

Norway Lutherans vote to cut church-state ties: Historic decision approved by synod delegates

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The general synod of the Church of Norway has voted for the first time to radically change the Lutheran church's relations with the country's government—a break toward autonomy that may take six years to complete.

A total of 63 out of 85 synod delegates voted in mid-November that the church should no longer be referred to in the country's constitution as a state or national church, according to the church's information service.

The Church of Norway's synod, which has 11 bishops, said it should assume all church authority now resting with the king and the government. Only 19 synod delegates voted to retain the church-state system.

"The synod's decision is historic," said Jens Petter Johnsen, director of the Church of Norway national council. "What matters is the relationship between church and people, not between church and state. We will do our utmost to strengthen the service of the church and with our people."

The church-state relationship was established in Norway in 1537, when the Danish king endorsed the Lutheran Reformation. Of Norway's 4.6 million people, 85 percent belong to the Church of Norway.

The synod's decision is in line with a proposal made by a government-appointed commission early in 2006 and resembles changes made in 2000 by the neighboring (Lutheran) Church of Sweden.

The changes will move slowly. A government report to Norway's parliament is expected in late 2008. Revising the system will require changes to the country's constitution, and some officials see 2013 as a target date.

The Roman Catholic bishop of Oslo has supported the Lutheran Church's moves to dissolve the church-state system. "The idea of the government as the supreme leadership of the Church of Norway belongs to another time than ours," Bishop Bernt Eidsvig told the newspaper *Aftenposten* on December 3. -*Ecumenical News International*