

Decision time for mainline Lutherans: ELCA considering same-sex blessings

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

The nation's largest Lutheran denomination will finally speak with a collective voice this month on whether to allow gay and lesbian pastors and on whether same-sex couples may receive rites of blessing. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, whose biennial Churchwide Assembly meets August 8-14 in Orlando, is one of the last mainline church bodies to act on the controversies. Few figure that the ELCA's debates will end in Orlando.

Preconvention estimates are that it is unlikely two-thirds of the 1,000 delegates—the required margin for approval—will vote to open pulpits to gay pastors, despite a proposal by ELCA leaders that “exceptions” could be created “for the sake of outreach, ministry and the commitment to continuing dialogue.”

A second proposal, which needs only a bare majority to pass, says that ELCA policy should bar blessings for couples in same-sex relationships in keeping with a 1993 pastoral letter from ELCA bishops saying that no basis can be found in scripture for such rites.

However, some conservatives complain that the rest of that resolution could be viewed as permitting informal blessings. The proposal asks members to “trust pastors and congregations to discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care to same-sex couples.”

The efforts by ELCA leaders to address gay issues falls short of what legions of Lutherans on the left and right say they expect of the denomination. Traditionalists are looking for policies that clamp down on sporadic, unauthorized ordinations of openly gay clergy. Progressives contend that faithful, nonheterosexual Christians are discriminated against when they are denied full and equal opportunities in the church.

The nearly 5-million-member ELCA, created in 1987 from a three-way church merger, has eluded convention showdowns over homosexuality that have occupied its mainline counterparts for years. The United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have repeatedly declined over decades to allow ordination of noncelibate homosexuals. Gay activists and their supporters in those churches vow not to abandon the fight.

Meanwhile, the more liberal Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ have made some bold changes. Many in those churches put today's churchgoing gays and lesbians in a different category from the people condemned in biblical texts. However, Episcopal traditionalists look to overseas Anglicans for support in resisting the changes, and UCC conservatives find succor in congregational autonomy and "renewal" movements.

The mainline convention disputes over homosexuality typically feature demonstrations or picketing and conservative threats to withhold funds or exit the church—but also, at times, cordial discussion and prayerful reconciliation.

So what's next for the ELCA?

"Lutherans are traditionally shy, but when push comes to shove they value healthy relationships above all," says the hot-selling *Lutheran Handbook*, a sometimes whimsical guide published by Augsburg Fortress this year. "Conflict should be viewed as an opportunity to grow, not a contest for domination," advises the handbook, which went into its fifth printing last month.

When the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality announced its findings in January, the panel emphasized that it took a "pastoral approach" for the sake of outreach and ongoing dialogue. But the task force was criticized for recommending that the church may "choose to refrain" from punishing congregations for calling as pastors otherwise qualified gay or lesbian candidates.

"It was not well-received," said Stanley Olson, executive director of the ELCA Division for Ministry. "It was perceived as too nebulous."

The approach was recast in April by the 37-member Church Council, which acts as a board of directors between biennial assemblies. The council proposed that instead of withholding disciplinary actions, the church "may permit exceptions to the expectations regarding sexual conduct for gay or lesbian candidates . . . in life-long,

committed and faithful same-sex relationships.”

The ELCA standard says pastors must be married to someone of the opposite sex or be celibate if single. Under the exception, a premium would be placed on a homosexual minister’s “evidence of intent” to live in a faithful partnership.

The ELCA already makes occasional exceptions on ordinations. Normally, a seminary graduate cannot be ordained unless a congregation invites him or her to be a pastor and the minister serves at least three years in pastoral ministry. Exceptions are sometimes made for graduates who have special opportunities in missions, teaching or administration, officials say.

Barbara R. Rossing, associate professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, said that the “exceptions” route “was a brilliant way to go because I think it claims the middle.”

In April, Rossing and faculty colleague Ralph W. Klein coauthored a short statement supporting the task force recommendations and getting 63 signatures from those they called “teaching theologians.” The statement, now endorsed by more than 100 signers, said the task force recommendations “represent a much-needed and faithful compromise for this moment in the life of the church.”

The Klein-Rossing statement took issue with an earlier statement signed by 17 theologians—including Carl E. Braaten, William G. Rusch, William H. Lazareth and Robert W. Jenson—who rejected the task force recommendations on ecclesiastical, pastoral and theological grounds.

The 17 said the task force “advocates a fundamental shift in policy” that would harm the church as “an effective collaborator” with the Lutheran World Federation and would sow “division and disunity at the local level.”

One of the 17, Robert Benne of Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, writing in the July issue of *The Lutheran* magazine, criticized the recommendation as rewritten by the Church Council.

By allowing exceptions, the proposal “bows to those who believe traditional teaching should be revised,” wrote Benne. “It uses the acceptance of divorced and remarried clergy as a parallel to the acceptance of partnered gay clergy . . . a dubious analogy because divorced clergy don’t argue that divorce is right and therefore keep

divorcing.”

Proponents of accepting gays in ministry commonly note that while the churches have found ways to allow divorce and remarriage, despite Jesus’ words to the contrary, the same churches resist change on homosexuality, an issue not addressed by Jesus.

Some of the rationale used in April by the Church Council resembled arguments in a joint proposal issued in March by bishops Paul Rogness of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Steven L. Ullestad of Iowa. While there are many in the ELCA, perhaps a majority, who believe homosexual activity is always a sin, the two bishops wrote, there are Lutherans, lay and ordained, “who believe we are at a time in history where we have come to know that homosexuality is a condition, not a choice, but simply a given that is often discovered as a person grows.”

To Jeff Johnson, the openly gay pastor of the University Lutheran Chapel at the University of California at Berkeley, “the trajectory of the church is clearly moving in a progressive direction.”

His bishop, David G. Mullen, has chosen not to remove at least 13 openly gay, lesbian or bisexual pastors serving in the Sierra Pacific Synod, said Johnson, who cochairs Good Soil, a Lutheran gay alliance. “The current policy of the church really serves no one,” Johnson said.

“The progressive wing is frustrated and unsatisfied because the policies intimidate a class of people unjustly,” he said. “The conservative wing is frustrated because the policies are inconsistently followed or ignored.”

The seven-day assembly in Florida “will decide whether the ELCA fragments in a serious fashion or not,” said Roy A. Harrisville III of St. Paul, executive director of the conservative Solid Rock Lutherans group.

“This is our Gene Robinson moment,” said Harrisville, referring to turmoil in Anglican churches created in 2003 by the Episcopal Church’s approval of the election of a gay man as Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire.