

ELCA urges 'restraint' toward gay pastors: A split decision

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For years, the largest U.S. Lutheran denomination has avoided some of the rancor over the issue of same-sex relationships that has divided the Episcopal Church and, to a lesser extent, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church. That could change, given two different decisions by the 4.8-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at its 2007 biennial assembly August 6-11 at Chicago's Navy Pier.

The Churchwide Assembly voted August 10 not to overturn the denomination's rules that bar the ordination of noncelibate homosexual clergy. The 1,000 voting delegates appeared to prefer dealing with that policy in 2009 when the assembly will discuss a long-awaited study on human sexuality.

But a day later, the delegates approved a resolution that calls on bishops and synods to "refrain" from taking punitive action or to "demonstrate restraint" in disciplining gay clergy in committed relationships.

That resolution, which passed 538 to 431, may have been prompted partly by the case of Bradley Schmeling, an Atlanta pastor defrocked this year after he told his bishop of his relationship with a male partner. In addition, earlier at the assembly, more than 80 ELCA clergy and seminarians publicly declared their homosexuality.

While seeing the restraint resolution as an interim measure, Emily Eastwood, executive director of Lutherans Concerned, a group advocating for gays, declared that the vote was "one giant step" by the Chicago-based denomination.

"Full inclusion and acceptance is still down the road, but the dam of discrimination has been broken," according to Eastwood, who also spoke for GoodSoil, a coalition of groups supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people active in churches. "It is a great day for LGBT clergy," she said.

Lutheran CORE, which opposes giving homosexuals in the church more rights, called the two votes an example of shutting “the front door for now on allowing ministers in same-sex relationships to serve the denomination,” but then telling “them to go to the back door and come in.”

Jaynan Clark Eglund, head of the conservative WordAlone Network, said in a statement: “I don’t know as a Christian, as a pastor and as a parent what really would be worse—a church with no biblical standards to govern our ministry, or standards we don’t intend to enforce. To refrain from discipline in the home is bad parenting, but we’re about to do so in Christ’s church.”

During assembly debate on the resolution, Bishop Paul R. Landahl of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod said that delegates needed “some breathing space to do what God is telling us to do.” Bishop Eric M. Peterson of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin added, “We need to refrain from harming good leaders.”

At a news conference, Mark S. Hanson, reelected by delegates for another six-year term as ELCA presiding bishop, depicted the restraint resolution “as words of counsel.” He added: “They are not words that change the standards of the church. They reflect the mind of this assembly as it seeks to give counsel to the leaders of the church.”

Hanson, who is also president of the 66-million-member Lutheran World Federation, indicated that the differences between LWF churches on homosexuality have not led to the intense conflict experienced in the Anglican Communion.

“The Church of Sweden is in a very different place than the Mekane Yesus Church of Ethiopia,” he said. “Those differences should not become church-dividing or church-defining.”

The assembly’s deliberations prompted a response by Gerald Kieschnick, the president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. In his official greetings to the ELCA assembly August 10—as it was considering whether to open ministry to noncelibate gays—Kieschnick said that “for the sake of our mutual witness and service together”—the two churches cooperate in Lutheran Services in America, Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran World Relief—“the implications of such action, should it be taken, would need to be addressed, fraternally and evangelically.” *-Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*