

Lutherans avoid sexuality clash for now

News in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

Bishop Mark S. Hanson, the outgoing president of the Lutheran World Federation, appealed to delegates at the LWF gathering in Germany to hold together and avoid splits in the face of differences over issues of sexuality. A key bishop from Tanzania, who opposes same-sex marriage, signaled early during the once-every-six-years meeting that the issue should be put on hold while churchwide consultations on sexuality continue.

Conflicts had surfaced between some churches from the African continent and Western churches on the role of homosexuals in the church. In recent months, the LWF's second-largest member church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, has stated its opposition to same-sex marriage and churches that support such unions.

The LWF president diverted from his prepared speech to delegates on the second day of the 11th Lutheran World Federation assembly, which met in Stuttgart July 20-27, to launch his appeal for unity. "I am deeply concerned that we are on the precipice of a time where the rich tradition of Lutheran theology is used to divide Lutherans among themselves," said Hanson.

Looking ahead to 2017, which will celebrate the start of the Reformation 500 years ago and the role played by Martin Luther, Hanson added: "As we approach 2017, it should become a celebration not of division but of our rich diversity."

The issue arises as churches in the Southern Hemisphere are continuing to grow while churches in Europe and North America are losing members.

Speaking of his own ELCA, Hanson said that 95 percent of its membership is white and does not mirror the multicultural U.S. society. The average age of its members is well above the average for the population as a whole, Hanson said. "We need to continue to address issues of leadership, decision making and sustainability," he

went on to say.

"Northern member churches can learn much about how important the training of lay evangelists and catechists is to the growth and renewal of the church," he told 400 delegates and other guests. "We need you to teach us."

In his report, the LWF's general secretary, Ishmael Noko, pointed out that there is a five-year period of consultation, ending in 2012, between member churches dealing with questions of human sexuality.

After Noko's speech, Tanzanian bishop Elisa Buberwa voiced support for Noko's advice not to deal with this issue in the current assembly. In what appeared to be a call to wait until the LWF has finished its consultation process on sexuality, Buberwa urged the assembly to be patient.

"We will submit a report as agreed in 2012. There is no need for individual members of the LWF to deal with this matter harshly," said Buberwa. Later, Noko said of the gathering's mood: "There is no tension but a lot of anxiety."

Some delegates credited the pleas for patience and unity from Noko and Hanson for defusing the issue—principally the 2009 decision of the ELCA to permit local churches to call gay or lesbian pastors who were in monogamous, committed same-sex relationships. But some delegates in Stuttgart indicated that tensions simmered under the calm.

Bishop Alex Gehaz Malasusa, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, declined to give a comment to ENI when approached. Malasusa, whose Lutheran church grew by 14.5 percent in 2009, backtracked in June on his threat not to accept any money from churches that support homosexuality, after meeting with leaders of the ELCA.

Another African bishop, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that if the issue had been discussed on the floor of the LWF assembly, it would have exploded. Some delegates had arrived at the assembly "with their hands formed into fists in their pockets, ready for a fight," he added. Yet another African delegate said, "We would like to understand how the northern churches think, but there is no real dialogue."

Other developments at the LWF meeting included the following:

- The global Lutheran assembly has asked for forgiveness for the 16th-century persecution of Anabaptists, the religious reformers whose modern-day descendants include the Amish and Mennonites. Anabaptists, whose originally pejorative name means "rebaptizers," stressed the need to baptize Christian believers, including those who had been baptized as infants. Both Protestants and Catholics persecuted Anabaptists as heretics, and many of them fled to America. The formal apology was the result of three decades of dialogue and reconciliation that began in 1980.
- The federation chose Palestinian bishop Munib A. Younan, 59, a campaigner for peace, justice and interfaith dialogue, as its next president. The only candidate for the post becomes the first Arab to lead the Geneva-based body. Younan's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land with 3,000 members is one of the smallest of the LWF churches.
- Chilean clergyman Martin Junge will replace Noko as LWF general secretary on November 1. Noko, a Zimbabwean theologian, will retire after 16 years in the post. Junge will be the first Latin American to hold the full-time position. The issues of economic justice and illegitimate debt are high on his agenda. "There is an economic order that is absolutely unfair, unjust and a deep expression of sin, depriving millions of human beings from their rights and even their lives," Junge told delegates on July 26. —ENI