

Disagreement on same-sex relations riles Lutheran body: Heated debate in Lutheran World Federation

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Blessings for people living in same-sex relationships triggered heated debate at a meeting last month of the main governing body of the Lutheran World Federation in the southern Swedish city of Lund.

Divisions that have torn apart the Anglican Communion and created discord in other Christian denominations received an airing March 22, but no action was taken.

As with the divisions among Anglicans, Lutheran churches in the global North tend to be more accepting of same-gender partnerships, and most of the opposition comes from the global South, including African countries.

The federation, marking its 60th anniversary, has not taken a position on the issues. LWF general secretary Ishmael Noko urged members to listen to one another in tolerance. A lack of time in the Lund meeting meant that proposed guidelines for discussing human sexuality did not succeed in getting full acceptance.

In order not to focus on the issues of sexuality alone, the federation's council appointed a task force in September 2004 to review research from member churches and "to propose guidelines and processes for dialogue by which respectful discussion can be pursued" on the three-part topic of "marriage, family and human sexuality."

LWF president Mark Hanson, who is also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, chaired the debate. Hanson said the report would be raised again during a March 20-27 LWF council meeting and discussed in subsequent regional meetings.

The day before the debate, the Church of Sweden announced that matrimony should be reserved for heterosexual couples, but that the church would give blessings to

same-sex couples in committed, faithful relationships. In doing so the church went against a recommendation by a Swedish government commission that proposed changing the law in order to accept both same-sex and heterosexual relationships within the legal framework of marriage.

Bishop Munib Younan, leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, hinted that decisions such as the one by the Swedish church would make life difficult for Christian leaders in the Middle East.

“We need to have more debate on what we mean by the family,” said Younan. He said the issue could cause an ecumenical crisis.

Lutheran leaders heard church representatives, especially from Africa, speak out strongly about the dangers of giving blessings to people in same-sex relationships. “If God had wanted people from the same sex to have relationships he would have created Adam and Adam, not Adam and Eve,” said Satou Marthe, a woman delegate from Cameroon.

One European dissenting on same-sex unions was Archbishop Janis Vanags of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia.

“Our church does not see it as helpful when homosexuality is discussed with family and marriage,” Vanags said. His church believes that homosexuality is a sin, he said, and that people should repent of their sins and seek forgiveness, just as Martin Luther advised.

African participants congratulated the Latvian archbishop after his speech for his forthrightness. *-Peter Kenny, Ecumenical News International*