

African Lutherans press opposition to gay rites: Church leaders in Tanzania and Ethiopia

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Three months before a major assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, church leaders in Tanzania and Ethiopia—who represent the two largest Lutheran constituencies in Africa—have expressed opposition to “same-sex marriages and those who support the legitimacy of such marriage.”

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America last year urged members to allow congregations that choose to do so “to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships,” but delegates did not call them marriages—reserving that term for heterosexual couples.

A statement posted April 29 on the Web site of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) said it will neither accept money nor work with groups that “support the legitimacy” of same-gender marriage. It was uncertain whether the ELCT included support for same-sex blessings and committed gay partnerships as cause for boycott as well. The 2009 ELCA assembly also acknowledged that its members were divided on the issue and would respect the consciences of Lutherans who disagree.

The 70-million-member Lutheran World Federation will hold its once-every-seven-years meeting July 20–27 in Stuttgart, Germany, and homosexuality is expected to be a divisive issue. The LWF president is Mark S. Hanson, who is also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The ELCA announced that Hanson would hold private meetings in Chicago in May with leaders of the two African Lutheran bodies—Wakseyoum Idosa, president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, and Alex Mala susa, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

Those African churches expressed deep concern over decisions of the 2009 ELCA assembly—and, separately, the Church of Sweden—on sexuality matters.

Hanson said in a May 4 statement that he expects to have “honest and open conversations” with those leaders in separate meetings. Hanson said he would affirm “the ELCA’s shared commitment with partner churches to be engaged in God’s mission for the sake of the world.”

Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of the ELCA’s Division for Global Mission, said that since the 2009 biennial assembly in Minneapolis, his mission staff has been in touch with many companion churches. “Our intent is to continue to be respectful of local policies and practices in the assignment of mission personnel and the development of shared ministries,” Padilla said.

Meanwhile, in the United States, ELCA officials continue to implement policies that now allow eligible Lutherans in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as clergy and professional lay leaders.

Bradley E. Schmeling, an openly gay Atlanta pastor whose clergy status was removed in 2007, has been reinstated to the ELCA clergy roster along with partner Darin Easler.

“It feels like being back with the family again after a time of uncomfortable separation,” said Schmeling, who serves as pastor at St. John Lutheran Church in Atlanta. Schmeling’s case attracted considerable attention in the news media.

Easler, who left an ELCA parish in Minnesota in 2003, had been removed from the ELCA clergy roster in 2006, but he later worked as a United Church of Christ minister in hospice care. A regional ELCA synod in Minnesota approved Easler’s request for reinstatement April 30.