

Churches leaving ELCA evaluate the cost

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

South Dakota pastor Julius Badigo has long known that Christian discipleship is costly. For him, that cost is increasingly measured in dollars—to the tune of thousands per month.

Badigo lost his \$2,200 monthly salary earlier this year when his Sioux Falls church cut ties with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in protest of new denominational policies that allow noncelibate gay clergy and the blessing of same-sex unions.

Badigo's ELCA-funded position ended—and so did his seminary coursework, because ELCA stopped funding his tuition. Married with two children, he still leads an African mission congregation, now named Falls Community Church, but his only income is \$70 per week from a part-time job as a security guard.

"In the church, I'm the only pastor, but nobody's paying me, and we have a lot of bills," Badigo said. "That's why I'm just praying for God's help."

Parishes unhappy with the ELCA's new policies on gays are exploring alternatives, such as switching to the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), which was officially launched in August. Weighing options, however, includes counting what can be considerable costs—and determining how much they're willing to suffer for their convictions.

Since the ELCA approved its policy switch in August 2009, 362 of its 10,000-plus congregations have voted to leave the denomination (some have not yet taken a requisite second vote).

Financial costs haven't always loomed large in congregational decisions since, unlike some other mainline denominations, the ELCA lets a congregation retain its building if it joins another recognized Lutheran denomination, such as the NALC.

Even so, some Lutheran parishes are debating whether the price of separation from the ELCA is worthwhile. And for fledgling congregations— 105 mission churches that serve African immigrants in the U.S., including Badigo's South Dakota congregation—financial issues also play an important role.

Most of the ELCA's African mission churches in the U.S. don't own buildings and depend on ELCA financial support to pay pastors and fund programs. Yet all 105 strongly oppose the ELCA's new policies, according to Jordan Long, a pastor in Rochester, New York, who directs African ministries for Lutheran CORE, the group leading the NALC.

"I know a lot of congregations that are stuck," Long said. "It's not because they support the resolution [on gay clergy and same-sex blessings], but because they are afraid of the consequences" if they leave the ELCA. That may mean having to repay tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to the ELCA.

"In the event the new or mission congregation leaves [the ELCA], it is supposed to return all funds it has received to the ELCA," ELCA spokesman John Brooks said in an e-mail. Debt repayment obligations are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, Brooks said.

Long's congregation, Niles Lutheran Mission, left the ELCA in August, triggering a requirement to repay more than \$150,000 the congregation has received since 2007. The ELCA made an exception and forgave Niles's debt in a September 16 letter, Brooks said.

So far, almost all African mission congregations have remained in the ELCA.

Members of the One in Christ Mission in Telford, Pennsylvania, have been disillusioned with the ELCA since last summer, according to mission developer Didi Panzo. But they have opted not to sever their ELCA ties—"not yet," Panzo said—choosing instead to keep Panzo on board as their ELCA-supported leader. His five-year term as head of the 30-member congregation ends in December.

"For the members, it is a shame to be named 'Lutheran'" because of the denomination's homosexuality policy, Panzo said. "The [One in Christ] Mission never participates in any ELCA event. . . . But leaving is a process. I'm still in conversation with my bishop."

To date, the NALC officially claims fewer than two dozen congregations. NALC Bishop Paul Spring hopes the denomination will grow to 200 or more congregations by the end of 2011.

Even well-established churches on solid financial footing must first be convinced that the benefits are worth the costs.

At St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio, members have been reluctant to give up their connections to ELCA institutions, including camps, according to Pastor Donald Allman. He said the rift with the denomination wasn't over gay issues but rather over what is perceived as the ELCA's lack of emphasis on evangelism.

But the costs of splitting are likely to be accepted if the church votes, as expected, to leave the ELCA in coming months. "There is always a cost for discipleship, and we have talked about some of those costs," Allman said. —RNS