

Lutheran panel proposes road map to permit partnered gay clergy: A four-step process

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A blue-ribbon panel has recommended that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lift its ban on partnered gay and lesbian clergy, but only after the church agrees in principle on gay relationships and agrees to respect the consciences of those who dissent.

A majority of the 15-member Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality believes that “it is possible to devise guidelines and policies that would allow . . . some flexibility” in its ordination standards.

The 4.7-million-member ELCA currently allows gay or lesbian clergy who pledge to be celibate; partnered or sexually active homosexual clergy are technically not allowed in ELCA pulpits, though some buck the rules without punishment.

At the ELCA convention two years ago, delegates—in a surprising interim action—voted 538 to 431 to call upon bishops and synods to refrain from taking punitive action against clergy in committed same-sex relationships.

The long-awaited task force recommendations, released February 19, were accompanied by a 30-page statement outlining the church’s thinking on homosexuality. (Citing a lack of consensus, however, the panel did not speak on whether to adopt rites for blessing same-sex couples.)

If the ELCA’s biennial Churchwide Assembly in August approves the ministry proposals, it would remove the blanket ban on noncelibate gay and lesbian clergy. Congregations and their governing bodies would be empowered to make their own decisions on ordination—a “local option” step disparaged by conservative critics as divisive.

However, Stan Olson, a task force advisor who heads the ELCA’s unit on vocations, said: “As on most matters, we trust people locally to make good decisions.”

While permitting noncelibate gay clergy would be a watershed decision for the ELCA, numerous obstacles could waylay the four-step process when the recommendation is considered by more than 1,000 delegates August 17-23 in Minneapolis.

Emily Eastwood, executive director of the pro-gay group Lutherans Concerned/North America, called the recommendations a “net gain.” But, Eastwood said, “we are distraught by the complexity of this system and the bureaucracy needed to maintain it if it passes.”

Lutheran CORE is one of the conservative groups pledged to fight the proposals. “These recommendations mark a significant departure from the church’s commitment to scripture as the source and norm of its faith and life,” said Paull Spring of State College, Pennsylvania, a CORE leader and former ELCA bishop.

Delegates to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly asked the task force to offer policy recommendations on allowing partnered gay and lesbian ministers to serve in the ELCA, the nation’s largest Lutheran denomination. A previous recommendation from the same task force to loosen restrictions on gay clergy was rejected by the Churchwide Assembly in 2005.

“This is a deeply divided church over this issue,” said Peter Strommen, a former bishop who chairs the task force and now pastors a church in Prior Lake, Minnesota.

The recommendations are subject to some change before the convention. The ELCA’s 37-member Church Council could amend the recommendations and the four-stage approval process when it meets March 27-30 in Chicago. For example, it is unclear whether the resolutions at the August convention will require approval by a simple majority or by two-thirds of the assembly.

In order to lift restrictions on gay clergy, the assembly must approve each of the following resolutions before the next can be considered:

- That the ELCA is committed to allowing congregations and synods to recognize and support “lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”
- That the ELCA is committed to finding a way for people in such relationships to serve as clergy in the church.
- That the ELCA agrees to “respect the bound consciences” of church members who disagree on the issue.
- That the ELCA agrees to remove the blanket ban on partnered gay clergy.

Task Force leaders said the church must deal with underlying issues—how it feels about gay relationships and the lack of consensus in the church—before it can amend its rules.

“We think you can’t really deal adequately with the change in policy unless you clarify your thinking on the principles,” said Strommen. —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*