

A vote for gay clergy: In the ELCA

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Leave it to Lutherans to address the issue of gay clergy with repeated references to a “bound conscience.” The term echoes the words of Martin Luther, who when he was put on trial for his critique of the Catholic Church declared that he would not recant, for he was “bound in conscience by the word of God.”

Respect for the bound consciences of opponents helped foster a civil debate last month in Minneapolis, where the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to allow noncelibate gays on its clergy roster (see news story on page 14). To be precise, the church voted to make room for clergy who are living in “publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships.” The talk of bound consciences was an acknowledgment that both opponents and advocates of the change may operate out of deeply held, scripturally based beliefs. Concern for bound consciences led to a final resolution calling on the church to make room for individuals and congregations that disagree with the outcome of the vote.

And there is the ecclesial rub. Is it possible for those conscience-bound to oppose gay clergy to join in synod activities with those bound in the opposite way? The church is used to accommodating many kinds of moral disagreements—on abortion, gun control and war, for example—but the issue of gay clergy raises structural issues requiring specific accommodations. Can the pastoral needs of differing congregations be met? Does a bound conscience on this issue inevitably lead to separation? No one knows for sure.

The ELCA’s continued capacity to negotiate differences will be important. The deeper issue is whether implementation of the new policy will be theologically cogent enough to win over skeptics and those with otherwise-bound consciences. For it to be so will require making good on the policy’s law and gospel dimensions.

As for law: the church must indeed make same-sex relationships as “publicly accountable” as heterosexual ones (neither more nor less so), in order to refute the charge that the new policy is merely anti nomian. The church has not abandoned moral law; it is saying that the crucial biblical standard for sexual relationships is faithfulness (“lifelong, monogamous”), not heterosexuality. So let that standard be applied. Given the sometimes nonexistent legal status of gay relationships, that may be no simple task.

As for gospel: the church will need to demonstrate in a compelling way what Lutherans are good at asserting: that Christian identity is based neither on sexual orientation nor on one’s convictions about sexual orientation or any other moral issue, but on the promises of God made known in Christ. Drawing on their rich tradition of law and gospel, Lutherans can make a unique witness of love and justice toward gays.