committee.

Taking these responses into account, FOD drafted a proposed policy in February 2015, which it submitted to the ELCIC's National Church Council (NCC). At its meeting the following month, the NCC recommended the policy's adoption (with a minor change in wording) by the ELCIC's National Convention, which approved the measure in July.

Consultation with the Anglican Church of Canada has taken place at every stage in this process through the active involvement of an Anglican representative on FOD, who provided reports on these discussions through Faith, Worship, and Ministry. The Joint Anglican-Lutheran Commission and the House of Bishops were also informed of the ongoing discussions.

Background and rationale

This policy emerges from a problem that is becoming acute in some regions of the country served by the ELCIC: the difficulty in providing clergy on a weekly basis to rural and isolated communities. It is a challenge equally familiar to parts of the Anglican Church of Canada.

This problem is the result of the convergence of two trends in recent decades. On the one hand, the increased appreciation of the eucharist as the central act of worship of the gathered community means that most Lutheran congregations, like most Anglican congregations, expect a weekly celebration of the eucharist. On the other hand, attendance, financial resources, and numbers of vocations have continued to shrink in both our churches—exacerbated in some localities by general rural decline—leaving the churches less equipped to meet the increased demand for ordained clergy who can provide regular eucharistic worship. It is a problem Anglicans recognize and share. The challenge is especially acute in western Canada, the ELCIC's demographic centre of gravity, where churches are often separated by greater geographical distance.

It is perhaps worth noting that when lay presidency has been proposed in the Anglican Communion, other reasons for its necessity are sometimes advanced: the relative devaluing of the eucharist *vis-à-vis* the ministry of the word, the desire to assert symbolically the priesthood of all believers, or even the attempt to avoid the ordination of women.² These arguments and motives play no role in the ELCIC discussion; this is solely a matter of regular provision of the eucharist to isolated congregations.

² See, for example, arguments advanced in the Diocese of Sydney, or publications such as Andrew Atherstone's *Lay Presidency: An Anglican Option?* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2011).

The Faith, Order, and Doctrine Committee considered various approaches to this dilemma:

- **The substitution of a service of the word for a celebration of the eucharist:** This was held to be counter to the principle of upholding the eucharist as the main weekly gathering of the community. This principle was one of the intentions of Luther's liturgical reform (as it was for the English Reformation), but it has only come close to full realization with the liturgical reforms of the past 50 years. The principle is too important to roll it back now for purely practical considerations.
- **Communion from the reserved sacrament:** This is a theological non-starter in the Lutheran tradition, which would see it as an improper objectification of the sacrament by isolating the act of receiving from the whole event of the eucharist as the word proclaimed and celebrated in the community.
- **Ordination of locally called and licensed clergy:** The ELCIC does have an alternate stream for ordination, somewhat analogous to the locally called priesthood as practiced in the Anglican Church of Canada. However, Lutheran tradition places a high value on the education and formation of the clergy, and is unwilling to compromise on that principle. As a result, the existing alternate stream to ordination is sufficiently demanding in terms of educational requirements such that it has found only a limited number of candidates. It is therefore not a practical means to address the problem.
- **Combining parishes under the care of a single pastor, or using pastors from neighbouring parishes, or using retired pastors:** All of these are preferred options. However, they are not possible in all situations. As well, there is some concern about overextending pastors, or reducing them to mere sacramental providers, driving long distances to serve numerous congregations.
- **Partnering rural with urban congregations:** This may be effective in some local situations, where the rural congregations are not too distant, and where the urban congregations have extra clergy to spare on a Sunday.
- **Partnering with local Anglican (or United or Presbyterian) congregations for sacramental provision:** Again, this is a preferred option that works in some places. In some situations, however, it is not a possibility.

The ELCIC remains committed to providing eucharistic ministry to its congregations *whenever possible* by conventional, cooperative means—cooperation between neighbouring Lutheran congregations or with Anglican parishes. Only in the small number of isolated situations where these options have been explored and found impractical would the bishop proceed to licence qualified lay people to preside at the eucharist. This permission would be local, temporary, and exceptional, given only as long as the need cannot be met in other ways.

Because permission to provide this kind of lay-led sacramental ministry is granted only on an annual basis, the congregation's situation will be reviewed each year to see if one of the more conventional options for the provision of eucharistic ministry might have become available, thus eliminating the need for the Authorized Lay Ministries.

Theological rationale

The theological basis for this practice is Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, according to which the various functions of ministry, including the sacramental, have been conferred by Christ not on a particular clerical caste, but on the church as a whole.³ In this tradition, all Christians are *theoretically* capable of administering the sacraments. However, this power is given not to individual Christians, but to the church as a whole, so that it may be exercised only by the appointment of the proper church authorities.

This has led, both in Luther's own practice and in that of the subsequent Lutheran tradition, to a conservative practice of limiting sacramental functions only to ordained clergy. There are, however, exceptions. Lay presidency has been practiced in the Norwegian Pietist tradition of Lutheranism, and this custom entered the ELCIC through one of its founding churches, remaining as a marginal tradition in some communities. This historical reality is reflected in the fact that the possibility of lay eucharistic presidency has been enshrined in the ELCIC's *Statement on Sacramental Practices* since 1991: "Persons not ordained may be authorized by the synodical bishop to preside at the Lord's Supper in those situations where an ordained minister is not available for an extended period of time. Such exemptions are allowed for only a specific time, place, and person."⁴ In this sense, then, the Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries is not introducing a new practice, but regularizing and licensing an existing one, and directing it exclusively toward fulfilling a specific need.

How are Anglicans affected?

The Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries reiterates the concern expressed by many members of the ELCIC in the consultation process: that this measure not harm the covenant partnership between our two churches.

Given that the practice is to be permitted only as a temporary and anomalous solution in specific local situations, where no clergy are available, Anglicans are very unlikely to ever encounter a lay-led Lutheran eucharistic celebration. The only situation in which it might occur would be if an Anglican were worshipping at one of the small congregations which have resorted to this practice. In that case, presumably it would be a matter of that Anglican's individual conscience to determine the degree to which they could participate in the liturgy. Anglicans already engage in this kind of individual discernment when they are present at the celebrations of holy communion in churches with which we are not in full communion but which nevertheless offer eucharistic hospitality.

Nonetheless, some Anglicans will be challenged by the theology of ministry and of the sacraments that permits this policy. It may seem difficult to reconcile with an Anglican understanding of the relationship between ordination and eucharist, particularly in its more Anglo-Catholic articulations. These are real differences. Normally these differences are scarcely

³ See especially Luther's "Letter to the Bohemian Christians, Concerning the Ministry of the Church," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II, eds. J.J. Pelikan, H.C. Oswald and H.T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1958), 3-44.

⁴ The full statement is available at <https://elcic.ca/What-We-Believe/Sacraments/Sacramental-Policy.cfm>.

noticed, as Anglican and Lutheran ordained ministry look so similar in practice. We are dealing here with one peripheral situation in which our theological differences come to the fore.

It is worth noting that Canada is not the only place where the issue of lay eucharistic presidency is present in an Anglican-Lutheran full communion context. The Church of Norway (out of which emerged the Norwegian Pietist tradition noted above) still authorizes a form of lay presidency under similar circumstances as those envisioned by the ELCIC. This practice long predates the Church of Norway's 1992 entry into the Porvoo Communion of churches, in which 15 northern European Anglican and Lutheran Churches—including the Church of England—are in full communion. This reality has had no discernibly negative effect on that full communion relationship.

In the United States, a similarly restricted form of lay presidency was authorized in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1993, and was still in place when it came into full communion with the Episcopal Church in 2001. At the request of the Episcopal Church's 77th General Convention in 2012, the Lutheran-Episcopal Coordinating Committee (the American counterpart to Canada's Joint Anglican-Lutheran Commission) studied whether the ELCA's continued (but little-used) practice of lay presidency presented an obstacle to the full communion relationship.

The coordinating committee noted that under *Called to Common Mission*, the agreement that brought the two churches into full communion, "provision for exchangeability applies only to ordained ministers of word and sacrament."⁵ The *Waterloo Declaration* expresses a similar understanding of the extent of mutual recognition implied by full communion. There therefore exists no possibility of a Lutheran authorized lay minister serving in an Anglican context (or even in a Lutheran context outside the specific congregation in which they are designated to serve). The report also suggests that Anglicans should bear in mind that it is the high premium Lutherans place on theologically educated clergy that in part makes them more inclined to prefer lay presidency to some form of locally raised priesthood: "It could be suggested that Lutherans might feel as shocked by the inadequacy of requirements for Episcopal licenses to preach as Episcopalians are expressing about Lutheran practices of lay presidency."

The American report concludes not by denying the churches' different sacramental practices this issue highlights, but by asking whether such differences should be church dividing: "Can we not live with our differences, especially if the consequence is to threaten a way of common life in ministry that has begun to reap so many advantages for the gospel? [...] Full communion is not about creating each other in our own image, but in teasing out over time through the enabling of the Holy Spirit those things which can make us all stronger in our sense and capacity for common mission." As with Porvoo, the limited provision for lay eucharistic ministry in the ELCA has not inhibited the full communion relationship with the Anglican partner.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the motivation for the ELCIC's Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries is one that Canadian Anglicans can fully understand, especially those of us with experience of serving the church in rural and northern regions of the country. Perhaps

⁵ The full report of the Lutheran-Episcopal Coordinating Committee can be found at <http://lutheran-episcopal.org/documents/response2014.pdf>.

more than any other factor, it has been our similar practice of liturgical worship—and specifically the centrality of both word and eucharist in our worship—that has allowed our full communion partnership to thrive.

The ELCIC’s Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries is an attempt to address practical difficulties which, in certain very limited circumstances, create obstacles for this common practice of regular word and sacrament ministry. As Anglicans we might prefer to address these difficulties by other means. However, even in this disagreement, let us remember that the intention of the Lutherans’ policy is to uphold that very centrality of eucharistic worship that unites our two churches.

Full communion does not entail structural merger, nor does it mean one church remaking the other in its own image. Rather it is a relationship in which the full communion partners become interdependent while remaining autonomous: “One is not elevated to be the judge of the other, nor can it remain insensitive to the other; neither is each body committed to every secondary feature of the tradition of the other.”⁶ Anglicans can understand this pastoral provision as such a secondary feature of Lutheran tradition and an expression of legitimate diversity of practice. It is in response to a real local pastoral need to which we cannot remain insensitive.

Can we not live with our differences? We have, in fact, been doing so, before the question of lay presidency emerged as a presenting issue. In 2001 the Anglican Church of Canada recognized “the full authenticity of the ordained ministries presently existing within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada” even before the ELCIC restored the laying on of hands in the historic episcopal succession as a visible sign of unity and continuity in apostolic life, mission, and ministry. In 2011 the ELCIC authorized its ordained pastors to preside at the weddings of same-sex couples, a matter on which our church remains in discernment. Our churches also continue to have divergent practices with regard to the administration of confirmation. Yet none of these can be said to have really diminished our relationship as churches in full communion. What unites us is far greater in number and importance than those relatively few things on which we diverge.

The ELCIC’s Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries may represent a matter on which Canadian Anglicans and Lutherans diverge, but not in a way that ought to threaten or diminish the *Waterloo Declaration*’s commitment that our two churches “express, strengthen, and enable our common life, witness, and service to the glory of God and the salvation of the world.”⁷

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Faith, Order, and Doctrine Committee, 2012-2015

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General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada

July 2015

⁶ Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Joint Working Group, Cold Ash, England, 1983, in *Anglican-Lutheran Agreements: Regional and International Agreements, 1972-2002* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004), §26.

⁷ *Called to Full Communion: The Waterloo Declaration*, <http://www.anglican.ca/faith/eir/waterloo>, §7.

APPENDIX A: POLICY REGARDING AUTHORIZED LAY MINISTRIES

*As approved by the 15th biennial Convention of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
July 11, 2015*

The proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments are inseparable and are central to Lutheran worship and church life.

We affirm that the normal means by which Word and Sacrament ministry is provided in congregations is through a called and ordained pastor.

We recognize that, under particular local circumstances, the usual norm of a pastor presiding over Word and Sacrament ministry is not possible. In most of these circumstances congregations can be served by one or more of the following:

- Interim/vice-pastors;
- Multi-point parishes or companion/yoked congregations;
- Wide-area parishes;
- Arrangements with our Anglican full communion partner;
- Assistance from ecumenical partners with whom we have an Ecumenical Shared Ministry protocol (e.g. United and Presbyterian);
- “Circuit riders” or itinerant ministers;
- Calling an individual who has been ordained through the Alternate Route for Admission to the Roster of Ordained Ministers;
- Partnering with other congregations to share their pastor.

In certain, rare circumstances none of these options is workable.

In such cases:

1. The Bishop of the Synod may initiate a conversation with the congregational council about authorized lay ministry and whether it may be appropriate to their context.
2. The Bishop of the Synod would then seek approval of the Synod Council and the Conference of Bishops for authorized lay ministry in this context.
3. The Congregational Council would normally identify more than one candidate to serve in the ministry context. Candidates should have an aptitude for preaching and presiding.
4. The Bishop of the Synod and the Synod Council would approve authorized lay ministers subject to the following:
 - Authorized lay ministers will be appointed for one-year renewable terms;
 - The synod will provide appropriate preparation in Scripture, Lutheran Confessions, preaching, worship and in appropriate boundaries;
 - Authorized lay ministers will work under the supervision of a mentoring pastor appointed by the Bishop of the Synod;
 - The mentoring pastor will provide on-going support and review;
 - Authorized lay ministers will normally be installed by the Dean;
 - Authorized lay ministers will participate in a regular, on-going process of formation and education.

Authorized lay ministry is non-stipendiary.

Authorized lay ministers are appointed to a specific ministry context and do not serve outside that context.

Authorized lay ministers are permitted to proclaim the Word and preside at Holy Communion.

This authorization does not extend to baptisms, weddings, funerals, or other activities which are normally in the purview of ordained or consecrated ministers.

Authorized lay ministers shall not wear clerical garb or vestments. When preaching or presiding, authorized lay ministers may choose to wear an alb.

The title "Pastor" is reserved for ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament. There is no title associated with authorized lay ministry.

In cases where pastoral counselling is needed, authorized lay ministers shall refer the individual(s) to their mentoring pastor.

There shall be an annual review of both the authorized lay ministers and of the appropriateness of the site for authorized lay ministry.

The Synod will ensure that resources are available for preaching and worship leadership which might include a sermon bank, seminary resources, and synod workshops.

This policy, once adopted by the ELCIC in convention, will be reviewed and amended as required by National Church Council.

APPENDIX B: JOINT ANGLICAN-LUTHERAN COMMISSION RESOLUTION

as unanimously adopted on 1 October 2015

THAT the Joint Anglican-Lutheran Commission:

- a) receive the report “Background and Reflections on the Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada” and express its thanks to its authors;
- b) commend the report to both the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and request it be made available on the national websites of both churches;
- c) affirm the report’s conclusion that the ELCIC’s Policy Regarding Authorized Lay Ministries represents an expression of legitimate diversity of practice as envisioned by the *Waterloo Declaration*, and is consistent with the full authenticity and mutual exchange of ordained ministries which full communion enables; and
- d) encourage bishops and priests of the Anglican Church of Canada to be generous in providing eucharistic ministry to ELCIC congregations which might otherwise look to the provision of Authorized Lay Ministries.