

Ripple effect: Gay issues surround Lutheran assembly

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's top legislative body had a full plate as it convened in Milwaukee in mid-August—major statements or initiatives on evangelism, mission, worship, health care and the Middle East, as well as an invitation to join a new ecumenical group. Though the docket included an interim report by a task force studying sexuality, homosexuality was not expected to be the hot topic at this year's Churchwide Assembly.

But the possibility of an assembly not preoccupied with gay and lesbian issues dissolved as awareness grew of the implications of an action taken a week earlier by the Episcopal Church, one of the ELCA's partners in full communion. The Episcopal General Convention confirmed the election of an openly gay cleric, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of the New Hampshire diocese.

The ELCA's presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, was peppered with questions at a pre-assembly press conference: How would the Episcopal action influence Lutheran decision-making? How might it alter ecumenical ties? What were Hanson's own views?

The bishop wisely refused to air his own opinions. Until the church changes its standards, the top leader's role is to "uphold present church law" and "to facilitate conversation," he said. He pointed out that the ELCA has five full-communion partners, "our deepest, fullest expression of unity—short of merger."

ELCA leaders keep an eye on other churches' deliberations, Hanson noted, but each church "has autonomy . . . in its standards for ordination. We're all at different places." Lutherans will make their own decisions in light of Lutheran understandings, he said.

In 2005, the ELCA will decide whether to change its standard that now allows only avowedly celibate gays and lesbians to be ordained. Also in 2005 the assembly will

vote on a proposal to recognize a rite for same-sex blessings—a step that ELCA bishops are on record as opposing (though it is widely assumed that many ELCA pastors quietly perform such blessings with unofficial, improvised liturgies). In 2007, the church will consider a social statement on sexuality.

Some delegates thought the ELCA was putting the cart before the horse, and proposed delaying the consideration of ordaining practicing homosexuals or sanctioning same-sex rites from 2005 until 2007. They argued that such proposals cannot responsibly be acted upon until the ELCA has adopted the social statement on human sexuality as a basis for action. Opponents of delay argued that “we wouldn’t refuse to feed the hungry until we had a social statement on hunger in place.” The proposal for a delay was rejected.

Several ecumenical guests who brought greetings to the assembly referred either directly or indirectly to the Episcopal action and the ongoing debate within the ELCA. Gerald B. Kieschnick, president of the conservative Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, spoke about “doctrinal purity,” but more genially than his combative predecessors ever did. The Episcopal Church’s decision to approve a gay bishop’s election, Kieschnick said, “constitutes a momentous break from the Christian church’s 2,000-year-long understanding of what the Holy Scriptures teach about homosexual behavior as contrary to God’s will” and the qualifications of the pastoral office

Kieschnick cautioned that the ELCA’s deliberation on the topic should be “made in the light of the biblical understanding of human sexuality [and ministry].” Any other approach isn’t likely to improve the fragile relations between the LCMS and the ELCA, he suggested.

The leaders of the two major U.S. Lutheran bodies want the dialogue beginning in November on “issues that divide us”—the first such effort in several years—to serve to heal wounds and strengthen ties. Hanson, responding to Kieschnick, alluded cryptically to Missouri’s own internal debates: “I will pray for you as you deal with issues on which you are not all of one mind.” The Missouri Synod, which suffered a breakaway by moderates and liberals in the 1960s, now finds its extreme right flank getting antsy. Some ultraconservatives are still smarting that the LCMS did not toss a district president out on his ear—though he was disciplined—for consorting with doctrinally impure Christians, as well as with Oprah, Mayor Giuliani, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs and Jains, at a packed Yankee Stadium gathering after 9/11.

Former presiding bishop Herbert Chilstrom, who since retirement has felt free to say exactly what he thinks, accepted an invitation to preach at an unofficial festival service, held at an Episcopal church down the street, which was sponsored by a coalition of groups supporting gays and lesbians in the church. Chilstrom called on the church to allow homosexuals in committed relationships to serve as ELCA pastors. The issue, said Chilstrom, is one on which he had changed his mind over the years. "It's long overdue," he declared.

A thoroughly civil demonstration by advocates for gays took place just outside the fenced-off area reserved for voting members. Men and women stood silently for hours wearing long rainbow-colored scarves around their necks. A call to the police by an unidentified person, warning that some demonstrators planned to breach the members-only boundaries and get themselves arrested, was judged by some gay advocates as bogus.

Some assembly proposals seemed to stem both from antigay sentiments and from a penchant for direct democracy. Some synods wanted the Church Council enlarged from 37 members to 69 or more to ensure that every synod has a voice. One opponent of that idea pointed out that with a council of unwieldy size, the power would shift to a small executive committee and people would feel even more shut out of decision-making. The assembly voted to leave the council at its present size.

Another unsuccessful proposal called for constitutional amendments, ecumenical agreements and decisions on ministry standards to be submitted to synods as well as to the Churchwide Assembly—with a majority of synod yes votes needed within a year. Some churches—including the LCMS and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—do send all constitutional amendments to their districts and presbyteries, respectively, for approval. Not the ELCA, said the assembly.

The ELCA's stated commitment to inclusivity was evident in the election of Carlos Peña of Galveston, Texas, to a six-year term as vice president—the denomination's highest lay office. (Critics have complained that "diversity" is the only standard that rates as *status confessionis* in the ELCA.) The 50-year-old businessman, president of supply and distributing companies, won out on the final ballot over Mary Froelich, 43, an Asian-American southern Californian. Peña, who is Hispanic, is the first man elected to the unsalaried position.

“If anyone had told me I’d be standing here today, I’d have said ‘No way!’” Peña told the assembly. The vice president’s key role is to preside over the Church Council, which makes decisions for the church between Churchwide Assembly meetings. If “politicking” goes on at Lutheran assemblies, it’s impossible for an outsider to detect, in contrast to denominations whose leadership candidates actively and vocally seek office.

The incipient ecumenical organization Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. was described to the assembly, and the delegates voted for the ELCA to participate. Moravian and Disciples governing bodies have already signed on for their churches. Randall Lee, ELCA ecumenical officer, and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, top leader of the Reformed Church in America, introduced the venture. The CCT planners hope to draw together mainline Protestant churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox bodies, evangelicals (those in the National Association of Evangelicals and others), Pentecostals and holiness groups, and historically black churches. Organizers expect that 25 churches will sign on within two years, and that CCT will then be “officially launched.”

Also unveiled at the assembly were a variety of worship materials in preparation for the church’s next hymnal and worship book. The ELCA will do what several churches have already done—modernize their repertoire of hymnody in response to what’s happening in growing churches and megachurches that use rock bands and “praise teams” as well as (or instead of) pipe organs and choirs; and especially to attract younger members. One official estimated that “about half” of the well-regarded Lutheran Book of Worship from the 1970s will survive. “We can’t publish a book so big it won’t fit in the hymnal racks.”

In a forum on the new hymn collections and worship materials, one young man noted, “Church is boring. My dad goes around the house singing ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.’ But that’s my dad’s music, not mine.” The young man called for peppier, newer hymns. The session moderator acknowledged the point: “Some people would like to sing only the hymns in the LBW. Others would like to sing anything but the hymns in the LBW.”

At daily communion services, many of the new hymns in one just-published resource were introduced. But veteran delegates sang out more confidently on the well-worn favorites. (Only a limited number of the new “praise songs” have made it into the “favorite hymn” canon.)

Much of the energy that marked this assembly was due to the personality of the presiding bishop. Hanson has twinkling blue eyes, a sense of humor and a grasp of presiding techniques, and he refuses to take himself too seriously. Once in a while the assembly seemed to spend far too much time debating minor matters while dozens of items were piling up, not yet acted upon. That occasional occurrence seemed due not to any inability on Hanson's part to take the reins but to his passion for letting as many voices as possible be heard.