

Gay clergy option backed by ELCA council, professors: Some not pleased by middle-ground proposal

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's high-ranking church council has prepared a proposal to the churchwide assembly in August that would give bishops the final authority to let congregations ordain gay and lesbian clergy who are in committed same-sex relationships.

The 37-member church council essentially followed a task force's January recommendation that some exceptions be made for otherwise qualified homosexual ministers who were being sought as pastors by congregations.

Prior to the council's April 9-11 meeting in Chicago, a large group of Lutheran theologians went public with a statement also endorsing the task force recommendations. The signers took issue with 17 other theologians who earlier had said that permitting a local option on gay ordinations would cause "intense division" and play havoc with church structures.

Carlos Pena, ELCA vice president and chair of the council, said that the council wrestled with the contradiction of keeping a rule against ordaining gays while permitting some churches to break it. "The council realized," he said, that gay relationships are "a reality and, for the sake of outreach and ministry, we need to create some opportunity for candidates who are living in a committed relationship to be ordained."

The council also followed the findings of the church task force on sexuality in urging the 5.1-million-member ELCA to seek church unity amid disagreements and to adhere to a 1993 statement banning same-sex union rites in churches.

If the ordination resolution is passed by the biennial churchwide assembly August 8-14 in Orlando, Florida—a two-thirds vote is required—gay ministers would be

expected to give “evidence of intent to live in a lifelong, committed and faithful same-sex relationship.”

The statement by Lutheran theologians favoring the task force recommendations received 85 signers by April 12. The coauthors were two biblical studies professors at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago—Ralph W. Klein, who is also interim dean, and Barbara R. Rossing, associate professor of New Testament.

Rossing told ELCA News Service that she believed the opinions of the 17 theologians opposing the recommendations were not “representative of the majority of teaching theologians.” Rossing suggested that “the modest steps” proposed by the task force “would not jeopardize the global Lutheran communion” and “do not threaten the unity of the gospel.”

The Church Council also heard from an alliance with the name “goodsoil,” which urged that all barriers to gay ordination and same-sex blessings be dropped, and from Solid Rock Lutherans, a group that said granting exceptions for gay clergy would change Christian tradition and create two classes of ministers.