



Northwestern Ohio Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Substance Abuse and Addiction Guidelines for Rostered Ministers and Congregations

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... ²⁹ for I am gentle and humble in heart"

– Matthew 11: 28-29

Approved by NWOS Synod Council
September 19th, 2026

Contents

1. Purpose	2
2. Background.....	3
2.1 <i>Definitions of Substance Abuse and Addiction</i>	<i>3</i>
3. Expectations.....	3
3.1 <i>Expectations of Rostered Ministers.....</i>	<i>3</i>
3.2 <i>Expectations of Congregations.....</i>	<i>4</i>
4. Investigative Process	4
4.1 <i>Receipt and Investigation of Concern or Complaint</i>	<i>4</i>
4.2 <i>Professional Medical/ Psychological Evaluation</i>	<i>4</i>
4.3 <i>Treatment or Disciplinary Process.....</i>	<i>4</i>
4.4 <i>Disclosure</i>	<i>4</i>
4.5 <i>Long-Term Recovery</i>	<i>4</i>
4.6 <i>Commitment to Future Disclosures</i>	<i>5</i>
5. Considerations for Congregations.....	6
5.1 <i>Workplace Substance Abuse Policy.....</i>	<i>6</i>
5.2 <i>Signs of Substance Misuse, Abuse, or Addiction.....</i>	<i>6</i>
5.3 <i>Handling Violations/Allegations</i>	<i>6</i>
5.4 <i>If Your Rostered Minister is Being Investigated, Treated, or in Recovery</i>	<i>7</i>
6. A Prayer for Those Suffering from Addiction	7

1. Purpose

This policy outlines how the Northwestern Ohio Synod (NWOS) responds to concerns of substance abuse and addiction as it relates to Rostered Ministers, in addition to outlining topics of consideration for congregations relating to the issue of substance abuse and addiction.

This policy is to be used in tandem with the synod's *Inquiry Process for Investigating Ministerial Ethics, Professionalism, and Misconduct*. Any conflicts between these policies are unintentional and should a conflict arise, the Bishop shall have the discretion to resolve the conflict as the Bishop sees fit.

2. Background

2.1 Definitions of Substance Abuse and Addiction

As defined by the American Society for Addiction Medicine, substance abuse:

“is the use of mood altering drugs that interferes with or has a negative effect on a person's life. This can include a negative effect on a person's physical, psychological, social, legal, emotional, occupational, and educational well-being.”¹

Substance addiction goes beyond substance abuse, and:

“is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.”¹

Furthermore, one of the hallmarks of a substance use disorder is “a cluster of cognitive, behavioral and psychological symptoms indicating that the individual continues using the substance despite significant substance-related problems.”²

It would be impossible to develop a comprehensive list of substances or behaviors that could be abused or prove addictive. For the purposes of this policy:

‘Substance’ can refer to any type of substance, or behavior consumed or engaged in with the intention of altering the mind/ mood, oftentimes for purposes of pleasure or coping, regardless of the legality of the substance, or behavior.

3. Expectations

3.1 Expectations of Rostered Ministers

Our church has established Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline to further outline the expectations and ramifications for the failure to live out such expectations. Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline state that:

“Misuse of substances (such as alcohol or drugs) or compulsions (such as gambling or use of pornography) that impair the ministerial function of a rostered minister is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office. Continued high-risk behavior or refusal to comply with treatment also constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.”

It should also be noted that if addictive behavior coincides with other behavior deemed to be incompatible with the character of the ministerial office as outlined by *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*, consequences for the additional incompatible behavior may override these *Substance Abuse and Addiction Guidelines for Rostered Ministers and Congregations*. As such, the Office of the Bishop may pursue an

¹ American Society of Addiction Medicine

² Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition, pg 483

investigative and possible disciplinary process on the basis of the non-addictive behavior that is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

3.2 Expectations of Congregations

It is the expectation of this synod, that congregations, congregational members, or congregational leaders, inform the office of the Bishop promptly if they are aware that their Rostered Minister is struggling with substance abuse or addiction. While it is the responsibility of all three expressions of this church (congregation, synod, and churchwide) to safeguard the integrity of the ministerial office; it is also our collective responsibility as followers of Jesus to practice care and compassion for each other and our leaders. This includes contacting the Office of the Bishop to arrange help for Rostered Ministers who are unable or unwilling to care for themselves.

4. Investigative Process

4.1 Receipt and Investigation of Concern or Complaint

The Office of Bishop will investigate concerns or complaints of substance abuse in accordance with this synod's *Inquiry Process for Concerns of Ministerial Ethics, Professionalism, or Misconduct*, which details the process of investigating, responding to, and resolving concerns and complaints.

4.2 Professional Medical/ Psychological Evaluation

In addition to the investigative process outlined in the synod's Inquiry Process, the Office of Bishop may request the Rostered Minister to undergo a professional medical or psychological evaluation. Such evaluation may assist the Office of Bishop to understand the extent of the minister's substance use and any addiction.

4.3 Treatment or Disciplinary Process

The synod's Inquiry Process will propose resolution in response to the findings from that process. Part of the resolution may include a treatment process. The Office of Bishop will consider the ability of the minister to remain in active service, or on leave from call, while undergoing treatment. It should be noted that in some cases this may not be possible. As stated in *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*, refusal to participate in a treatment plan constitutes "conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office" and is grounds for discipline and removal from the roster(s).⁸

4.4 Disclosure

As outlined by this synod's Inquiry Process, the Office of Bishop will make appropriate disclosure to the appropriate parties.

4.5 Long-Term Recovery

⁸ *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*, pg 5 & 9

If treatment proves successful to the satisfaction of both congregational leaders and the Office of the Bishop, the Rostered Minister will enter the recovery phase, which will be long term and perhaps indefinite. Treatment providers may give long term recommendations to all parties that are specific to the type of substance abuse or addiction. These may include, but are not limited to, increased supervision for a specific timeframe, internet controls, travel restrictions, long-term therapy, participation in long-term support groups, etc.

In addition to recommendations given by treatment providers, both the Office of the Bishop and congregation may outline additional stipulations for continued employment and rostered status. While these stipulations may go above and beyond what is recommended by the treatment provider, they should not conflict with the recommendations of the treatment provider and should be developed in consultation with the treatment providers.

After a year of continuous healthy behavior and/or treatment, the Office of Bishop may request a reassessment by a licensed medical/ psychological professional, preferably the same individual(s) utilized for the initial evaluation. If the evaluator/ treatment provider determines that recovery is on target, the Rostered Minister will provide appropriate status reports for an agreed upon period. Should the need arise in the opinion of the Office of the Bishop this reporting schedule may be modified.

4.6 Commitment to Future Disclosures

The Office of the Bishop is committed to future disclosure of known substance abuse and addictions. This will be disclosed in the Rostered Minister Profile and disclosed to congregations when a Rostered Minister interviews, even after years of service. If the Rostered Minister accepts a call in another ELCA Synod, the Office of the Bishop of the NWOS will disclose to the receiving Office of the Bishop both the existence of the substance abuse/ addiction and the rostered minister's history of compliance with proper treatment.

It is the policy and practice of this synod to never hide or cover up potentially damaging behaviors or actions of members of the rosters of this synod.

5. Considerations for Congregations

While the Office of the Bishop exercises some oversight of our Rostered Ministers in accordance with the constitutions of the three expressions of our church, a congregation is the legal employer of the Rostered Minister. As an employer, congregations are encouraged to have conversation about their own expectations in regard to conduct and acceptable workplace behavior of their employees, including their Rostered Minister(s).

Congregations are strongly encouraged to develop an "Employee Handbook" or "Personnel Policies" that outline appropriate conduct, workplace behavior, and expectations. The NWOS can offer a copy of its own Personnel Policies for congregations to utilize in crafting and contextualizing their own.

Congregations are also strongly advised to have any and all policies reviewed by their own legal counsel. Any recommendations given here or by the Office of the Bishop of this synod are not intended and should not be taken as professional legal counsel.

5.1 Workplace Substance Abuse Policy

As an employer, congregations should also consider adopting a workplace substance abuse policy of their own (if not included in the congregation's personnel policies). It is far easier to have conversation with employees about expectations and consequences before a problem arises. A clear policy can also provide legal protections to the congregation in the event of a termination or related employment dispute.

Resources and examples of policies can be found in abundance online, but congregations may wish to consult with their own members who are human resource professionals. Likewise, congregations could even contract with a firm or individual to develop a policy. Regardless, it is strongly encouraged that congregations seek the guidance of local legal counsel when developing these policies.

5.2 Signs of Substance Misuse, Abuse, or Addiction

Below are some signs and symptoms of possible substance abuse or addiction. (from the American Addiction Center):

- Loss/ lack of interest in work, declining workplace performance, consistent tardiness
- Changes in appearance especially a lack of personal hygiene and grooming
- Changes in behavior, especially increased need/ insistence of privacy
- Financial management issues, including asking to borrow money
- Extreme changes in relationships and interpersonal skills
- Changes in appetite and eating habits
- Bloodshot eyes, poor skin tone, appearing fatigued
- Defensiveness when asked about substance use, abuse/ addiction

It should be noted that some of these signs/ symptoms can also be symptoms of other issues, including mental illness or mood disorders. Therefore, their presence does not automatically mean a substance abuse issue or addiction is present, but they may indicate that some form of care or intervention is needed.

5.3 Handling Violations/Allegations

Congregations are encouraged to utilize this policy as a model for how they may respond to violations or allegations against their own employees. It is the hope of this synod that congregations respond with compassion and understanding, recognizing substance abuse and addiction as treatable medical and psychological issues and not moral failings.

5.4 If Your Rostered Minister is Being Investigated, Treated, or in Recovery

If the Office of the Bishop is investigating a Rostered Minister, called or otherwise employed by your congregation, you will be informed by the Office of the Bishop once the concerns or complaints have been substantiated as outlined in section 4.

When the Office of the Bishop discloses the existence or admission of substance abuse or addiction to the congregational leadership, the Office of the Bishop will also outline the next steps, such as treatment or disciplinary action, and provide recommendations to the congregational leadership. At that point, the congregational leadership has several different options and rights.

The congregation may choose to retain the Rostered Minister, working in tandem with the Office of the Bishop, treatment providers, and health insurers to provide support and treatment. The Rostered Minister, Office of the Bishop, or the congregation may request or decide that a medical leave may be necessary during this time. In this case, the Office of the Bishop will help the congregation find adequate pastoral care during the leave and will provide additional support and leadership to the congregation.

The congregation may also decide that it is in the best interest of the congregation to end the call of the Rostered Minister, and may ask him/her to resign, or if he/she refuses, may seek their termination in accordance with the constitutions of the congregation, synod, and ELCA. Likewise, the Rostered Minister may also decide that their resignation from the congregation is the best outcome. In both cases, the Office of the Bishop will work with all parties to achieve an appropriate severance package and separation.

A congregation with a recovering Rostered Minister should closely adhere to the long-term recommendations of the treatment providers in an effort to minimize the chances of relapse.

In the case of relapse, the process as outlined in section 4 will begin again.

6. A Prayer for Those Suffering from Addiction

O blessed Jesus, you ministered to all who came to you. Look with compassion upon all who through addiction have lost their health and freedom. Restore to them the assurance of your unfailing mercy; remove the fears that attack them; strengthen those who are engaged in the work of recovery; and to those who care for them, give honesty, understanding, and persevering love; for your mercy's sake. Amen.

- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* pg. 85