

NORTHWEST WASHINGTON SYNOD
POLICY ON ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS

Adopted by Synod Council September 19, 2015

Replaces Policy on Chemical Dependencies dated January 16, 1993

Addiction is a reality of human life. We define addiction as a “behavior one continues doing compulsively, regardless of the negative consequences.” While addiction does not preclude one from the pastoral office or rostered ministry, untreated addiction is destructive to individuals and breaks trust with community, and is therefore incompatible with rostered leader service in the church.

Both *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* and *Vision and Expectations* outline the church’s standards of conduct for rostered leaders. Here is a relevant section from *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* (page 5 paragraph 6):

Addiction and Substance Abuse: Any addictive behavior that impairs the ability of an ordained minister to perform effectively the duties of the office or the misuse of alcohol, drugs, medications, sex, gambling, or pornography is incompatible with the office of pastoral ministry. The approach of this church to such a problem may be to insist upon effective treatment or to initiate immediate discipline. Refusal to accept treatment or failure to abide by the terms of such treatment is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

(The corresponding statement for the lay rosters is found in *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* page 9 paragraph 5.)

Consistent with this standard, the Northwest Washington Synod has adopted the following policy for handling all addictive behavior; substance abuse; and, substance use disorder, also referred to in this policy as substance misuse or substance misuse disorder.

1. A person dealing with addictive behavior, substance abuse, and/or substance use disorder may seek advice or assistance voluntarily without fear of punitive action. Family, friends, and/or colleagues may discreetly initiate help without fear of punitive action or discrimination as well.
2. In the pastoral role as Bishop, and in the Bishop's responsibility for the pastoral care of the clergy and lay rostered leaders, the Bishop is responsible to the Synod Council for the well-being of all rostered leaders. If it comes to the attention of the Bishop or Bishop’s staff that a pastor or lay rostered leader is exhibiting addictive symptoms or behaviors, the Bishop will take action for the sake of the church and the sake of the rostered leader. The Bishop will seek assistance from professionals specializing in the area of the addictive behavior, substance abuse, and substance use disorder.
3. The Bishop or someone on the Bishop’s staff will contact the rostered leader and ask the rostered leader to get an assessment by a professional specializing in the area of the individual’s addictive behavior, substance abuse, or substance use disorder. The choice of professional may be made by the rostered leader but must be approved by the Bishop or Bishop’s designee before the assessment begins. If the rostered leader refuses the assessment, the disciplinary process may begin immediately. Once the assessment is complete, if indications are that no significant problem is present at the time the assessment has been completed, no further action shall be necessary.
4. If there is a positive assessment for addictive behavior, substance abuse, or substance use disorder, the rostered leader must begin recommended treatment immediately. A variety of treatment options may be considered, but must be among those recommended by a professional specializing in

the addictive behavior, substance abuse, or substance use disorder disclosed by the assessment. The rostered leader will sign a release to the treatment counselor to provide a monthly report to the Bishop's office for one year. The rostered leader shall also sign a separate release recognizing and authorizing the disclosure of information to the rostered leader's congregation, clients, and/or colleagues, as the case may be.

5. The Bishop's office will contact the congregational president and/or vice president for the purposes of making disclosure of the rostered leader's addictive behavior, substance abuse, or substance use disorder and assessment. Congregational councils and other employers should give reasonable sick leave in the event the rostered leader is in treatment on an in-patient basis and/or as indicated by treatment recommendations.

6. The cost of assessment and/or treatment for rostered leaders may be supported by the ELCA medical benefits plan, where applicable. The Synod shall not be required to pay for any portion of the costs of assessment and/or treatment.

7. If this is an internet related behavior (for example, sex, gambling, or pornography), the congregation and rostered leader may be asked to install internet computer monitoring software or devices with reporting capabilities on all church and personal computers. Periodic, random reports of internet activity may be requested. An evaluation of the computers may be done by a professional.

8. After a year of continuous sobriety and/or treatment, a reassessment will be made. If the specialist engaged for reassessment determines recovery is on target, the rostered leader will report annually thereafter.

9. The person under treatment should be accorded job security in the position where he/she is, both during and after in- and/or out-patient treatment, whenever feasible as determined by the Bishop in consultation with the congregation.

10. Discrimination in violation of applicable state or federal law of a recovering rostered person with an addictive behavior, substance abuse behavior, and/or substance use disorder shall not be permitted.

11. Diagnosed addictive behavior, substance abuse, and/or substance use disorder will be disclosed to a congregation when rostered leaders interview for a potential call, as required by the ELCA. If the rostered leader interviews for a call in another ELCA Synod, the Bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod shall disclose to the receiving bishop or appropriate bishop's staff person both the existence of the addictive, substance abuse, and/or substance use disorder behavior(s) and the rostered leader's history of compliance with required treatment.

12. The policy of job protection and re-employment need not be applied to persons with addictive, substance abuse, and/or substance use disorder symptoms or behavior who refuse treatment.

Nothing in this policy is intended to limit the role or responsibilities of the Bishop under Chapter 14 of the Synod Constitution, or the duties and responsibilities of congregations under their constitutions.