

An Emotional Toolkit for Participating as a Nominee/Candidate in a Synodical Bishop's Election Process

By Rev. Emily Carson

Hello! My name is Emily. I'm a Lutheran pastor and recently participated as a nominee in a synodical bishop's election process in the Southeastern Minnesota Synod. It was a beautiful, courage-building, and intense experience from beginning to end.

The process worked. By its conclusion, the voting members of the 2019 Southeastern Minnesota Synod Assembly had called an immensely gifted, faithful leader named Rev. Regina Hassanally. She is a gift to the church and the synod, and we are excited for the impact of her continued leadership among us!

It was an honor to journey through the process in our synod, and I'd like to share a bit about it. I'd also like to make some suggestions for what to pack in your emotional toolkit if you're ever considering participating in this kind of process as a nominee (side note: many synods throughout the ELCA are electing new bishops over the next 7 weeks!).

First, let me share with you some background on bishop's elections in the ELCA. Skip this part if you'd like (but it may provide some helpful context if you haven't heard how bishops are called). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is divided into 65 synods. Each synod has a bishop. Individual synods have their own processes for electing a bishop. An election happens every six years or so and culminates during an annual event called Synod Assembly.

In calling a new bishop, some synods have a pre-assembly process during which congregations highlight the names and gifts of pastors that they believe would be good candidates for the call of bishop. In some synods, the pre-assembly process is extensive and includes panels and forums and the sharing of nominee biographical information. In other synods, there is no pre-assembly process, and the election begins during the assembly itself.

The process of electing a new bishop is in many ways like any congregational call process. Just as a congregation periodically calls a new pastor, a synod periodically calls a new bishop. In a bishop's election process, it just happens that instead of a 8-person call committee as would usually be the case in a church, there's a 500-member call committee that includes all the Synod Assembly voting members. It's really important to note that it's not a political election; it's a call process (that just happens to be very large and public).

An ecclesiastical balloting process is used across the ELCA. An "ecclesiastical ballot" means that for the initial ballot cast during a Synod Assembly, assembly voting members get a piece of paper with no names on it, and the voters can write down the name of any Minister of Word and Sacrament. After that, a committee contacts all of those leaders whose names are lifted up on that initial ballot and asks them if they want to continue on in the process. This is a big discernment for a minister!

Regardless of whether a synod has a pre-election process or not, participating as a nominee can be a life-giving, spiritually formative experience. It can also be really weird and surreal. Here are some suggestions for what to pack in your emotional toolkit if you are considering allowing your name to go forward as a nominee for bishop in your synod.

Courage: Author Brene Brown describes courage as showing up as your whole self when you have no control over the outcome. It's one thing to show up as your whole self in circumstances that are low-risk where basically everyone thinks you're the bee's knees. It's a whole other situation to show up as your whole self when you truly have no control over the outcome. Being a nominee for bishop requires courage...perhaps more vocational courage than you've previously been called upon to muster. Each synod is different, but it's likely you're going to be asked to speak extemporaneously in front of hundreds of colleagues and church members, and then they're all going to either circle or not circle your name. And it's very possible that they won't circle your name. Take courage! Your worth as a beloved child of God has nothing to do with the processes happening around you, and you will need this courageous awareness all along the way. The process of a synod calling a bishop requires participants. If you feel called to participate, go for it. As you do, keep inhaling and exhaling courage all along the way. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you show up and be seen. At the end of the process, we trust that the right person will be called. You might not be that person, but your courage won't be wasted because God doesn't waste anything! All of the courage shown in the process by every participant gets recycled back into the synodical ecosystem, and it makes everyone stronger and more brave!

Non-attachment: If I could advise one thing to pack in your toolkit, it's this: non-attachment. Try your very best not to have an emotional attachment to any outcome. This is really challenging because you will perpetually be tempted to attach to an outcome. Attachment is a way of describing how sticky your own personal desires become to wanting the call process to go a specific way. It's really normal that you'll be inclined to attach to an outcome. You'll have to answer questions about your vision and strategies and hopes, and to do that well, you'll probably have to imagine yourself in the role of bishop. But as you imagine, try not to get too stuck in that place, because only one person gets elected. Try to remember that the process is set up in such a way that it works most effectively when the Holy Spirit can continue to blow all the way until the very last ballot is cast and counted. If you discern that you do feel called to participate in the process as a nominee, find ways to practice non-attachment all along the journey. Practice by allowing feelings to come and go without attaching to them. Lots of feelings will course through your body on this pathway...probably all of the feelings at some point, but remember, you are not your feelings. You can have feelings without attaching to all those feelings. Once you step into this arena, you have no control. This will be a great opportunity to practice releasing the illusion of control. From the moment you allow your name to be part of this process, try to participate with your wide open heart and trust God.

Self-Compassion: What's your relationship with yourself? If you do not have a good relationship with yourself, I do not recommend participating as a nominee. Self-compassion is a way of describing your capacity to extend yourself warmth and love no matter what. As you navigate the journey as a nominee (and after it's all over), please be gentle with yourself. You are loved. You are valued. You are worthy. No matter what. You're a pastor, so you think you already know these things because you proclaim them to other people every day. You think these identities in Christ are your lifelong baptismal gift, and you'll never forget your worth. But there might come a moment or a million moments in this process when you feel vulnerable and exposed and rejected. Lean toward compassion...not only for yourself but for everyone involved. Release any kind of judgment of yourself and others. Let Spirit move. And trust that at its core, this process has very little to do with you. It has everything to do with the transformative nature of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's willingness to use systems and structures and processes to transform the world into a more just and peaceful place. If you do become a

nominee in the process, be ready to extend yourself so much unconditional love before, during and after the experience.

Forgiveness: In our synod, the process started last fall with congregations receiving a packet of information that invited them to lift up names for the pre-election process. I suspect that the longer the process, the more time there is for a synod to discern. But it also means more time for people to say and do weird things. It's also more time for you as a nominee to say and do weird things, too. Maybe you will answer a question during a pre-assembly event in a confusing way. Maybe someone will say something intentionally or unintentionally offensive to you. Your peers and groups of people you don't know will talk about you when you're not there as they discern whether to vote for you during the balloting process. They'll dissect your credentials and resume. They'll try to figure out what separates you from the other nominees. All of these dynamics create a very unique synodical pressure cooker in which everyone sincerely wants a great outcome - but everyone is also a fallible and imperfect human. Potential nominees, forgive yourself and forgive other people every day, every hour, every minute of this process. You will definitely say something unintended along the way (probably multiple times), and then you'll replay it in your mind and think of at least a dozen ways you could've said it better. Release it. It's really possible that you might get hurt along the way by people who love you as a fellow human but don't think you're called to be bishop. Remember, it's literally the job of an assembly voter to make discernments and cast ballots. Everyone is doing the best they can to navigate a strange and holy process with the tools and resources and awarenesses they have. Also, humans have egos, and they get in the way, so just be prepared for that. Your ego will get in the way sometimes and that's okay. Discernment is complicated and humans are complicated, too. Forgive and release. Continually.

Acceptance: When it comes to reality, we can either welcome it or we can resist it. As you're packing up your nominee toolkit, make sure to save room for acceptance. Acceptance is a way of describing your ability to welcome reality as it actually is - not just as you wish it would be. Potential nominee, you may love the outcome of this process. It may be exactly what your heart desires. Or, it may not be what your heart desires. But no matter how you feel in a given moment (and your feelings will change and keep changing), you can always practice acceptance. As the balloting process progresses, your name might be there or your name might not. And all of it will happen in real-time in a big room of your peers (this was the most terrifying part for me). Don't retreat or shrink or crawl into a shell. You didn't do anything wrong. This is just how the process works. Breathe. A new reality is being ushered in, and you have a front row seat! Witness it. Welcome it. Feel what you feel. Practice acceptance.

There are many other emotional tools that would be beneficial in your toolkit, and perhaps other people will add to this list with their suggestions based on their own experiences. I'm a few days out from the process now, and I can definitely say it was one of the most spiritually formative times in my life. What a gift to explore ideas about God and humans and church in community with others. It was really exhausting, too.

The process of calling a new bishop is an exciting, engaging journey for a synod.

If you discern that God is calling you to participate as a nominee, please do. Then get to packing your emotional toolkit because as much as the synod will benefit from your ideas and vision and experience, the synod will also be collectively strengthened by the emotional intelligence you exemplify. Breathe deep, dear one, and get ready for an adventure.