



Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Synod Authorized Minister Handbook

Here you will find information, links, videos, and
resources to guide you along your way.

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www.NWMNSynod.org/pages/synod-authorized-minister-resources



Dear Siblings in Christ of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod,

If you are reading this, then you are either a person who is discerning a call from God to serve your own or another congregation in Word and Sacrament Ministry as a Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) or you are a lay leader of a congregation considering the possibility of having a SAM come to serve some or all your Word and Sacrament needs as a congregation, or you are a pastor considering serving as a Mentor to a SAM. Whomever you are, know that you are now part of an exciting movement of the Holy Spirit underway across the church in North America, but especially here in Northwestern Minnesota! This is a movement in which God is raising up local leaders for the work of the church, just like God did in the churches of the first and second centuries that we read about in the New Testament stores from Acts and the Epistles. While in the past the vast majority of Synod Authorized Ministers were approved because of a lack of pastors, it is becoming evident that underneath all of this, God is at work shaping a church that is more faithful and more lay-led. In this emerging church, God is creating a new energy driven by a more empowered laity and equipped and supported by the gifts and expertise of our seminary trained ordained pastors who act as Mentors to our Synod Authorized Ministers.

This handbook intends to provide an overview of the SAM program in Northwestern Minnesota and serve as a “how to” guide for becoming a SAM or inviting a SAM to serve in your congregation. You may wonder why it is necessary for the synod Bishop and staff to be so involved and why there exist these steps for accountability and training of our SAMs and Mentors. The simple answer has to do with what we in the Lutheran Church have historically called “good order.” We cherish our unique way of sharing the story and love of Jesus Christ and want to make sure that this faithful and important witness to the gospel is preserved for this and future generations, and we believe this is one reasonable way of doing that. This structure of training and accountability is also important for guarding and supporting the faith of our members. For some, having anyone besides a pastor at the altar or in the pulpit introduces an occasion to doubt the efficacy of the sacrament that is administered or the integrity of the word that is preached. While there is no special power or unique gift that is imparted by a synod authorization, it does serve as a public acknowledgement by the church that someone has been examined, trained and mentored to serve faithfully. This process also serves to reassure those whose consciences may be troubled by the fact that we are doing what seems to be a very strange and new thing (though, in fact, it is a very old and ancient practice).

Thank you for taking time to review this and then ask your questions or raise your ideas or concerns. We are all learning and rushing to catch up to the Holy Spirit as we work together to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. We need all the voices and wisdom to be as faithful and effective as possible. Please, never hesitate to reach out to me or my staff with your questions or concerns.

God’s blessings on your faithful discernment!

Sincerely in Christ,

Rev. Bill Tesch, Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA

An Overview on Becoming a SAM

If you believe God has called you to be a leader in a church community, here is a way God might be calling you: to become a Synod Authorized Minister.

WHO: If you would like to discover what God is up to, first make an application and set up a visit with Bishop Bill.

WHAT: Most will serve a church currently without a Pastor. You may preach, teach, commune, marry and bury the members of a certain congregation.

WHEN: Once a visit is completed with the Bishop or Bishop's designee and have their blessing, you and a church body will decide what will be provided and at what pay, to be followed by a signed covenant of licensure.

WHERE: A church may make a request for a SAM or can recommend a candidate to be a SAM.

HOW: You will need to complete 6 areas of study over 2 year period of time and take boundaries and anti-racism trainings. You will work with a mentor and have a supervisor for guidance.

For more information, please contact Kip Fontaine, SAM coordinator, at kipfontaine@cord.edu or by phone (218)280-6507.

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Synod Authorized Minister Handbook

- I. Overview of Synod Authorized Ministry (SAM)
 - II. Becoming a SAM
 - III. Congregation's Role
 - IV. Mentor Role
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Overview of Synod Authorized Ministry

Synod Authorized Ministers used to be a bridge plan for congregations when they were experiencing a pastoral vacancy, whether short term or long term. Now this is emerging as a God-led strategic initiative in our synod where both lay and ordained leaders work together as professional leaders of God's church.

For more historical context, please [click here](#).

A Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) is a lay person who can function like a pastor in **only one congregation/parish** and who commits to ongoing learning/education, mentorship and supervision. An annual discernment conversation and annual review are part of the process to continue as a SAM. SAMs do not use the title of Pastor (in written or verbal communication), nor can they wear stoles in their professional role. They are encouraged to wear an alb while leading worship.

Please note: If the SAM candidate is enrolled in a Master of Divinity or Master of Arts degree program or is currently a Word and Service Deacon of the ELCA, please contact the synod staff as the process will be modified.

Overview of the SAM Process

A need is identified:

The Bishop and Synod staff, in consultation with the congregation or other ministry of the church, identify a need where pastoral leadership will not be available for an extended period of time or where an emerging missional opportunity would best be served through the appointment of a SAM.

A Candidate is identified:

The Bishop may recommend an existing or potential candidate or the congregation may put forward a candidate. An ELCA pastor is identified as a mentor for the candidate; required education and training will be offered. An annual review process will allow continuation of a SAM/congregation relationship.

Becoming a Synod Authorized Minister

Requirements to become a SAM

1. Need to be an active member of an ELCA congregation.
2. Need to be identified (personally or by a community) as a person of faith who has the skills to do congregational leadership work.
3. A fee of \$200 for SAM's will be paid to the NWMN Synod, payable by the SAM's work congregation, candidate or the home congregation (helps cover cost of background checks, etc.).
4. Find a mentor pastor who is a seminary-trained, ordained ELCA pastor who is not related to you.
5. Attend SAM Lay Classes: 6 classes are required in the first 2 years of being a SAM (LED classes are both virtual and in person; Region 3 training program; Lutheran Seminary; other continuing education platforms must be approved by the synod SAM committee.)
6. Complete boundaries and anti-racism trainings (renewable every 3 years).
7. Attend SAM retreats; synod sponsored events; synod assembly; etc.
8. Complete an Annual Review with your assigned congregation and mentor pastor.

Checklist for new SAM's

1. An [application](#) is completed.
2. [Nomination form](#) when being raised to serve their congregation of membership.
3. An interview with the Bishop or Bishop's designee is conducted.
4. A [Pastor or Congregation Leader reference form](#) completed by an ELCA pastor or Cong.
5. A comprehensive background check is initiated for first time SAM's. This fee is typically reimbursed by the congregation where the SAM is appointed. After a second congregation placement a standard 604.20 background check is completed.
6. [Mentor/SAM agreement](#) is completed with the SAM, mentor and a synod staff member.
7. A [Covenant of Licensure](#) is completed by the SAM and church council, signed and submitted for the Bishop's final approval for a first-time SAM.
8. A Letter of Appointment is signed by the Bishop and given to the SAM after steps 1 – 7 are completed.
9. A commissioning worship service will be scheduled annually at Synod Assembly. A [Celebration of SAM Ministry](#) is available for congregations to use as a part of a worship service when the SAM candidate starts their service.
10. Affinity Group—monthly zoom meeting

Annual Review process

- a) An [annual review](#) (based on start date) is completed by the SAM, mentor pastor and supervisor and/or church council and submitted to the synod office.
- b) An [addendum](#) is completed for another year of appointment.
- c) A new [Mentor/SAM agreement](#) is completed if needed.
- d) A discernment conversation is held with the Bishop.
- e) A new Letter of Appointment is signed by the Bishop and issued.

Congregation's Role

Recommending A SAM

- When you notice someone who has the gifts for pastoral leadership and conforms to ethical guidelines required of all ministers of the ELCA, you can fill out a [congregation nomination form](#).
- May provide the fee of \$200 for the SAM (helps cover cost of background checks, etc.)

Please note: If the SAM candidate is enrolled in a Master of Divinity or Master of Arts degree program or is currently a word and service deacon of the ELCA, please contact the synod staff as the process will be modified.

Identifying a need for a SAM

If your congregation is interested in a SAM, contact the synod office or email Bishop Tesch to inquire and discern together. If no one within the congregation is lifted up as a potential SAM, the synod staff will work with you to identify potential SAM candidates for your council to have conversation with. Finally, your congregation will need to agree to the below requirements.

Compensation and Benefits for a SAM

Compensation and benefits for lay leaders is decided each year by a compensation guidelines taskforce and is approved at each Synod Assembly. These guidelines are intended to be a part of the conversation and negotiation process for each appointment. It is understood that this can look very different for each situation depending upon the needs of both the individual and the faith community.

[2026 Compensation Guidelines for Synod Authorized Ministers \[SAMs\].pdf](#)

Please pay close attention to section 2, Compensation for SAM on page 5 which has clear recommendations for salary, taxes and more. If there is a parsonage available for the SAM, please

contact your tax advisor for how to best handle this. Just like any other lay employee, the SAM will need a W-2 prepared at the end of the calendar year.

Congregational Requirements

- Provide direct day-to-day supervision of the SAM
- Is the legal employer of the SAM like all other lay employees
- Provides funding for the required education and continuing education of the SAM (approx. \$1,200/yr.)
- Provides reimbursement of the Mentor Pastor (\$75 a session) (If reimbursement is over \$600 a year, congregation is responsible for giving a 1099 to that mentor pastor.)
- Participates in the annual review of the SAM
- Pays or reimburses expenses for the SAM retreats and Synod Sponsored Events

SAMPLE FIRST & SECOND YEAR BUDGET FOR A SAM:

\$1,200 Con Ed (SAM Lay Classes) – this is similar to full time rostered leaders

\$100 SAM Retreats (2x a year)

\$500 Synod Sponsored Events

\$3,600 mentor fees for year 1 & 2 (\$75 a session x 48) request for reimbursement by mentor pastor

\$5,400 TOTAL costs to the congregation (in addition to compensation)

Use this [Excel Spreadsheet](#) to help calculate Congregational Costs.

Congregations can help educate members about the role of the SAM ministry in our synod by:

Recognizing that the SAM can only lead pastoral/sacramental responsibilities on site or as a representative as your faith leader (funeral home, nursing home, when your congregation gathers at a local park, etc.) For example, a neighboring congregation cannot invite the SAM appointed to your congregation to come over and preside over the sacraments.

Honoring that SAMs do not use the title Pastor or Reverend. They do not wear stoles of any kind. For example: Jane Doe, SAM, would be the official title in writing.

In order to preside over weddings, the SAM needs to be registered at the courthouse of the county

they reside in. Proof of being a SAM can be their covenant or Letter of Appointment from the Bishop stating that they are approved in our denomination to preside at weddings.

Once a SAM is in place, a commissioning worship service will be held each year at synod assembly. A [Celebration of SAM Ministry](#) can be planned to celebrate the start of this partnership.

SAM Mentor Roles

Mentors are seminary-trained, ordained pastors who walk beside SAMs to help with their ongoing learning and practice of ministry. Mentors provide “on the job training” as needed for the new and experienced SAM in all aspects of ministry. Mentors can provide spiritual support and care as well as provide education on presiding at the sacraments and other ministry functions. The most important thing to note is that each SAM-Mentor relationship is unique and tailored to the unique experiences and needs of the SAM and the ministry that the SAM is being called to do. Time spent in mentorship will therefore vary from an hour or two a week for a brand-new SAM with little or no training or background in ministry to once a quarter for an experienced SAM who has been doing ministry for two years or more. Upon entrance into Synod Authorized Ministry, the SAM will select a qualified mentor or one can also be nominated for them. The synod staff meets with the SAM and the mentor to craft a SAM/Mentor Agreement that is then signed by the SAM, the Mentor, an officer of the congregation and the Bishop. The congregation being served by the SAM pays for the cost of mentorship which is reimbursed at the recommended rate of \$75 per hour.

Interested in being a SAM Mentor? Please contact the synod staff about this role. [Mentor Job Description](#)

Requirements of Mentors:

- A mentor pastor must be a pastor of the ELCA in good standing from the active, retired or disabled roster of Word and Sacrament rostered leaders.
- The mentor pastor shall be approved by the Bishop.
- An annual SAM/Mentor agreement is approved by the Bishop or Bishop’s designee.
- It is highly recommended that mentor pastors receive training as ELCA Clergy Coaches.
- Attend a mentor equipping gathering annually (hybrid).

In this capacity, the Mentor fulfills the confessional and constitutional role of oversight by an ordained pastor with respect to word and sacrament ministry. The mentor:

- Provides practical, pastoral, theological and spiritual guidance to the SAM;
- Meets with the SAM regularly during the first two years of their service (receives \$75 per session for up to 48 sessions per year), paid for by the congregation served by the SAM); (use this [reimbursement form](#) to request payment)
- Participates in the [annual review](#) of the SAM; and
- Completes new [Mentor/SAM agreement](#) as needed