

Report R13.5 (2026)

Policy Requirements for the Specific Ministry Program: Admissions, Administration, and Supervision



Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023 Res. 6-03A
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POLICY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE SPECIFIC MINISTRY PASTOR PROGRAM:

ADMISSION, ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION
— LCMS PASTORAL FORMATION COMMITTEE —
NOVEMBER 2025

PREAMBLE

The 2013 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) charged the Synod’s “SMP Committee” with providing refined parameters and policies for continuing and strengthening the Synod’s Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program.¹ This assignment was never completed, and the “SMP Committee” no longer exists. Therefore, the 2019 and 2023 LCMS conventions tasked the Pastoral Formation Committee (PFC) to provide such parameters to the church.² The PFC has explored these matters through significant engagement with the broader Synod at many levels, including one-on-one formal interviews with all 35 district presidents; additional informal conversations with many of the district presidents; surveys returned by more than 1,800 pastors; attendance and conversations with pastors and laypeople at most of the 35 district conventions in 2025; and meetings with the SMP directors of the seminaries, the seminaries’ boards of regents, the LCMS Council of Presidents (COP), the COP and seminary faculties together, and a joint meeting of the two seminary faculties. Informed by Synod convention actions and the above interactions, the PFC hereby establishes the following policy requirements for the SMP program. These are preceded below by several premises that have emerged as important considerations.

PREMISES

Premise 1: “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Our gracious Lord established the Office of the Holy Ministry and calls men to serve as pastors over His dear flock. Moved by compassion as He looked upon crowds, Jesus declared, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:37–38). St. Paul says that those who desire to serve in this way desire “a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1). God has established

¹ 2013 Res. 5-03E and 5-04B.

² The PFC is “responsible for ensuring that the Synod’s objective of training pastors is fulfilled consistently (Constitution Art. III 3)” (LCMS Bylaw 3.10.4).

the office of preaching that, by means of “the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments” people might receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation “freely ... for Christ’s sake, through faith” (Augsburg Confession V and IV; hereafter, AC). This office of preaching should be treated in the church with diligence and good order, so that “no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call” (AC XIV). It is a serious and necessary calling, for pastors “are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” before God (Heb. 13:17). For these reasons the LCMS has always given great care to the preparation of its pastors.

Premise 2: The LCMS has entrusted its two seminaries with the task of preparing well-formed pastors for the flock of God and for Christ’s commission to make disciples of all nations. These pastors must be wise and faithful disciples of the Holy Scriptures and confessors of *Book of Concord* Lutheranism. These undershepherds of Christ must be bold, faithful, joyful proclaimers of Christ. The church needs many such pastors.

Premise 3: The Synod’s SMP program was created by action of the 2007 convention “to address real-world needs with an urgency for bringing the Gospel to a dying world” while acknowledging the reality that “emerging needs and economic pressures often make it impossible to call a pastor who has received a broad and thorough theological education to every congregation or mission station where, nevertheless, people need to hear the Gospel” (2007 Res. 5-01B). The SMP program, as implemented at < 2 of 5 > our two seminaries, has served the church well by providing basic theological and pastoral formation for men willing to serve as pastors in such situations, who then serve under certain restrictions and under ongoing pastoral supervision. We thank God for the pastors formed through our SMP program and regard them with honor as called and ordained servants of Jesus Christ conducting valid ministry.

Premise 4: The intention in creating the SMP program was not that it become a preferred or prevalent route for pastoral preparation, given its more limited scope. Since its creation, regular appeals have been made, with formal requests issued by the 2013, 2019 and 2023 conventions, that the Synod provide more specific direction and policy parameters regarding the optimal uses of the SMP program for the well-being of the church and her mission. The PFC has engaged in extensive conversations with LCMS constituencies and, with this document, is providing clarified SMP policy parameters to the seminaries, to district presidents and to congregations, as directed by the LCMS in convention.

Premise 5: Currently, and for the foreseeable future, the LCMS is facing a shortage of pastors. While robust recruitment efforts are underway through *Set Apart to Serve* and through seminary, university and district initiatives, many small congregations struggle to call and support a full-time pastor. Parameters for the SMP program should be conceived, designed and managed to address the challenges faced by these small congregations in particular, and to maintain and enhance the overall long-term well-being of the church and her mission and ministry. The development and calling of an SMP pastor is one among numerous good options

for addressing the need for a pastor in certain small congregations. For many such situations, the church also has other good, wise and appropriate options: church consolidation or partnerships, multi-point congregations, use of lay readers of sermons, a blessed closure that enables assets to be used for fruitful ministry elsewhere while ensuring existing members receive care at nearby LCMS congregations, and so forth.³

Premise 6: There is long-term value to the man himself, to his congregation of origin, and to the church at large when a young man is sent to the seminary and set aside for years of full-time study by enrolling in the residential pastoral formation programs at our seminaries so that he may be shared with the wider church throughout his lifetime of ministry. The 2023 LCMS convention appealed to all LCMS congregations, districts and seminaries to prioritize and strongly encourage such full-time, residential formation for prospective pastors (2023 Res. 6-02A and 6-03A). The SMP program should be structured in such a way that it does not discourage or detract from full-time, residential seminary preparation for men pursuing a lifetime of ministry in the LCMS.

Premise 7: The proportion of men completing the most comprehensive program of pastoral preparation (M.Div. at one of the two Synod seminaries) matters. When the church's confession is clear and strong, the mission and ministry of the church is invigorated. The long-term scriptural confession and scriptural confidence of the LCMS is placed at risk if a substantial proportion of its pastors have received less preparation in biblical study, the Lutheran Confessions, Lutheran doctrine, church history and the disciplines of pastoral theology. The clear proclamation and defense of biblical truth is hampered when fewer of the Synod's pastors have learned the original biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek. Martin Luther warned at length that learning Hebrew and Greek must not again be lost among the teachers of the church at peril of losing the Gospel itself (see Luther's Works, AE 45:358–68).⁴

Premise 8: Related to the previous, the men completing the most comprehensive program of pastoral preparation (M.Div.) are better positioned than SMP pastors to take up an ensuing

³ Regarding these options, including the use of lay readers of sermons, see the April 13, 2023, CTCR document *President of Synod Request for Opinion on Lay Reading of Sermons and Conduct of Worship in the Absence of a Pastor* and the October 4, 2024, CTCR document *Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions*, especially "Practical Observations and Suggestions," Section 2.e. Both are available at resources.lcms.org/reading-study/ctcr-library-church-and-ministry-lutheran-doctrine-and-practice

⁴ As just one brief excerpt states: "In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. ... And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored ... Experience too has proved this and gives evidence of it. For as soon as the languages declined to the vanishing point, after the apostolic age, the gospel and faith and Christianity itself declined more and more until under the pope they disappeared entirely. After the decline of the languages Christianity witnessed little that was worth anything; instead, a great many dreadful abominations arose because of ignorance of the languages" (AE 45:359–61).

lifetime of *additional* rigorous continuing education that deepens their ability to serve. The ministry of our pastors is greatly enriched by continued theological and practical growth after their years of seminary formation. The Synod in convention has spoken clearly of its desire to support and encourage rigorous continuing education (see 2019 Res. 6-04 and 6-07 and 2023 Res. 6-06A and 6-07A). While some argue that the lesser depth of SMP preparation can be compensated for by continuing education later in ministry, the reality is that richer initial preparation < 3 of 5 > provides invaluable tools for such later learning, including broader perspectives on church history, doctrinal resources and knowledge of the original languages of the Bible. Bivocational SMP pastors, in particular, may find it challenging to engage in many continuing education opportunities, such as conferences and weekday circuit pastors meetings, because of work commitments.

Premise 9: The SMP program is more suitable for older men than for younger. Evidence shows greater completion rates in the SMP program for men over 40, compared to younger participants. A man who begins pastoral preparation before age 40 is likely to be able to provide 30 years or more of full-time service to the broader church. Young men preparing for a lifetime of ministry in the LCMS should attend a full-time residential program at one of the Synod’s seminaries. The church affirmed this at the 2023 LCMS convention: “Resolved, ‘That the district presidents and seminaries be strongly encouraged to direct men to residential pastoral ministry routes [at our Synod’s seminaries] as the preferred option.’”⁵ See also the 2023 PFC Report 60: “The PFC and seminaries affirm the proposition that ‘the most complete means of preparing a man for the general responsibilities of the pastoral office *and a lifetime of service* is the residential master of divinity route at the Synod’s seminaries.”⁶

Premise 10: The ongoing supervision of SMP pastors throughout their years of service places extra commitments on the other pastors of the church (work in addition to the call to serve a congregation). That supervisory burden will become more pronounced and more challenging to fulfill as the number of SMP pastors grows in proportion to the number of general pastors.⁷

Premise 11: Many SMP applications arrive to the seminaries fully completed, with the endorsement of a congregation and their district president included, before any contact or conversation has occurred between the student and the seminary. In other words, without any consultation with the seminaries, these men have decided to pursue distance education and more limited-scope service to the church rather than pursuing full-time residential preparation in the M.Div. or Residential Alternate Route (RAR) programs. These same students often report that they are pursuing the SMP program because it would not be possible for them to attend the seminary residentially. However, an individual’s perspective on the question,

⁵ 2023 Res. 6-02A, which is here quoting 2019 Res. 6-02.

⁶ 2023 *Convention Workbook*, 129, citing 2013 Res. 5-14A Task Force and 2016 Res. 6-03; emphasis added.

⁷ COP Document 14.2.8. states that the district president will identify a local pastor to serve as supervisor, and will secure replacement if he leaves, in consultation with the seminary. It also states that the district president will appoint a (non-SMP) pastor to serve as the ongoing supervisor for the SMP pastor throughout his years of service.

“Would it work for me to pursue the residential M.Div. or RAR?” will be better informed by speaking with seminary admissions officers, staff and residential seminarians. If congregations and district presidents can put all men aspiring to be pastors (including those interested in SMP) into contact with seminary admissions officers as early as possible in their planning process and if seminary admissions officers will maintain good communication with district presidents, this will benefit these men and the broader church. The goal should be to fully inform these men so they can make the best decisions regarding the stewardship of their sacrificial service to the church.

Premise 12: The SMP route should not be seen as a “choice among route-to-ordination alternatives” by a man desiring to serve, even in his local context, in the pastoral office. The mistaken perception exists among some in the LCMS that the SMP program is an “online option” as is typical in some fields today. This treats the SMP program as one option among others from which *an individual may decide how he wants to pursue* pastoral formation and ministry in the LCMS. The 2023 PFC Report 60 helpfully clarifies this, stating: “Generally speaking, such contexts [approved for SMP ministry] *should be thoughtfully identified and assessed by the congregation in careful consultation with the district (especially the district president)*. ... In creating the SMP route and acknowledging the role that distance learning would play in its implementation, the Synod’s objective was not simply to offer a nonresidential distance learning alternative to the residential MDiv route.”⁸

Premise 13: The SMP program is not designed to theologically re-wire recent Lutheran converts from non-Lutheran backgrounds; it is not sufficient for this purpose. The SMP curriculum assumes that the men enrolled have a firm and mature grasp of and commitment to basic Lutheran theology.

Premise 14: There are some circumstances in which part-time or bivocational ordained pastors can be a great blessing to the church’s mission, and the ministry of these men should be valued and honored. The SMP program is particularly useful in < 4 of 5 > providing pastoral preparation for men serving such settings. At the same time, St. Paul wrote: “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:13–14; see also vv. 8–12). In view of our Lord’s command, the Synod should not intentionally plan its future and mission strategy around part-time pastoral service. For congregations where revitalization or consolidation is in reach, a part-time pastor may not be the best option, since he may not be able to devote to the task the kind of time and effort needed to achieve those ends.

Premise 15: The Synod’s collective aim to increase the number of men recruited for service in the pastoral office must always be carefully balanced by the Synod’s aim to prepare the

⁸ 2023 Convention Workbook, 129; emphasis original.

highest quality graduates for ministry and mission, and vice versa. In other words, quantity and quality of pastors must always go in tandem.

Premise 16: The 2007 LCMS convention approved the creation of the SMP program to prepare men for certain specific (specialized) ministries. The understanding was that an SMP pastor's future calls and mobility would be restricted to "a similar specific ministry context."⁹ However, the SMP program has not, in fact, been developed with any "tracks" or specializations. (The residential M.Div. program, with greater room for elective courses, is more easily adapted to such specializations.) The SMP curriculum at each seminary is a single, standard curriculum of general, minimal preparation for pastoral ministry. The students in each SMP cohort come from varied ministry contexts. The "specific ministry" (specialization) for which an SMP student prepares is, in fact, the context of *their current place/context* of ministry. The program routinely asks them to reflect on the learning taking place in view of their current context, and their mentor pastor supports and advises their development within that particular context.

Premise 17: SMP placement and service assume the man's familiarity with the context and community of his place of service, as well as that congregation/community's familiarity with and established confidence in the man. The design of the SMP program as originally conceived did not envision a congregation recruiting an SMP candidate from outside the congregation or a man seeking an SMP placement and, with the assistance of a pastor or district president, finding a congregation where he might serve.

POLICY REQUIREMENTS FOR SMP ADMISSIONS, ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION

1. SMP applicants must have membership and significant service in an LCMS congregation for at least the last 5 years. (*)
2. SMP applicants must have membership in the congregation of placement, or a nearby congregation, for at least the last 3 years. (*)
3. SMP applicants must be at least 40 years old. (*)
4. Prospective SMP applicants will be directed *from the beginning of the process* to seminary admissions counselors for clarification regarding the nature of the SMP program and for exploration of the possibilities of residential seminary study. A visit to the campus of one of the LCMS seminaries will be strongly encouraged as part of the application and vocational discernment process for SMP applicants. Congregations should not act or vote to approve a man for SMP service before he has confirmed his willingness to enter the SMP *program after consultation with one or both of the LCMS seminaries.*
5. As part of the SMP application process, congregations in which and supervising pastors

⁹ 2007 Convention Proceedings, 135.

under which SMP students will be learning will affirm their ready willingness to teach and practice according to our Synod's doctrines and resolutions.

6. Seminary admissions will give priority to SMP applicants who will serve congregations that could otherwise not receive Word and Sacrament ministry.
7. Congregations and districts should pledge themselves to be responsible for the funding of the student's program (if feasible in the circumstance) to create a clear sense of their involvement, fully considered commitment and valuing of the SMP pastor's program of study and service. < Workbook page 76 > < 5 of 5 >
8. Ongoing supervision of SMP pastors throughout their careers of ministry will be formalized, defined, documented (i.e., on LCMS Church Worker Locator, Pastoral Information Forms) and required for continued rostered SMP status. Commitment to long-term supervision will be explicitly acknowledged and planned by the student and by the congregation, circuit and district from the beginning of the program and shall be the responsibility of the district president and the SMP pastor to arrange and document on a continuing basis.

(*) Exceptions to Policy Requirements 1–3 may be recommended to the admissions committees of the seminaries by the Council of Presidents after approval by a majority of the COP.

STATUS AND INTENTION OF THESE POLICY REQUIREMENTS

These policy requirements for the LCMS SMP program stand as:

- An official re-articulation of the nature and parameters of the SMP program to foster a shared, common understanding of the program across our Synod;
- An affirmation of the value and legitimacy of the SMP program for its defined purposes;
- A reassertion of key aspects of the original design of the SMP program;
- A reflection of the church's prioritization of full-time pastoral formation in a seminary community;
- An effort to maintain a salutary balance within our overall ministerium between residentially formed pastors and SMP pastors;
- Policy requirements for district presidents in their counsel of potential SMP applicants and approval of SMP sites; and
- Policy requirements for the seminaries in the operation of the SMP program, including eligibility and prioritization considerations for admission to the program.