

Allowing local option would fracture ELCA, say Lutheran critics: Ordination of gay pastors

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If this summer's Evangelical Lutheran Church in America convention follows the advice of a sexuality task force to selectively permit ordination of homosexual pastors without fear of church discipline, the denomination will suffer "structural dissolution" and, at the local level, "intense division and disunity," contends a group of influential Lutheran theologians and clergy.

The ELCA task force, saying it tried to "set a pastoral tone," released its recommendations in January, and in them acknowledged that some regional church bodies "may choose to refrain from disciplining those who in good conscience, and for the sake of outreach, ministry and the commitment to further dialogue, call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates" to the ordained ministry.

National, regional and local bodies within the 5.1-million-member ELCA, including its council of bishops, will be crafting their official responses prior to the August 8-16 churchwide assembly in Orlando.

A strongly worded statement by 17 Lutherans, many of them prominent academics, declared that the task force's comments on "conscience" and its "pastoral" approach to local decisions amounted to an abdication of "theological and moral constitutional responsibility" by the church. The ELCA at present does not permit the ordination of openly gay pastors, though some such ordinations have taken place without strong penalties.

"The most conspicuous logical inconsistency in the task force's report is that in the name of a 'no change in policy' it advocates a fundamental shift in policy," says the statement circulated by one of the signers, Robert D. Benne of Roanoke College in Virginia. Other signers included Jean Bethke Elshtain, who teaches at the University of Chicago Divinity School; Karl P. Donfried, religion professor at Smith College; Carl

E. Braaten, coeditor of *Pro Ecclesia* and former professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago; William H. Lazareth, a former seminary professor and bishop now teaching at Salem College in North Carolina; William G. Rusch, a former ELCA chief ecumenical officer; and Robert W. Jenson, a longtime seminary professor now resident at the Center for Theological Study at Princeton.