

ELCA says no to gay pastors, blessings: Delegates decline to authorize existing practices

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

On the face of it, the nation's largest Lutheran church didn't budge on issues of homosexuality. Though aware that some same-sex couples receive blessings from pastors and that some openly gay or lesbian pastors are ordained, delegates to the biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, held in Orlando, declined to authorize either practice, even on a provisional basis.

The leadership of the church had proposed a lenient approach on these issues to the 1,015 delegates at the August 8-14 Churchwide Assembly, meeting a few miles from Florida's Disney World. Too few delegates agreed, so the status quo prevails in the 4.9-million-member denomination.

Yet advocates of change saw both momentum and time on their side, and were relieved that delegates rejected taking stricter stances on homosexuality. There were also indications that irregular same-sex blessings were likely to continue.

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson for more than a year emphasized that a church that struggles with social-moral divisions is not necessarily a "struggling" church. Dealing openly with tensions is the mark of a vibrant church, he said. (Hanson himself took a neutral stance on the gay-lesbian issues before and during the assembly inasmuch as he was the full-time moderator of the convention's business.)

A special task force on sexuality, which reported its findings in January, called (1) for "living faithfully in the midst of disagreements" without jeopardizing church unity. That proposal won handily in Orlando.

The more detailed task force recommendations were (2) to follow the 1993 advice of bishops by not conducting church blessings for gay or lesbian unions even while welcoming gays and lesbians and extending pastoral care to them, and (3) to

withhold, for the sake of outreach, disciplinary actions against congregations that employ openly homosexual pastors.

The ELCA Church Council, the denomination's board of directors, was willing to allow delegates to decide whether "pastoral care" might embrace a form of gay blessings. The council also recast the third recommendation by proposing that ordinations of gay and lesbian ministers be allowed as "exceptions" for the sake of ministry outreach.

Delegates, voting August 12, changed the second recommendation so as to ask pastors and congregations to provide faithful pastoral care to "all to whom they minister," rather than "to same-sex couples." That proposal, as amended, passed 670 to 323. The vote to allow gay and lesbian pastors fell far short of the two-thirds majority required for a policy change—490 yes votes to 503 no votes.

ELCA officials later that day were asked at a news conference if it was pointless to propose changes destined to be defeated. No, said Roy Riley, the New Jersey bishop who chairs the ELCA Conference of Bishops.

"What impressed me today is how right the task force was," said Riley. Its members "heard out in the church that there was a significant minority that wanted some space, some flexibility to perhaps move in a different direction in terms of ordination," he said. "And when it finally came down to that recommendation—well, we pretty much knew that it wasn't going to get two-thirds—almost 50 percent of persons voted for that."

Hanson conceded that allowing seminary-educated gays and lesbians in committed same-sex relationships to be admitted officially as pastors "was a change that was asking too much." But Hanson praised the "serious, prayerful" consideration of the "complex proposal" by delegates.

Spokespersons for "goodsoil," an alliance of gay advocacy groups, said they were disappointed. "The church seems willing to sacrifice [gays] on the altar of a false and ephemeral sense of unity," said Jeff Johnson, a gay pastor in Berkeley, California. Emily Eastwood echoed that observation, but said she was encouraged that alternative motions to ban same-sex blessings and to return to older language barring gay ordinations were defeated.

“We are seeing a momentum for change under way; God’s time and our time are not always the same thing,” she said.

Some bishops agreed. Former bishop Paul W. Egertson, who has a gay son active in the church, said, “Change is inevitable,” pointing to church surveys that show younger people are open to full inclusion of gays in the ELCA.

Paul Landahl, bishop of Chicago, who took part in a nonchurch commitment ceremony for his gay daughter and her partner last year, said he was “relieved that on the issue of blessings we didn’t go backwards; it’s still an issue of pastoral care, where I think it ought to be.”

Stephen Bouman, bishop of New York City, described the situation this way: “We voted for a marvelously ambiguous opportunity to continue to be pastoral in our congregations [with] gay and lesbian people, including blessings of relationships.”

Leaders of conservative groups feared that many proponents of same-sex blessings were interpreting the assembly’s actions in just that way. Roy A. Harrisville III, executive director of Rock Solid Lutherans, said in a statement that he and Jaynan Clark Egland, president of the WordAlone Network, agree that “no warrant, permission or allowance is given in the wording” of the approved motion for conducting same-sex union rites.

“The church will bend backwards but not break its back to accommodate certain things,” Harrisville wrote in another statement. The minister also noted that Rock Solid Lutherans will soon fold, to be replaced by an already forming association of “confessing congregations.” The new group is expected to resemble the conservative “renewal” groups active in other mainline Protestant denominations.

The biblical-image names picked by opposing lobbying groups inspired one young delegate from Pennsylvania, Jana Holt, to end her appeal for gay blessings with a jibe: “Nothing can grow from a rock, but from soil.”

The only disruption occurred after delegates voted down a motion by Gladys Moore of New Jersey that no policy should bar otherwise qualified gay or lesbian pastors. Nearly 100 gay rights supporters, who had stood previously in the visitor sections, silently moved to form a line in front of Bishop Hanson and facing the delegates.

Hanson twice asked them to leave, to no avail, as delegates disagreed whether the demonstration was intimidating. The presiding bishop then suggested the assembly

simply continue with its business. “If you can do it, we can do it,” responded Sue Ericsson, a minister who said she was “in awe of your ability to lead us through this.”