



APPROVAL ESSAY

MAY 2025

Dear candidate for rostered ministry,

We welcome you to Approval, the next threshold in your lifelong commitment to discernment and formation for rostered ministry. The Approval process gathers many of the partners who have accompanied you through your preparation for ministry to confirm the call that has led you, to review and inquire thoroughly into your readiness for ministry, and to acknowledge on behalf of the ELCA that you are qualified and suited to serve under call as a rostered minister.

The Approval process culminates in the Approval panel interview with your candidacy committee. This is the final official meeting with a candidacy committee as you proceed with candidacy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As with the steps of Entrance and Endorsement, each candidate is required to prepare an essay that follows the specific guidelines shared in this document. On behalf of the Christian Community and Leadership home area, we send you blessings and appreciation for your faithful participation in the candidacy process. We hope that your preparation and formation have been challenging and fulfilling. May God's spirit be strong in your heart and mind as you prepare this essay, participate in the panel interview, receive the committee's decision and offer yourself in service to this church for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely,

Rev. Martha Hampton, Director, Candidacy and First Call

Ms. Cynthia Zamora, Program Manager, First Call Process and Candidacy

Ms. Sandra Mejia-Vega, Program Manager, Candidacy Data and Resource Development

and your partners in the Christian Community and Leadership home area

Approval Introduction

“The final step in the ELCA candidacy process is Approval – a significant milestone in a candidate’s lifelong journey of discernment. At this stage the candidacy committee, the seminary of enrollment (or affiliation), and the candidate are discerning the candidate’s readiness to serve as a rostered minister after successful completion of all academic and candidacy requirements.”¹

To prepare and write your essay:

- Read:
 - The following chapters of “Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA” (www.elca.org/constitution): Chapter 2, “Confession of Faith”; Chapter 4, “Statement of Purpose”; and Chapter 7, “Ministry.”
 - “About the ELCA” on the church’s website (www.elca.org/about).
- Review:
 - “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline: Rostered Ministers, Congregations, and Members of Congregations” (resources.elca.org/office-of-the-secretary/definitions-and-guidelines-for-discipline-2021/).
 - The Wholeness Wheel from Portico Benefit Services (porticobenefits.org/the-wholeness-wheel/).
 - Review your Endorsement decision and incorporate your learning and any formative experiences since Endorsement.

Approval Components

- The Approval essay.
- ELCA seminary Faculty Recommendation (Form D).
- Internship evaluations from the intern, supervisor and committee.
- Academic transcripts.
- The Approval information form.
- Updated consent form to release student information under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).
- Any other materials requested for review by the candidacy committee.

The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The ELCA Electronic Communications Procedures provides guidance for using artificial intelligence (AI) within the ELCA churchwide organization. This is adapted for our use in considering AI in candidacy materials.

“The ELCA recognizes the benefits of artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing its mission, ministry and operations. However, it acknowledges the risks and ethical, environmental and

¹ ELCA Candidacy Manual, adopted by the Church Council November 2016, revised January 2023, 62.

theological considerations associated with AI, including issues related to bias, privacy, security and transparency. In all potential uses of AI, the organization and individuals must keep human dignity in mind and support the ELCA's social teachings. As such, the ELCA is committed to ensuring the responsible, human-centered and ethical use of AI." Later we also read, "Using AI for 'creative' purposes likely involves AI incorporating copyrighted material and presenting it as its own 'creation'"²

In ministry settings, and as an issue of personal character, theological honesty and integrity of formation artifacts, using AI programs requires intentionality and transparency. AI may be used appropriately as a proofing aid (i.e., to check only spelling and basic grammar). If AI-generated content appears in an essay or artifact, it must be cited as if it were any other resource, e.g., with attribution and a link to the conversation. AI-generated content that is not cited will be treated as plagiarized.³

Approval Essay Instructions

The Approval essay provides an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate readiness for rostered ministry by exercising theological wisdom related to practical situations and ministry tasks. Candidates will also prepare a personal reflection on rostered ministry and submit a sermon. The candidate is responsible for sending the completed Approval essay to the candidacy committee by the required date.⁴

Responses to the Approval essay questions should be approximately 500-750 words per essay, double-spaced, with your name and the page number on each page.

Answer each of the numbered questions. The questions that begin with bullet points are sub-questions that you should address in your response. All essays should include the question number and/or prompt to which it responds.

The content of the essays and the sermon must be your own. This is a professional document and should include a bibliography and footnotes.

Submit copies of the essay to your candidacy committee through your synod office, and to your seminary academic advisor.

Keep a copy of the essay and bring it to your Approval Interview.

If you have questions about the essay prompts, please contact your candidacy committee.

² ELCA Electronic Communications Procedures, January 2025.

³ Wartburg Theological Seminary Student Handbook, 2024.

⁴ ELCA Candidacy Manual, Adopted by the Church Council November 2016, revised January 2023, 63.

Approval Essay Questions

All your work should be recent (from the time of Endorsement until now). Draw on your internship experience and recent coursework to answer the questions.

1. Rostered ministers engage people in Scripture beyond preaching. Share about a Bible passage that was integral to a challenging situation during your internship. Include:
 - A brief description of the situation and its intersection with the biblical text.
 - What does this passage teach us about God?
 - How have you integrated this passage into dialogue with the people you serve?
 - What word of challenge or hope did you share?
2. Reflect on your internship experience:
 - Is there anything else about your internship setting that would be helpful for the committee to know?
 - What did you learn from lay leaders?
 - Where did you see yourself grow as a leader as you were challenged?
 - How did you build trust over time?
 - How has your diaconal or pastoral identity been shaped during this time?
 - How has your call to be a deacon or pastor been affirmed?
3. Give a specific example from internship or the past year of your ministry where you needed to lead through change.
 - How did your leadership help move a community from one place to another?
 - What went well?
 - What did you learn about yourself?
 - How did you navigate any tension?
 - What would you do differently next time?
4. As you prepare for rostered ministry in this church, identify and explore a need for change within the ELCA.
5. Identify one area in your experience of ministry where there was a need for a significant change. How did you and other leaders in the context go about effecting that change?
6. Describe the cultural norms that exist in your context.
 - What are your community's hidden assumptions about race, ability, gender identity, economic background, education levels, etc.?
 - How should rostered leaders address racism and inequality in the church and world?
 - How do you navigate tension between your thinking and the congregation's?
7. Consider the Wholeness Wheel (porticobenefits.org/the-wholeness-wheel/). How are you supported and sustained in:

- Discerning your sense of call.
 - Forming a pastoral or diaconal identity.
 - Practicing healthy boundaries.
 - Pursuing social wellness.
 - Engaging in spiritual practices.
8. Describe a time during your internship when your theological understanding of the sacraments intersected with your lived experience.
- How has knowing the people and community as an intern made a difference in your understanding of sacramental theology?
 - Describe a time when someone asked you questions about the sacraments, and how you responded.
9. Describe a time when you participated in the church active in society.
- Explain your theology of servant leadership.
 - What is the church's role in society and the world, and what informs your practical and theological understanding of that role?
 - How has this understanding changed throughout your internship, and what will you bring with you to your first call?
10. Pastoral care sometimes occurs in unexpected moments. Summarize or share verbatim a conversation in which a challenging pastoral care situation emerged through brief communication (text, social media, email).
- What was most important, and how did you convey it briefly?
 - What did you find most challenging about the situation?
 - What could you have done differently, and what did you feel went well?
11. Submit a sermon you wrote and preached in the last year. Include the written sermon and an attachment or link to a video/audio of the sermon. Review video of yourself preaching and respond to each of the questions below:
- In a paragraph, describe the context in which the sermon was preached and how this directly affected your crafting of the sermon.
 - In your study of the text, what did you learn about the Bible passage that your own first reading did not teach you?
 - Identify something in the sermon's structure, language, biblical context or historical background that sheds light on how you interpreted this passage.
 - Summarize in one sentence the good news you proclaimed in the sermon. What about this passage led you to articulate the gospel in this way?
 - Discuss the role and relationship of Law and Gospel in the sermon.
 - What did you hope would happen to your listeners as a result of having heard this sermon? In what ways did the feedback you received match your hopes? In retrospect, how might you change the sermon and/or delivery, and why?