

Vote on gay clergy may cause rift in Lutheran denomination

WASHINGTON - A vote to permit the ordination of homosexuals in committed monogamous relationships for the United States' largest Lutheran denomination may provoke a rift among its members and leaders.

The 559-451 vote Aug. 21 during the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's biennial churchwide assembly in Minneapolis approved a resolution to allow gays in "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships" to serve as clergy. The denomination had previously permitted celibate gay men and women to be ordained.

The 4.6-million-member denomination joined the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ in accepting sexually active homosexuals as clergy.

The Episcopal Church in July adopted a resolution that all ordained ministries, including the office of bishop, are open to all the baptized, including gays and lesbians. The United Church of Christ officially accepted the ordination of actively gay men and women in 1980.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has twice defeated such a move, and the United Methodist Church also has rejected the ordination of gays.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls homosexual acts "intrinsically disordered," but adds that those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity" and that "every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."

The ELCA - formed in 1989 from the merger of the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church - had voted in 2005 against allowing sexually active gays to serve as ordained clergy.

The churchwide assembly is the chief governing authority of the denomination, and the Aug. 21 vote reverses the 2005 action. However, some clergy serving as

delegates to the assembly indicated they would leave the denomination, or at least reconsider their membership.

Leaders from about 400 Lutheran congregations have planned a meeting for September in Indianapolis on how to deal with the situation, but without breaking with the church.

The vote was an outgrowth of a denominational task force studying issues of human sexuality. Prior to the assembly it had issued a report, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," with "implementing resolutions" intended to begin putting the report's policy recommendations into practice into all areas of the church's work. Those implementing resolutions passed by a 695-285 vote.

Bishop Mark S. Hanson, the denomination's presiding bishop, urged against hasty actions by those who opposed the resolution on gay clergy. He asked in closing remarks at the Aug. 17-23 assembly that, if such opponents are wondering about their place in the ELCA, "let us be part of that discernment."

"Take time with your decision. Step back and understand the magnitude of the decision if you choose to leave, because we will be diminished by your absence," he said, adding that the capacity for the church to do its work also will be diminished.

At an Aug. 21 press conference immediately after the vote, Bishop Hanson said, "I am always concerned when I hear any indication of either congregations or clergy or both wondering about whether they can continue to be part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in light of these decisions.

"Included in my concern is even a deeper concern for those who are at that point tonight. Are you willing to stay engaged with us in the conversation about how you can, with integrity, stay in this church body so that we might respect your bound conscience?" he asked.

The assembly had earlier approved, by a 771-230 vote, a resolution committing the church to respect the differences of opinion on the matter and honor the bound consciences of those who disagree.

"The ELCA has always had gay ministers," said Emily Eastwood, director of

Lutherans Concerned/North America, which supported the policy change. “Now those and all ministers are free to claim who they are and to have the love and support of a lifelong partner.”

“The current division between our churches threatens to become a chasm,” said the Rev. Gerald B. Kieschnick, president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the second-largest U.S. Lutheran body with 2.4 million members, in remarks to the assembly Aug. 22.

The Missouri Synod does not admit gays or women to the ranks of clergy. Women’s ordination is a practice that all three of the churches that formed the ELCA had adopted in the 1970s.

“I speak these ... words in deep humility, with a heavy heart and no desire whatsoever to offend,” he said.

“The decisions by this assembly to grant noncelibate homosexual ministers the privilege of serving as rostered leaders in the ELCA and the affirmation of same-gender unions as pleasing to God will undoubtedly cause additional stress and disharmony within the ELCA,” Rev. Kieschnick continued. “It will also negatively affect the relationships between our two church bodies.”