



The Synod Vice President Role

Living Into Your Leadership Calling

Abstract

This document provides guidance and direction for those called to be ELCA Synod Vice Presidents. The goal is for each Vice President to live fully into this leadership calling.

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Summary

The Synod Vice President is the highest elected lay officer in each of the 65 Synods within the ELCA. God has called each Vice President (VP) to this time and this place for a reason. This leadership role is critical in the ELCA, particularly in the rapidly changing culture in which we live.

The VP role is defined generally in each Synod's Constitution. What occurs in practice is that each VP adapts this role in unique ways to meet the particular needs of their Synod using their individual skills and experience. Recently, a desire was expressed among Vice Presidents to develop a Best Practices and/or a "how to" document to help us lead even better. In mid-2020 a team was formed – the Vice President Future Vision Team – to develop such a document. This is the product of that work.

The details of the charter and the process used by the Future Vision Team is found on page 11. In short, we invited key leaders from the Churchwide organization and each Synod to respond to a survey to help better define our work. The survey was taken by 719 leaders. The input they provided was very insightful and provided the basis for what you will see in this document. The details of the survey are also found on page 12.

The survey respondents clearly had very strong appreciation and value for the work of the VPs. It was very clear that the VPs bring a strong faith, leadership skills and drive to this office. They also affirmed that our roles in each Synod are very diverse. The role comprises a range of duties, in some cases, beyond what is specified in the Constitution. **We concluded there are two categories of duties for VPs. The first are those outlined by Synod constitutions and those deemed essential by the survey respondents. The second are those duties characterized by the unique needs of each Synod, the particular skills, experience and gifts of the VP and the relationship between each VP and their Bishop.** We also identified a set of duties that others are better suited to do. The survey results also made clear that as this is an unpaid, lay leadership role, there is a need to establish boundaries, so as not to overload those currently serving, or to make the office too intimidating for those that succeed us.

This document is structured to first give you a summary of key themes from the survey and then an overview of each of the roles. **You may then discern what roles fit your unique skills, the needs of your Synod, and the relationship with your Bishop to carry out the office to which you have been elected. There is no "one size fits all" template for this role in the ELCA.** While you may at times struggle with it, know that others have gone before you and can help you navigate the journey. The Resource section of this document provides additional information and contacts on specific topics to help you.

The word Synod means "walking together". We would like to use that as a model for how to live together as a church, each in our unique callings, to express the Gospel of Jesus in the world, knowing that Jesus walks beside us each step of the way.

Key Themes

The survey provided a wealth of information. The comment sections alone had over 500 individual comments. As we reviewed the answers to the specific questions and the comments we uncovered the following key themes:

- Strong appreciation for the work that VPs do
- VPs bring a strong faith, leadership skills and drive to this calling
- Many VPs do much more than what the Constitution defines
- Many respondents had little to no idea what the VP role entails - the survey helped them
- Value to further define the role to better understand what's expected and what's not
- Focus of the VPs should be primarily at the Synodical level - little traction for an expanded leadership presence at the Churchwide level – Churchwide Council, VP Council, etc.
- Interest in defining the “essential functions” more clearly – those that each VP should be doing
- There is no “one size fits all” approach
- There needs to be flexibility in the role
 - Each VP comes with unique gifts and abilities
 - Each Synod has a unique set of needs
 - The role of the Bishop and the VP are unique and need to mesh and be complementary
- Thought that the role may be something like half “Constitutional and essential functions” and half those that are unique to the Synod, the VP, and the Bishop/VP relationship. The unique roles are to be defined by the Bishop, VP and Synod.
- Bishops and VPs working together is a very strong role model for the rostered-lay partnership
- Recognition that VPs have a large scope and therefore there was little interest or value in expanding the role – especially in light of the fact that this is a volunteer job and VPs in many cases have full-time employment
- Too large of a scope may limit the number for persons willing to serve in this role
- VPs should eschew responsibilities where rostered leaders are better trained and equipped – preaching, call process, etc.
- Given the realities of declining mission support and reduced Synod staff levels, the VP role may be even more critical in future
- Need stronger role in Synod mission/vision/strategy development
- Flexibility and empowerment are important - don't add any more formal structure

Key Role Summary

The roles of the Vice President fall into two general categories:

- **Constitutional and Essential** – all VPs should be doing these
- **Synod/VP/Bishop Specific** – determined by your gifts, the unique needs of your Synod and the relationship with your Bishop

In addition, recognize there are responsibilities more appropriately done by others.

Of course there needs to be flexibility in how you carry out your calling, but our hope is that this will give you some general guidance and direction.

Constitutional Roles

Synod Constitutions say the following about our role:

The vice president shall be elected by the Synod Assembly. The vice president shall be a layperson. The vice president shall be a voting member of a congregation of this Synod. The vice president shall not receive a salary for the performance of the duties of the office.

The vice president shall chair the Synod Council.

In the event of the death, resignation, or disability of the bishop, the vice president, after consultation with the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, shall convene the Synod Council to arrange for the conduct of the duties of the bishop until a new bishop shall be elected or, in the case of temporary disability, until the bishop resumes full performance of the duties of the office.

Chairing the Synod Council – in this role you are responsible for leading meetings of the Synod Council. This involves making sure that the meetings are conducted effectively and that the business of the Synod is well-managed. As VP you chair the Synod Council meetings. Your Bishop has both voice and vote. See the Resource section for some tips on how to conduct effective meetings.

Role in Member Discipline - the ELCA Constitution (Section 20.41) outlines the process of member discipline. In this process the VP is responsible for selecting a 5-person team (3 lay, 2 rostered) from the Consultation Committee to act as Consultation Panel to resolve the issue per Matthew 18: 15-17.

Essential Roles

In addition to the above, the survey identified the following roles which the majority of respondents felt their VPs should be doing based on the unique needs of the Synod:

Advise/Support Bishop – one of your key roles is to help your Bishop do their job most effectively. Establishing a relationship grounded on mutual trust and confidence is critical. Both you and your Bishop should know that confidential issues can be discussed and those confidences are honored. You can provide a trusted “listening ear” to support your Bishop. Your wisdom and counsel is invaluable.

Voting member at Churchwide Assembly – depending on how your Synod’s Constitution is written, you may or may not automatically be a voting member at the Churchwide Assembly. If this is not part of your Constitution you may stand for election as a lay voting member. Either way, if you do attend the Churchwide Assembly your role will be to actively prepare and participate fully.

Plan agenda for Synod Council meetings – since you are the chair of the Synod Council it is logical that you would be the point person for the development of the agenda for meetings. The process of developing the agenda should be in collaboration with your Bishop, key staff members and other Council members as appropriate. The goal of a well-thought-out agenda is to cover the topics requiring the Council’s action and input. See the Resource section for some guidance.

Lead/participate in VP networks – Region and/or ELCA – it is important to remember that you are not alone in your role. Regional networks of VPs can be a source of mutual encouragement and support. This is also true with the ELCA-wide VP network, which meets remotely each month and has an annual in-person meeting. Participation in these networks is invaluable for mutual sharing and support.

Assist in planning Synod Assembly – Synod Assembly is the one time of the year when your Synod comes together to worship, network, elect leaders and conduct business. You should participate in planning the agenda to ensure a worthwhile experience for those attending.

Co-chair Synod Assemblies – the model your Bishop and you have as co-leaders at your Synod Assembly demonstrates the shared rostered/lay leadership model. Work with your Bishop to determine how you will share leadership at your Assembly.

Leader/member in home congregation – sometimes the scope of the VP role may make it is easy to forget you are member and leader in your home congregation where you should worship regularly. Work to keep these ties strong.

Assist with Synod vision/mission/strategic plan development process – “without vision, the people perish” – Proverbs 29:18. Any large organization needs to have a mission, vision and a strategic plan to guide the day-to-day work. Your Synod is no different. There is tremendous power in having a consensus of mission, vision, and strategic plan. Work with your Bishop, Staff and Council leaders as they develop a mission/vision and strategic plan discernment process that includes a wide range of key leaders. Use consultants to help you if needed.

Member of Synod teams/committees – if time and interest allows, you might participate in your Synod’s teams or committees. This will give you insight into how the work of the Synod is accomplished. Your presence will be a welcome addition.

Synod/VP/Bishop Specific Roles

Additional responsibilities you may take on will be determined by your specific gifts and skills, the needs of your Synod, and the relationship between you and your Bishop. These cannot be defined in this document, since they are unique to you and your situation. Appreciate that reality and then live into it as you feel the Holy Spirit’s call. Below are a few examples from the survey, but they are just a start.

Write newsletters, blogs, videos, etc. – communication pieces to your Synod’s leaders via regular newsletters, blogs, videos, etc. is a great way to help you and then to stay connected to what is going on

from your unique perspective. Helping your Bishop by taking some of the communication load can be a welcome benefit.

Visit congregations – Attending services with congregations across your Synod can serve several purposes. It helps congregations to get to know you, your Synod and be informed about synodical ministry beyond their congregation. It is also important for you to see and hear what issues are important to individual congregations.

Consult by invitation on Churchwide issues – the VP group has a wide array leadership experience and skills. At times, you may be invited to provide input on an issue at the Churchwide level. This is an opportunity to serve the wider Church, and also increase in your personal growth.

Done By Others

The survey identified the following responsibilities as better carried out by others than by the VP. The first three items listed are duties suited for rostered leaders, often fulfilled by the Bishop or by those who serve on the Bishop's Staff. The final item, to sit ex-officio on all Synod team/committees, is unnecessary.

Assist with call process

Preach

Assist in installation/ordinations

Sit ex-officio on all Synod teams/committees

Making It All Work

You were elected by your Synod and called to serve in this time and this place. Your unique leadership skills and experiences are what brought you to this role. The challenge is finding the right balance in how to best live into the role. The following are some general principles we hope will point you in the right direction. It is not meant to be all-inclusive. We hope to give you some guiding thoughts. Our prayer is that this is helpful in your journey.

- **Servant Leadership** – use Jesus as your model of leadership. Others come before you. This is not about you, but about God’s church, your Synod, and those with whom you work.
- **Be in Prayer and Study of the Word** – Jesus went away often to pray and to be alone with God. Use that model to keep grounded and in touch with our Loving God. The benefits are immeasurable.
- **Establish and Maintain a Strong Relationship with Your Bishop** – the relationship you have with your Bishop and how you work together will set the tone for rostered and lay collaboration in your Synod. Devote time to make sure this relationship is a strong one.
- **Establish and Maintain Strong Relationships** – spending time in relationship building early in your term will greatly increase your leadership effectiveness. Work early in your term to get to know key leaders on your Synod staff and Council and build on those relationships. One-on-ones over coffee to get to know those leaders on a personal basis can be most beneficial.
- **Discern how Your Gifts, Skills, Experience and Abilities Mesh with the Unique Needs of Your Synod** - spend time talking with your Bishop and other key leaders in your Synod to discern how your uniqueness fits into the work of the Synod.
- **Establish and Maintain Trust** – trust is the base on which all leadership rests. Work hard to establish trust and keep it. Assume the best in others; trust them to do the right thing. As simple as it sounds, this can have a significant positive impact on how other leaders engage and conduct their work with you.
- **Lead With Integrity** – be a role model of integrity. Treat other with respect. Take responsibility for your actions and of those you lead. Support and encourage others.
- **Be Positive, Upbeat and Optimistic** – being positive has a multiplying effect. This does not mean that you ignore issues or try to spin them in a way that ignores reality. It means keeping a positive focus knowing that God is working through you and everyone else for the good of your Synod and beyond.
- **Empower Others** – you cannot do this all yourself. Empower others to live into their unique callings. Remember that we are truly the “body of Christ” and those that God brings around you are critical parts of that body.
- **Teamwork** – even Jesus had a team. Use that model to develop a highly effective team that works seamlessly to achieve the mission and vision of your Synod.
- **Communicate Effectively and Often** – work to be excellent at communication, written and oral. Communicate frequently to make sure the message is received.
- **Strive Towards Excellence** – in all you do, do your best. There is no more important work in this world than God’s work. Do your very best in both big and small things.

- **Think Strategically and Long-Term** – as much as you may need to be into the day-to-day details, don't let the long-term get away from you. Think strategically and long-term as you help guide the direction of your Synod. Work to have alignment and buy-in for your Synod's mission and vision and then use them as you make decisions going forward.
- **Lead Great Meetings** – a lot of our work is done in meetings. Meetings that are effective are life-giving. Do your homework ahead of time, plan, and then run great meetings. Be sure to start and end on time. See Resource section for help.
- **Be Visible, Open and Accessible** – along with your Bishop, you are a key leader in your Synod. Be visible, open, and accessible to those that wish to connect with you.
- **Adaptive/Flexible Leadership** - what worked last month may not work this month. Be looking for new and innovative ways to solve problems. Remember that God may be doing a "new thing" through your leadership.
- **Don't Shy Away From Conflict** – conflict is unavoidable. Be a leader that addresses conflict up front and in a respectful manner. Be open to God's guidance.
- **Continuous Learning** – your journey as a leader evolves. You will never "arrive". You should continue to learn and grow as a leader and encourage others to do the same.
- **Coach/Mentor Others** – spend time in coaching and mentoring other leaders. You have experience and skills that can help others develop as strong and effective leaders. Look for opportunities to help others develop. You will get as much out of this as they will.
- **Be Deliberate about Planning for Your Successor** – God calls us each to a time and a place. You will know when your work in this role is coming to an end. Make room for and help the next person who assumes the office of Vice President and help them ensure they, too, will be successful.
- **Reaching Out for Help and Support** – you are not in this alone. When you feel overwhelmed reach out to others for help and support. Other VPs can help provide perspective and insight. A leadership coach or spiritual director can help you find the way God wants you to go. Use these resources; they're ready and willing to help.

FAQs

Q: I'm a newly elected Vice President. What do I do now?

A: First, breathe. You'll do great! Then, your relationship with your Bishop and the Synod Staff is key. Have an open and frank conversation about expectations. Every Bishop is different in what they would like you to undertake. And every Vice President is different in the skills they bring to the table. Ask what the previous Vice President was responsible for. Be open about your skills and talents. Constitutionally you are the Chair of the Synod Council. Everything else is based on conversations with your Bishop

Q: How do I determine how my leadership gifts, skills, experience and abilities best fit into my Synod's needs?

A: First seek God's guidance through prayer. You have been called to this time and this place for a reason. This document was prepared to help you understand what the role of the Vice President is and what it isn't. A portion of this role is required by the Constitution, however, a large percentage of it is to be discerned and is unique to you, your Synod and your relationship with your Bishop. Spend time developing relationships with your Bishop, key staff, Council members, Deans and other key leaders and the needs of your Synod will emerge and you will see where you're specific skills will fit to meet that need. Above all, trust God!

Q - What are requirements to be VP?

A - Member in good standing of a church in the Synod. "God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called."

Q – How many Synod VPs are there in the ELCA?

A – There are 65 – one in each Synod.

Q: How do I get more involved within the Synod?

A: Start with having a conversation with your Bishop. The relationship between the VP and Bishop is crucial in running the Synod. If you are new or the Bishop is new, spend time in finding out how the Bishop likes to handle tasks or their "management style" and where you can fit in.

Q: Isn't Churchwide/ELCA responsible for our role and what we do?

A: We are all governed by our Synod Constitutions which provides the minimum of our role. The good news is how you can form a working relationship with your Bishop and other staff in the Synod office to make your role as large or as small as you want.

Q: If the Bishop is unable to fulfill their duties, and the VP takes over, until their replacement is named, what is the scope, or range of responsibilities, of the VP?

A: If the Bishop dies, resigns or is unable to serve, the VP doesn't take over for the Bishop. The VP sets in motion a process to secure coverage for the duties of the synodical Bishop. The VP first consults with the Presiding Bishop. That conversation determines the next steps. The VP then convenes the Synod Council to arrange for the appropriate care of the responsibilities of the Bishop until an election of a new Bishop can be held or until the Bishop is able to serve again. The arrangements may include the Synod Council appointing an interim Bishop. The arrangements, whatever they are, are based on the recommendation of the Presiding Bishop, but it's the Synod Council that has to take the action. The goal is to have an ordained person in place to carry out the duties of the Synodical Bishop.

Q: What is my role during a Bishop election?

A: You have an important role in every Synod Assembly, but even more so during a Bishop's election. Don't panic! You won't be alone in this. You will be working in close contact with Churchwide for the year prior to the Bishop election. They will provide you with numerous resources and check sheets so that you are able to chart your progress. There will be constant communication so that you are fully prepared for your election. Each Synod does their Bishop election a little differently and you will be working closely with your Synod staff and Synod Council members to make sure everything goes according to plan. In addition, the representative from Churchwide attending your Synod Assembly will be working closely with you and will be chairing the Synod Assembly during election procedure.

Q - How do I pull back from my duties?

A - Start with having a conversation with your Bishop. Explain your situation and provide possible resources if the task is something that needs to be done but doesn't fit your schedule or persona. For example, if you're an introvert, visiting congregations may not be for you but perhaps writing a monthly letter to the congregations may work.

Q - How do I contact other Synod VPs for support and encouragement?

A - Churchwide has a list of all VPs, email addresses, etc. Contact Jennifer Johnson at jennifer.johnson@elca.org or contact the Office of the Presiding Bishop – Synodical Relations for the latest list. We highly recommend that you participate in the VP Network Zoom calls and the annual face to face meetings when they are scheduled. The amount of learning and mutual support you will gain cannot be overstated. Remember, you are not alone!

Vice President Future Vision Team

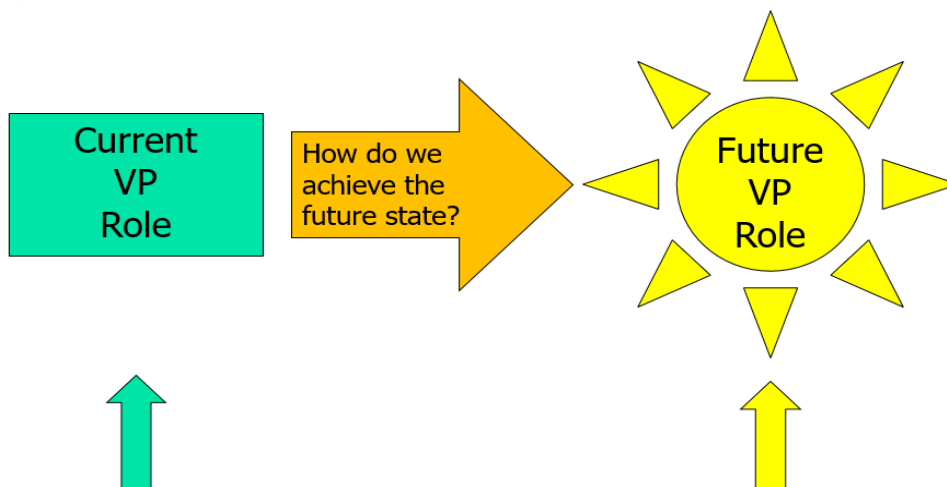
Vice President Future Vision Team Members:

- Syd Brinkman NE Iowa
- Terry Henderson Metro Chicago
- Gail Kiyomura Sierra Pacific
- Tom Madden Upstate New York
- Bryan Penvose NE Ohio
- Imran Siddiqui Southeastern
- Renee Wickland Metro New York
- John Auger Delaware-Maryland

Team Charter:

The VP Future Vision Team will be responsible for the following:

- Soliciting input from the VPs and other key groups (Bishops, Church-wide Staff, Council, Synod Councils, etc.) on what that vision should be and how it can best be implemented
- Based on that input, developing a vision for the VPs that clarifies our role in all three expressions of the Church – Churchwide, Synod and Congregations
- Expressing to the Churchwide organization what we need from them to carry out our work
- Working to understand the history of the VP role
- Clarifying our role description to include:
 - Clear development/understanding of the expectations and boundaries
 - Minimum qualities and competencies
 - Basic duties and Synod-specific expectations
 - Term limits
 - Considers the relationship with our Bishops
- Communicating widely the work of this team to all key groups
- Developing Best Practices to help ensure that present and future VPs can do their work with excellence
- Timing – within one year



Survey Details

The VP Future Vision Team launched a Survey Monkey survey to be distributed widely to key leaders at Churchwide and our Synods. The survey was launched on Monday, November 30, 2020. It was open for two weeks. A summary of the survey is below.

- Outstanding response!
- Exceeded our goals for participation in all areas
- High interest from 719 leaders across the ELCA
- Wide range of input represented
- Answers to questions provide direction
- Comments (~500) provided much insight

Respondents:

	<u>Goal</u>	<u>Actual</u>
• Bishops	33/50%	36/55%
• VPs	33/50%	38/59%
• All Others	546/30%	645/35%
Totals	612	719

Strong Responses from:

• Synod Council members	277
• Deans	143
• Synod Staff	117
• Churchwide Council	20

Questions Asked:

- What does your VP do now?
- What does your think your VP should do that they don't do now?
- What do you think your VP should not do?
- Each question had an open comment box and there was an open comment box at the end of the survey

Survey Monkey Link to Detailed Results: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-YG6NGG6Z7/>

Resources

- **ELCA Webpage:** <https://www.elca.org/>
- **ELCA Constitution:**
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Constitutions_Bylaws_and_Continuing_Resolutions_of_the_ELCA.pdf?_ga=2.97352863.1652693399.1611504842-710088327
- **Model Synod Constitution is available at:**
<https://elca.org/About/Churchwide/Office-of-the-Secretary/Constitutions>
- **Role of Synod Vice President pdf:**
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Synod_Council_Administrative_Resources.pdf
- **Video prepared by Southwest California Synod's VP election 2021:**
<https://youtu.be/wz2OLgZTKLk>
- **Vice President Roster/Contact information:** contact Jennifer Johnson at: Jennifer.johnson@elca.org or contact Office of the Presiding Bishop – Synodical Relations
- **Meeting Leading Resources:**
<https://boardsource.org/resources/the-best-board-meeting-ever/>
<https://boardable.com/blog/run-a-board-meeting/>
<https://hbr.org/1976/03/how-to-run-a-meeting>
- **For General Assistance contact:** John Auger at augerjohn76@outlook.com