

Tanzania bishop tells Lutheran World Federation gay relations unacceptable: Says relationships "against principles of nature"

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The host bishop at a global Lutheran conference in Tanzania raised the thorny issue of homosexuality in his sermon opening the meeting of the main governing body of the 68-million-strong Lutheran World Federation—a group that has so far avoided the open fights over the issue seen in the Anglican Communion.

Lutheran bishop Thomas O. Laiser, speaking in Arusha at the June 25 gathering of the LWF Council, said same-sex relationships are unacceptable and go against biblical teachings.

“What is the witnessing and the stand of the LWF at the moment as [far as] the whole question of homosexuality and lesbianism is concerned?” asked Laiser. “It is an undeniable fact that this question is not even discussable, and therefore it is not acceptable.”

LWF president Mark Hanson, who is also the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said he believed that the global Lutheran body has mechanisms to adequately deal with debate and divergent attitudes on the issues of human sexuality.

“There are some people who would love to see us fall apart on this issue,” Hanson added.

Although Lutheran churches throughout the world hold different views about matters such as the acceptance of homosexuals in church life and blessings for same-sex relationships in some Northern Hemisphere countries, the LWF has managed to avoid the divisions faced by Anglicans.

Tanzanians, some of them in traditional Masai dress, danced and sang during the two-hour service, which officially began the six-day gathering of the council. The meeting near the foot of Africa's highest mountain had an environmental theme, "Melting Snow on Mount Kilimanjaro: A Witness of a Suffering Creation."

The Tanzanian bishop said: "I am not standing here to tell you how this matter should be in your respective churches and countries; I am only sharing with you a piece of information on our stand in the ELCT [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania], your host."

Laiser, who studied for a master's degree in theology at Wartburg Seminary in Iowa, said that homosexuality "violates all the principles of what we know about the teachings of the word of God" and is "also against the principles of nature."

He added, however, "I am not saying there are no homosexuals and lesbians in Africa and in Tanzania. The worst thing is this strong move to make these perverts officials in the church in the guise of human rights." He said the situation should be "mended" before it is "past mending."

At a press conference, Hanson said the Lutheran federation is addressing the topic of sexuality in a way that does not stifle discussion.

He noted that at its last council meeting in 2007 at Lund, Sweden, the governing body received a report from the LWF Task Force on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality. The council asked LWF churches to discuss the issues in their congregations, within a biblical context and with an awareness of how these issues could impact relationships with others.

Hanson said that during his visit to bishops in Tanzania and East Africa before coming to Arusha, he had listened to Tanzanian bishops discuss how to grapple with the lingering issue of polygamy in their communities and how to allow people in polygamous families to share in the sacraments.

At the June 25 LWF service, Hanson asked for patience while sexual issues are discussed in member churches, saying he thought it was not "helpful" at present for the LWF as a communion to take a stance. -Peter Kenny, ENI