

What Makes First Call Congregations Unique?

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Lutherans believe that an individual might have a sense of call to serve as a pastor or deacon, but until a community invites that person into a role of ordained ministry, that person isn't called. We believe that the Holy Spirit is brings a congregation and pastor together to begin a new chapter of ministry. Offering a call to a seminary student fresh out of seminary means that the congregation is a "first call" congregation, and the pastor is a "first call" pastor or deacon.

Of our thirty congregations in the Alaska Synod, in the last ten years, two-thirds have been served by a pastor right out of seminary. That percentage is higher when associate pastors who've served in the last fifteen years are added. The length of that first call ranges from ten months to thirty-four years. The right fit for the spouse matters deeply in any calls and especially when the spouse has never been in a role of "pastor spouse."

When a congregation starts a call process, someone will usually tell me that they need a pastor with twenty years of experience for first call compensation. People who've had a rich career in other fields do respond to God's call by going to seminary and serving as pastors or deacons. A second-career pastor could have loads of life experience within a congregation that is brought to a first call. But the majority of seminary graduates are relatively young without experience in building a church spending plan, managing facility maintenance or a nursery or staff, selecting curriculum and training teachers,...

The people who do have that experience are in your congregation, or a neighboring congregation or the synod office. The lay members of a congregation bring expertise and passion that a pastor may not (yet) have. Thank you for training up our new pastors.

Another part of being "new" has little to do with professional experience. It is being new to the culture of a congregation and community and synod. As a bishop, I assure you that every congregation has unique ways of doing things. And they are all correct—just different. Practices around funerals, baptisms, communion can't be taken for granted although, sometimes we forget we do things the way we do. Calling a new pastor is a time to ask questions about practices. Your new pastor is wondering about them, also.

The ELCA took a deep dive into looking at what makes first call congregations unique ([found in this resource](#)). Ask how your congregation fits these descriptions and why or why not?