



Bishops for Life? No!

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The custom of electing pastors as bishops and presidents of synods/districts for terms has served Lutherans in the United States well for over two hundred years. There are three possible major reasons to propose a significant change in our practice. None of the three is persuasive to me.

The argument from ecumenism:

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) has invited all communions that do not now vest their *episkopé* in the historic episcopate to give that form of ecclesiology lively and positive consideration. That assumes bishops with life terms. Our own ELCA Study of Ministry is charged to consider this invitation.

The proposals that will soon come before us from the current Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue will recommend election of ELCA bishops for life or until retirement as a major step to mutual recognition of ministries. The ELCA will not then yet have the historic episcopate, but this step is touted as a major advance toward “full” communion. So then to argue for the election of bishops for life in the ecumenical context is ultimately and essentially to argue for the historic episcopate. The election issue is a stalking-horse for the historic episcopate.

To this simple Lutheran bishop there is one compelling theological issue here: the “*satis est.*” When others insist on additional criteria for “true” unity or “full” communion then the confessional answer must be “No!” It can be persuasively argued that historic episcopacy for Lutherans is an adiaphoron. But when it is not a matter of adiaphoron for others, it can then not be adiaphoron for us. The perceptive Lutheran will examine the stalking-horse immediately before us with great suspicion.

I also have a pragmatic concern. Adoption of life terms for ELCA bishops would do little to advance the full range of ecumenical opportunities before us. This proposal certainly would move us toward “full” communion with the Episcopal Church, but it is meaningless vis-à-vis the Roman or Orthodox churches. Outside that band of the ecumenical spectrum, terms of election and the historic episcopate are both non-issues for “full” communion with the great majority of churches in the United States.

The argument for more faithful and effective ministry:

This argument would require a case-by-case setting forth of precisely how

documents of this church less effective and faithful than if they had been elected for life.

I have done the ministry of *episkopé* for twenty-three years in the former Lutheran Church in America and in the ELCA. I have stood for election six times. This has never inhibited me from preaching the gospel, forgiving sin, counseling the troubled, judging doctrine, or excluding from the community those whose conduct is destructive (to paraphrase the Augsburg Confession, Art. 28).

Those elections did inhibit me from exercising a different kind of power in organizational and institutional issues—“secular” issues driven by personal prejudice or personal style. Never forget that the church is not a docetic wraith—it is both the Body of Christ and a social institution that selects leaders all of whom are fallible and sinful. It is good for them to be accountable to the people of God at regular intervals.

It has been extremely rare for any Lutheran president or bishop to fail in re-election over the past thirty years. When that has happened, I am convinced that non-theological and non-confessional issues were determinative.

Power corrupts and a dangerous potential for power in any institution—including the church—is lifetime tenure.

The argument from analogy to parish pastors:

Many clergy of the ELCA are serving, like bishops, under term calls: ELCA staff, synod staff, social ministry staff, college and seminary teachers who do not have academic tenure, as well as parish pastors serving less than full time calls, as mission developers, in world missions, in parish staff calls where term ends with the term of another, and where the bishop agrees to a term call. Term calls are common.

But parish pastors who do serve without limitation of term are under a clear constraint: they can be dismissed by their congregation because of “local difficulties which imperil the effective functioning of the congregation.” Bishops have worked with scores of congregations and pastors under this constitutional provision and bishops know that most of these tragic situations are resolved by resignation of the pastor, not congregational ballot. Would those who propose no limitation of term for an ELCA bishop add a clause for removal of a bishop for cause other than discipline? Or is a bishop to be beyond accountability?

Elect ELCA bishops for life or until retirement? No! Such a change in our polity would solve none of the problems presented, nor would it give opportunity for the confessionally described ministry of a bishop. It would invite or permit a more authoritarian model of leadership which we do not need or want in the American setting where we do our ministry.

Bishops for Life? Yes!

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I agreed to write these reflections only if I could disavow the term “bishops for life.” My strong hope presently is that I will be granted a generous measure of this life, even after laying down the duties of the office of bishop.

The issue of a term call versus a “permanent” call for bishops has gained increased

significance in my own Lutheran church because of its recent ecumenical involvements. We stand under the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ, who prayed for the unity of Christians “so that the world may believe” that the Father sent him (John 17:23). We also stand in the tradition of reformers who asserted (in the Preface to the Augsburg Confession) that they would “not omit doing anything, insofar as *God and conscience* allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity.”

Christian unity is often reason enough for making changes, provided such changes serve the gospel or, at the very least, do not compromise the gospel. However, it is not my intention here to address the difficult question of whether “God and conscience” allow or require the resolution of this issue on the basis of ecumenical considerations. That aspect of the issue (i. e., the interpretation of the *satis est* of Augsburg Confession, Art. VII) is being ably debated by others. Nor do I suppose that even the cautious recommendations of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) will be much served by what I have to say, or that my proposal—that bishops be elected to serve until retirement but that they then lay down both office and duties—will satisfy the requirements of either Episcopalians or Roman Catholics.

While my sympathies are with those at least disposed to respect these points of view, I offer to the discussion the perspective of a bishop whose primary concern is What structure most effectively serves and most faithfully represents the Word of God? It is my conviction that term calls for bishops should be eliminated because they diminish the effectiveness of a bishop in serving and in representing the Word of God. With regard to the former, three observations inform my thinking.

The ELCA constitution assumes the call of a parish pastor to be permanent (except in unusual circumstances, cf. Constitution for Synods, §14.13). It also specifies (§8.12) that a bishop is the “synod’s pastor.” Indeed, Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, the history of the church, the ELCA Order for the Installation of a Bishop, and personal experience all testify that those elected to the office of oversight in the church (whether called bishop, president, or whatever) have a God-given Word and sacrament ministry which is first and foremost *pastoral*.
Why

should a synod pastor, called by the Holy Spirit through the vote of an assembly representing the people of a synod, be given a call implying less validity or authority than that of a parish pastor? It is hardly less important for a synod pastor to preach and teach the Word of God authoritatively, especially in hours of crisis, than for a parish pastor.

A recent personal experience illustrates the point. I was called out in the middle of the night to fly half-way across the southeastern United States to be with a dying pastor. When I arrived at the hospital in the early hours of the morning, and slipped into his room, he looked up at me with joy, reached out his arms, and said, “Thank God! My pastor is here.” That could only have taken place, I am confident, from my having dealt with the office as God’s call for my life and not merely as an administrative function for which I was hired for an arbitrary length of time.

The second observation follows immediately from the first: anyone seeking to be a good pastor needs several years to mature in a new position. Synods, no less than congregations, also require a generous amount of time to come to know and trust their pastor sufficiently to allow him or her to exercise that authority needed for faithful ministry of the Word. While the

experience of nearly two thousand years undergirds the practice of granting permanent calls to pastors of synods and congregations, it is not the weight of tradition that has led Lutherans to grant permanent calls. Rather, it is the conviction that the gospel is not well served by a system in which the pastor, known to be temporary, is often merely tolerated by the people and the position therefore similarly regarded by the incumbent.

Thirdly, term calls tend to generate political activity that is detrimental to both the election to and the exercise of the office. To perceive the bishop as a *pastor* whose call is of the same sort of permanence as that committed to parish pastors will tend to restrict candidates for the office to those who are well-known to the electorate—persons in whom the synod has experienced the living voice of the gospel, who manifest love, compassion, strength, and integrity.

Finally, I am convinced that term calls diminish a bishop's effectiveness in representing the Word of God, if for no other reason than the fact that such terms are a secular contrivance that suggests distrust for the living Word. Some proponents of term calls argue that it isn't easy to oust a pastor even if she or he is perceived to be trifling or stupid. It isn't easy, and properly so!—not just because such perceptions may be unfairly affected by resistance to preaching and teaching that is running contrary to popular opinion, but above all because we believe that it is God who has issued the call.

When there is ample evidence that perceptions of incompetence are accurate, pastors should be, can be, and are removed, and it is done without the trauma of investigations and disciplinary action through straightforward counseling. Since incompetent bishops could be removed in the same way, there is no reason why their election and call should reflect less faith in the living God than those calls issued to parish pastors.

Thus, while the resolution of this issue may well have significant ecumenical consequences, there is a more important reason for treating the call of a synod pastor with as much respect as that issued to a parish pastor: do we really believe that God still speaks the Word? Is the call a merely human contrivance, requiring arbitrary allowances for human error, or is it really God's call?