

The Games Bishops Play

“I need to get a copy of your membership roster with names, addresses, and phone numbers.”

Your Bishop or his assistant may contact you to demand a full list of names, addresses, and phone numbers of all your members before your first meeting to vote to leave the ELCA. Your constitution provides that the bishop can be present at the special meeting, but you are not constitutionally obligated to provide your membership roster to the bishop. It has been reported that Bishops are quite aggressive and persistent in getting this list, have used guilt to make people feel that they aren't good Christians or are somehow unfair or dishonest for not turning over the list, and have been known to get the list outside of official channels through a single member in the congregation they know or have strong-armed. Bishops have been reported to use this information to campaign against any decision to leave by sending letters and calling members in the congregation. Specifically, pastors and lay people have reported that the Bishop used these contacts as an opportunity to divide the congregation, turn members against each other, defame the character of the pastor or other church leaders, and frighten people. They work to get members on your list who haven't been to church in years come and vote against leaving the ELCA- so you also want to make sure you clean up your membership list before initiating any votes. If your Bishop demands your membership roster, politely say, “We're sorry Bishop, the constitutional provisions that govern our special vote to leave the ELCA do not require that we provide you with that.”

“You could lose your property.”

Bishops have been known to warn congregations that they could lose their property if they take the vote to leave. This is a well known scare tactic and is simply not true in most cases. If your congregation was a member of the LCA before the ELCA merger, the constitution simply says that you need to seek consent from the Synod Council to sever ties once you complete your second vote to leave. The language in that provision of the constitution is broad enough, some say, so that even if a Synod Council refuses to give consent this may not be a binder to keep you in, but you should consult a lawyer. In any case, the title to your property rests with the congregation and is not held in trust by the ELCA. If you have agreed at some point to receive mission monies from the ELCA by accepting the formal designation of “Mission Church,” the ELCA may have more rights to your property and bank accounts. Again, you may want to consult an attorney about property and asset rights. Though the ELCA has closed down and sold many congregations, there has yet to be a legal battle over property or assets against a congregation that decides to leave the ELCA, though ELCA officials have signaled that this may not always be their policy towards leaving congregations.

“You will not be allowed to participate any longer in Women of the ELCA.”

The Bishop finds out that one of your members has some kind of committee or leadership role in Women of the ELCA. Usually the bishop finds a woman that is retired, single or widowed, who is active in the WELCA and contacts her. Once he finds out your church is leaving the ELCA, he immediately searches the WELCA membership list to find contact information for any of the women in your church. Many times, he gets your entire membership roster by requesting it from a WELCA member at your church. The conversations occur more than once as the Bishop positions himself as a pastoral presence and builds trust, oftentimes telling the woman that he chose to contact her because she is an important leader in the WELCA and that he appreciates the incredible ministry she does. Bishops have reportedly talked to WELCA women about their relationships in the organization and the good fellowship they have there before telling them, “It would be a loss if you were no longer in the WELCA, and it saddens me, but I had to call to tell you that if your church leaves the ELCA, you are no longer eligible for WELCA membership.” These calls are usually followed up on by a WELCA staff who hammers away at the woman again, urging her to do whatever she can to stop her church from leaving the ELCA. Oftentimes she does go to church and make an effort to lead opposition against leaving, unaware that the Bishop is using her to divide the congregation.

“Your pastor is getting close to retirement, and you won’t be able to find a pastor if you leave the ELCA, and you won’t know what kind of pastor you’ll get if you do.”

This is another fear tactic in which the Bishop suggests that your congregation will not be able to survive without the ELCA, that you won’t be able to find another pastor, or that you can’t trust LCMC or any other denomination to keep good pastors on their rosters. Churches have reported that Bishops will suggest “off the record” that your pastor has a health problem and that he may not be around too long. If you ask for more detail, the Bishop would tell you he is not at liberty to disclose any more. Bishops use these tactics to make a church anxious about their future, but also to create conflicts with the pastor and raise doubts in people’s minds about the pastor’s leadership. Members should talk to their pastor right away, and trust your pastor’s leadership. The fact of the matter is, Churches that have left the ELCA have much more choice and many more options for calling a pastor. Most have experienced significant membership growth too. The truth is, the local congregation can do its own background investigation of candidates, no longer bound to taking the ELCA’s word that a particular candidate is qualified. Churches that leave the ELCA will be able to end the practice of a bishop choosing their pastors. Bishops usually send only a handful of possible candidates to a congregation- the one he wants to place there- and two or three others that he knows the congregation will not see as a good fit. Congregations who leave are free from these games, and oftentimes have a dozen or more candidates to consider for a pastorate.

“I’m not sure what would happen with your pension- you could lose it.”

Because pension rules change so often, too many pastors aren’t aware of their pension rights. Bishops have reportedly suggested or outright stated that the pastor’s pension will be at risk if the congregation leaves the ELCA and the pastor stays. The Bishops tell the pastors that they have to be a member of the ELCA to keep their pension. This makes many pastors afraid to lead their congregations out of the ELCA. Pastors also face informal or formal disciplinary action. Bishops have threatened to remove pastors from the roster after their church leaves the ELCA under the rationale that the pastor is no longer serving an ELCA church, or Bishops suggest that the pastor’s name will no longer be provided to other congregations for a future call. Whether or not a pastor attends an ELCA congregation, or is no longer even on the ELCA roster, the ELCA cannot touch the pastor’s pension. If the pastor joins another denomination, the ELCA cannot touch the pension. If the pastor would like, he can move his pension to his new denomination. If you or your pastor is unsure about pension rights, it may be worth contacting a lawyer for assistance. You can also email info@leavingtheelca.com for the phone number of a pastor who has done the financial planning for many pastors who have left the elca. You can get a free consult and a walk-through of pension rules.

Character Assassination

Many Churches, particularly larger churches that have left the ELCA, report that desperate bishops go to desperate lengths to keep their churches in. These are Churches, many of them, that contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars to the ELCA coffers. However, the character assassination tactics have been used by bishops in smaller churches too. One of the most flagrant actions reported was when a bishop gathered a group of church members together outside the church and outside the normal channels to strategize with them on how to keep the church in. He actually suggested ways that the group could raise suspicions of sexual impropriety about the pastor, though patently untrue. A running tape recorder, though, foiled the entire plan. It is a good idea to record meetings you have with the bishop. Another tactic Bishops use is to claim knowledge about a pastor or Church leader that they say is troubling, but he is not at liberty to share details, only that the congregation would be making a big mistake to leave the ELCA because of this “inside knowledge.” We have discovered that Bishops, unfortunately, lie or make misleading statements to persuade parishioners to vote against leaving, and have no problem destroying other people’s reputations and impugning their character to achieve their goals.

“I set the expectations for the constitutionally required consultation with the bishop.”

Bishops have insisted that the consultation required by constitution before a congregation can leave the ELCA is determined by him in form and scope. Some Bishops have insisted on leading Sunday Worship, presiding at communion, preaching, then holding a “study session” after Church. Many bishops have insisted on more than one meeting with the congregation. The congregation is not constitutionally bound to allow the bishop to set the terms of the consultation, but only to “consult” with the bishop. Some congregations have called a special congregational meeting and invited the Bishop to be present to address the church. Many more congregations, however, fulfill this constitutional requirement by holding a conference call with the bishop over the phone with the Church council, or inviting the bishop to speak to the Church Council as the legal representative and voice of the Church. While bishops are constitutionally able to attend a congregation’s special votes, a congregation has no requirement to give the Bishop a voice at these voting meetings. Churches usually opt to define the bishop’s role as observer rather than keynote speaker. All of this is important to keep in mind, because ELCA bishops use these times as opportunities to drive a wedge between members, create conflict, and impugn the character of congregational leadership.

Dear Seminarians

Seminary students are reporting across the country that bishops and their assistants have said that if the recent ministry policy changes aren’t fully supported by seminaries and students, the ordination of women is at risk. They warn that the Lutherans who are opposed to the full “inclusion” of gay marriage and practicing gay ordination into the life of the Church are also actively opposed to women’s ordination, and that overturning the recent votes would open the door to overturning women’s ordination. This is simply not true. The same argument was used against Lutherans opposed to the historic episcopate in the Called to Common Mission/Concordat agreement with the Episcopal Church. Advocates of the historic episcopacy claimed at the seminaries that those opposed to the Historic Episcopate were also opposed to women’s ordination- and that a vote against the CCM agreement would put women’s ordination at risk. While there are a lone voice or two that would argue against women’s ordination, even they are the first to acknowledge that they are not taken seriously in the larger reform movement.

“Did you know that.....?”

Bishops work hard to create rumors within a church community, using every possible avenue available. They have enlisted the “help” of other local congregations and pastors to seek out members of a church voting to leave and create anxiety by spreading rumors. Bishops know that members of a leaving congregation have friends in other congregations- friends that may be more persuasive. Visits from another local pastor, calls from bishop’s assistants, letters and any other kinds of contacts that make a member feel important or special, are meant to build trust and play on ego. Bishops create opposition in a congregation by making certain members feel “special” or as if they are in his “inner circle.” Local pastors may be promised a “bright future” if they can help keep a church from leaving the ELCA. Indeed, we have examples in which bishops have followed through on these promises, rewarding pastors with higher paying calls or a job in Chicago. By virtue of his authority and office, bishops have been reported to use everything at their disposal to keep a congregation in. In fact, the Saul-Alinsky model of organizing and strategy employed by bishops and GLBT/CCM advocates to push through their agendas are heavily employed against congregations seeking to leave the ELCA. The most important thing church leaders and pastors can do is to foster strong communication and make their members aware of what lies ahead with the games Bishops play.