

ELCA calls for some leeway on gay clergy: Advocates on both sides unhappy

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

"They unlocked the closet door, but they haven't opened it," wryly commented a retired Lutheran bishop on his church's much-awaited report on homosexuality.

A task force in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, noting the strongly held differences in the 5.1-million-member denomination, recommended that the ELCA's biennial convention in August not allow congregations to hold same-gender union rites and not alter current church policy prohibiting sexually active gay pastors.

However, striving to "set a pastoral tone rather than a legal tone," in the words of New England Bishop Margaret G. Payne, who chaired the task force, the 14-member panel acknowledged that some regional church authorities "may choose to refrain from disciplining those who in good conscience, and for the sake of outreach, ministry and the commitment to further dialogue, call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates" as deacons or pastors.

At a news conference in the ELCA headquarters in Chicago January 13, Payne said that refraining from punishment of those violating a church ban on ordination of noncelibate gay pastors "is not something that can be done lightly or without consultation" within each church region, or synod.

The majority report noted that "faithful, conscience-bound Lutherans" differ as to what the Bible says or doesn't say about homosexual intimacy. Two dissenting positions included in the report reflected that disagreement, but the task force majority endorsed the pastoral approach.

In that vein, the report observed that "human experience and knowledge can change," and that it seems to have done so, "in some ways, with respect to our understanding of sexual orientation." As such, the task force endorsed "a need to

allow some 'space' in our practices and attitudes for further insights to emerge."

That has been happening already for a relative handful of churches that have called gay or lesbian pastors in recent years. Most have received mild censure. One exception was a mission church in San Bernardino, California, whose assistant pastor's ordination was invalidated last year.

Advocacy groups on the left and right in the ELCA were unhappy with the recommendations. But retired Bishop Paul W. Egertson, who told the Century that the report "unlocked the closet door," saw a "positive" aspect to the report.

He predicted that a number of "closeted" pastors will declare their sexual orientation in friendlier circumstances. Egertson said he knows of 20 closeted clergy, though gay rights groups estimate that the numbers may be in the hundreds among the denomination's 17,500 ordained pastors.

Egertson, who lives in Thousand Oaks, California, was the bishop of a Los Angeles-based synod in April 2001 when he joined dozens of ELCA clergy in a newsmaking ordination of a lesbian pastor in Minneapolis. The task force did caution congregations that call gays in committed relationships as pastors to "refrain from making the call a media event either as an act of defiance or with the presumption of being prophetic."

On the issue of union rites for same-sex couples, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, its formal name, recommended that the church continue to disallow the practice, following the guidance from a 1993 statement by ELCA bishops.

Yet the task force recognized that inasmuch as the ELCA openly welcomes gays and lesbians to worship and church activities, some pastors may want "to surround same-sex couples in committed, long-term relationships with prayerful support," which "does not necessarily mean public approval of homosexual intimacy."

Bishop Payne and James Childs, director of ELCA Studies on Sexuality, emphasized also that this support would not constitute a church "blessing," a term used in some churches for marriage-like rites.

Leaders of the conservative WordAlone Network said in a statement that the majority report was "an attempt to hoodwink" church members.

While the task force “may say it isn’t suggesting change in the ELCA standards for ordination, the recommendations in its report will bring about de facto change because they suggest that the standards not be enforced,” said WordAlone President Jaynan Clark Eglund, a pastor in Spokane, Washington. “How stupid do they think we are?” added Pastor Mark Chavez of New Brighton, Minnesota, director of the self-described reform and renewal group.

Emily Eastwood, speaking in Chicago for a new alliance of six gay rights advocacy groups, said that a “nonenforcement” approach would “institutionalize an existing pattern of selective discrimination.” Eastwood, executive director of Lutherans Concerned/North America, said she was “dismayed” by the recommendations.

Eastwood commended the task force, created in 2001, for its diligence in seeking solutions. But she said the reported opposition by church members to policy changes by more than a two-to-one ratio was misleading. “Look at the statistics,” she said, referring to solicited responses in churches. “More than 80 percent [of respondents] are over 45 years old; 40 percent are over 65 years old.”

Childs and Payne, speaking for the denomination, said that the task force recommendations “are not the final word.” The matter goes back to synods, which may submit proposals of their own, and to the top-level ELCA Church Council, which in April may craft its own recommendations for the Churchwide Assembly August 8-14 in Orlando.

The ELCA, formed from a three-way merger in 1987, has been able to avoid the numerous convention wrangles on homosexual issues that other mainline churches have endured for decades.

It remains to be seen whether the denomination will agree with the task force majority that “it is not helpful to engage in a vote that will produce ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ among faithful Christians.” The task force report can be read in full at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.