

Some Lutherans consider cutting ELCA ties: After the ELCA decision on gay clergy

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A group of Lutherans upset over the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's recent decision to allow qualified noncelibate gays to serve as clergy voted to create a freestanding synod and to study for a year whether to leave the denomination.

"Basically, what we're saying is that a year from now, we're going to have a proposal of some form," said David Baer of Whitewood, South Dakota, a pastor and member of the Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (CORE), which hosted the meeting of 1,200 conservatives in an Indianapolis suburb September 25-26.

The group approved a constitution for CORE and asked a steering committee to return in a year with recommendations on whether to leave the ELCA, merge with another Lutheran denomination, or start their own. Ultimately, the group hopes to "reconfigure" Lutheranism in North America to accord with traditional views of scripture and homosexuality.

In August, the ELCA at its churchwide assembly voted to allow Lutherans in "lifelong, publicly accountable, monogamous, same-gender relationships" to serve as clergy or professional church workers. The 4.6-million-member church also voted to allow congregations to "recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships."

Regional synods and local congregations are not required to hire gay or lesbian pastors or to recognize same-sex couples—a position intended to acknowledge the deep divisions on homosexuality within the ELCA.

Already, though, one well-known congregation has departed. On September 27, the Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, which was the ELCA's tenth largest congregation at 6,800 members, voted to leave the denomination and join Lutheran

Congregations in Missions for Christ. The Arizona church, whose senior pastor is Walt Kallestad, took its first vote to secede—two votes are required under ELCA guidelines—in June, before the ELCA assembly decision.

As for the freestanding synod that CORE created on September 26, its leaders asked ELCA members to funnel donations away from the denomination's Chicago headquarters.

CORE leaders say their synod will assume the tasks of regular ELCA synods: providing congregational resources, planting new congregations, supporting global missionaries and offering theological education.

"God is calling us to do something," said CORE's chair, Paull Spring of State College, Pennsylvania. "The ELCA has fallen into heresy. It is a time for confession and a time to resist."

Meanwhile, the ELCA has yet to make revisions to the denomination's ministry policies as required by the delegate balloting in Minneapolis. The ELCA News Service said it appeared that final work on new policy language will not occur before April.

The president of the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, second to the ELCA in membership among U.S. Lutheran bodies, referred to that bureaucratic process in reiterating the LCMS's opposition to the acceptance of noncelibate gay clergy.

"It would be a blessing to our ongoing cooperative relationships if the actions taken at the ELCA assembly were not implemented, nor given influence," wrote LCMS president Gerald B. Kieschnick in an October 1 letter to the bishops conference.

Nevertheless, Kieschnick and ELCA presiding bishop Mark Hanson met in Baltimore the week before and agreed to do all they could to continue working together on the social ministry projects of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Services in America and Lutheran World Relief.

Hanson reportedly thanked Kieschnick for his "clear" and "honest" comments at the late September meeting.

In a separate but related development, the International Lutheran Council adopted a statement objecting to recent actions by the ELCA and other religious groups that condone same- gender relationships.

“Rooted in the Bible’s witness and in keeping with Christian teaching through 2,000 years, we continue to believe that the practice of homosexuality—in any and all situations—violates the will of the Creator God and must be recognized as sin,” reads the group’s August 31 statement.

The LCMS is a member of the council, with Kieschnick serving as chair, but the ELCA is not. Hanson is also president of the Lutheran World Federation. -*Religion News Service*