

Conservative Lutherans organize new church body

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Conservative Lutherans have a new church body that came into being following disagreements with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over the ordination of gay clergy.

The North American Lutheran Church, formed August 26-27 in Grove City, Ohio, "will uphold confessional principles dear to Lutherans, including a commitment to the authority of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions," organizers said.

In 2009, after years of contentious debate, the ELCA voted to change its policies to allow noncelibate gay and lesbian clergy and to allow churches to bless same-sex relationships.

Ryan Schwarz, vice chairperson of Lutheran CORE, the organizing group of the new church body, said in an interview that the ELCA's policy on same-sex relationships is "a symptom" rather than a cause of the unhappiness over the ELCA.

Schwarz cited a recent example of a service held by one ELCA synod in which, he said, several versions of the Lord's Prayer were recited, including one in which "the Mother who is within us" was evoked. "To us, that appears to be close to paganism," Schwarz said.

Asked why dissatisfied ELCA members did not join the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Schwarz said he and many who are likely to join the NALC neither agree with the Missouri Synod's "very literal" interpretation of the Bible nor support its ban on ordination of women.

Schwarz said 18 U.S. congregations have already decided to join the new church and more than 100 congregations are preparing to do so.

The Chicago-based ELCA has 4.5 million members and more than 10,200 congregations. It takes a two-thirds majority of members in two successive votes

for congregations to disaffiliate. As of August 3, according to ELCA tabulations, 504 congregations have taken first votes to leave the ELCA; 348 passed, 156 failed. Of the 348 that passed, 212 congregations took a second vote, 199 of which passed and 13 failed.

Spokesperson John Brooks said the ELCA "regrets the decisions of some ELCA congregations and members to create another church body and possibly leave the ELCA."

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson issued a pastoral letter August 24, noting the ELCA's commitment to ecumenical relations with other church bodies. But he indicated that it would be difficult to establish cooperation with the breakaway church in light of mischaracterizations of the ELCA, which he did not identify. "I believe we must commit to obey the commandment against bearing false witness and commit to live its meaning in every setting, both private and public," wrote Hanson.

"We live in a world that is plagued by incivility, willful misunderstanding and hurtful caricatures of those with whom one disagrees," he added. "There is room in [Lutheran churches] for vigorous dialogue that witnesses to faith without rushing to judgment and closing off discussion." —Chris Herlinger, ENI/RNS