

Ruling to remove gay pastor may rekindle Lutheran debate: Committee removes him while calling for reinstatement

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America may be asked to change a ban on practicing gay and lesbian clergy after a disciplinary committee voted to remove an openly gay pastor but suggested that the church find a way to reinstate him.

The ruling called for Bradley Schmeling, a gay pastor in a committed relationship, to be removed from his pulpit at St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta by August 15. The committee said that it reached the decision reluctantly and suggested that the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly, which meets August 6-11, should "reconsider and revise" guidelines prohibiting gay clergy who are not celibate.

The hearing committee said that the gay pastor ban is "at least bad policy, and very may well violate the constitution and bylaws of this church." The 12-member committee also recommended that the upcoming assembly in Chicago consider reinstating pastors who have been ousted from their positions for being in committed homosexual relationships.

Emily Eastwood, executive director of the gay rights group Lutherans Concerned/North America, called the ruling "astounding and unprecedented.

"This is not about the removal [of Schmeling]," she said. "If he had been acquitted or censured we would have dodged a bullet in this one case, but, since the decision calls for his removal at a specific time and calls for a change within that time frame, we have an opportunity to change the policy outright."

At the church's last national meeting in 2005, ELCA delegates defeated a move to allow practicing gay and lesbian clergy and upheld a 1993 policy banning same-sex

marriage. A churchwide commission had recommended permitting local option on gay ordination. But if the issue resurfaces at the August meeting, it would come as resolutions from regional church bodies, a church official said.

In an open letter to his parish, which was largely supportive during the case, Schmeling said he thinks the policy of the church is wrong and needs to be changed, though he acknowledged that “change never comes without a struggle.”

Added Schmeling: “My sexual orientation and my partnered status shouldn’t preclude me from serving the church.”

ELCA spokesperson John Brooks said he could not comment on the case because both Schmeling and Atlanta bishop Ronald Warren, who began the disciplinary proceedings against Schmeling, still have 30 days from February 7, when the decision was announced, to appeal the decision.

Mark Chavez, director of WordAlone, a conservative Lutheran group based in Minnesota that supports the ban on actively gay clergy, said the committee’s decision is “further evidence that many of the leaders of the ELCA are convinced that they can disregard the authority of God’s word and, especially, the word as revealed in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that clearly proscribes homosexual behavior.” *–Religion News Service*