

June 3, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

First of all, I want to commend our NGLS candidate for having the integrity and maturity to even ask the question of whether or not an intern could cohabitate with a partner or fiancé while on internship. His forthright honesty speaks of his character and a desire to be transparent. I believe our Church is living in a time when everything is being re-examined which makes the question not only appropriate, but timely.

Know that the answer to this question impacts not only the intern and his partner, and not only the internship site, committee, and supervising pastor, but also both ECSW and NGLS candidacy committees, both myself and Bishop Edison-Albright, and our colleague bishops across the ELCA. It will also impact future candidates, interns, and rostered leaders.

My discernment of this question has included conversations with our Candidacy and Leadership Manager, Rev. Ramie Bakken, the NGLS candidacy committee, ECSW Bishop Anne Edison-Albright, and a handful of rostered leaders whom I asked to consider this as a theoretical situation. Out of these conversations I heard the following:

- By requiring marriage, or even engagement, as the pre-requisite to co-habitation of partners, would that pressure the couple to bring their relationship to a level of commitment that they do not feel ready for?
- By requiring an engagement, would this open the door for abuse? An intern or a pastor could, in order to cohabitate with a partner, enter into multiple engagements over time, or become engaged for the sake of convenience? It is much easier to enter into an engagement of convenience than to enter into a marriage of convenience.
- Why the focus on marriage? There are plenty of dysfunctional marriages as there are plenty of cohabitating couples who approach their commitment to each other with honor and integrity.
- The world has shifted, and most couples today live together before marriage.
- “Biblical marriage” does not offer a helpful example. Multiple wives, easy divorce, and a minimum word from Jesus leaves a theological silence regarding sexual relations before marriage.
- The rostered leader is held to a higher standard because the potential for harm is greater.

I have been grateful for the conversation surrounding this issue, and I recognize that the world is shifting. However, I feel my responsibility most acutely in regard to the potential for harm. While I have no doubt that the intern and his partner are in a committed relationship that is monogamous and honorable, the only metric I have to apply to what constitutes “committed” is marriage since engagements are not as binding. While I would like to take such questions on a case-by-case basis, currently I have no other metric by which to judge the intentions of

pastoral leaders towards their partners, and my decision in this case will set a precedent whether I want it to or not.

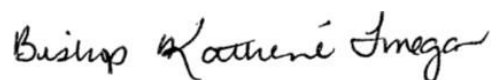
Since it is up to the bishop to decide what are the grounds for disciplinary action, it then becomes my responsibility to define those parameters. After much consideration, until further notice, the Northern Great Lakes Synod will expect that candidates for ministry, interns, deacons, and pastors will be married (publicly accountable monogamous relationship) when cohabiting with their partner for the following reasons:

- Because of the potential for harm: While the internship committee and supervising pastor may have no problem or even support co-habitation, they cannot speak for the whole congregation. The effectiveness of the intern as a leader in formation will be compromised by those who see cohabitation negatively, even if their disapproval is not verbalized.
- Living together without a legal contract poses a risk to the intern or rostered leader. If the relationship should disintegrate to the point of vengeance, the former partner could claim that professional boundaries were crossed, jeopardizing the future of the intern or rostered leader. A legal marriage makes that much less likely.
- Rostered leaders are held to a higher standard because of the potential for harm. That is part of our calling, our privilege, and our responsibility.

While I appreciate the support our NGLS candidate is receiving from his internship site, I feel it is inappropriate for one bishop, or one congregation, or one internship committee, or one candidacy committee to, in essence, decide for the whole Church a new standard for interns and rostered leaders. Since such a change impacts so many, it ought to be considered in collective and prayerful discernment by the whole Church. A day may come, and may come soon, when the metric by which the Church gauges what is a committed relationship changes, or a new system is developed. But I do not believe we are there yet.

Thank you all for your consideration of these things and God bless your efforts in ministry.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bishop Katherine Finegan". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Rev. Katherine Finegan

Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America