

Storm clouds gathering: Lutherans face sexuality issues

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

This was to be a relatively calm year for Mark S. Hanson, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The ELCA has not experienced nearly the angst over homosexual issues that Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians have. That was expected to change next January as an ELCA task force recommends whether the 5-million-member denomination should rescind its ban on ordination of noncelibate gay and lesbian pastors, and whether the ELCA should create rites to bless committed same-gender partnerships.

But April 15 was a taxing day for ELCA leaders with the news that three congregations—two in California, one in Minneapolis—said they were about to install either a gay or lesbian as a pastor.

The biennial Churchwide Assembly will vote on gay clergy and same-sex rites in August 2005 in Orlando, but few think delegates will settle matters any more than other mainline denominations have. “A vote will not force us to be one,” said the ELCA’s top bishop.

Hanson, 57, a Minnesota native who lives near the Chicago headquarters of the ELCA, affirmed his neutrality on the volatile issues in an interview with the Century before plans to hold defiant installations were announced. “If the assembly in 2005 changes our stance on either one of those issues, then I’d try to articulate the standards of the church as it defines them and interpret them for the wider church,” he said.

It’s tempting to compare Hanson to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and not simply because both sport a crop of white facial hair. Besides heading national churches, both also shoulder global duties—Williams as spiritual leader of 70 million Anglicans worldwide and Hanson as president of the 66-million strong Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Both traditions now enjoy rapid church growth in African nations, but Africa is also a region outraged at Western churches’ moves to accept

homosexuality.

No wonder then that Hanson—elected in 2001 as presiding bishop of the ELCA and in 2003 to a six-year term heading the LWF—has looked to his Anglican and Episcopal counterparts for examples in leadership in tumultuous times.

At the international level, Hanson said he learns “all the time” by observing Williams, who as leader of the Church of England acts as the spokesman for the Anglican Communion. “I value him as a colleague and mentor,” said Hanson. He said that the LWF assembly last year urged him and other leaders to talk about sexuality with Lutherans in the Southern Hemisphere in ways “that would be mindful of our varied contexts but also our common tradition.” The ELCA “is so far down the road in its discussions,” he added, that the U.S. church must “keep the rest of the Lutherans in the world informed and listen to their critique.”

On the national level, Hanson said he and Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold have talked about similar tasks, agreeing that they hope the disagreements on gay and lesbian participation in church life do not push aside issues of poverty, racial diversity and church unity. “It’s enormously challenging, but it’s comforting that we have the collegiality of one another in this struggle,” he said.

The Episcopal Church has been more liberal in practice on gay issues than the ELCA, which bars ordination to openly gay or lesbian pastors. The Lutheran ban was challenged also in April 2001, when a congregation in St. Paul, Minnesota, ordained staff member Anita C. Hill, a lesbian in a committed relationship, as pastor. An active bishop and three former bishops joined more than 100 ELCA clergy in the irregular rite.

Hanson, then bishop of the St. Paul Area Synod, censured the congregation and prohibited its clergy and lay members from serving on any board or committee posts in the synod. Bishop Peter Rogness, who succeeded Hanson in the synod, kept the censure but lifted the sanctions at the start of 2003.

In the April 15 events, Central City Lutheran Mission in San Bernardino, California, said it would install Jennifer Mason on April 18, Hollywood Lutheran Church said it would install Daniel M. Hooper May 2 and Bethany Lutheran Church said it would have ceremonies July 25 for Jay Wiesner. While those actions might all be declared invalid by local bishops, Hanson is starting to experience the kind of preemptive measures well known in the Episcopal Church.

The election of openly gay priest V. Gene Robinson last year as bishop in New Hampshire and his subsequent endorsement has threatened the Anglican Communion with schism. Though Williams had been sympathetic to faithful gays and lesbians in the church previously, as archbishop he dissuaded a gay priest in England from accepting a bishop's post.

Hanson declined speculate over possible ELCA scenarios in 2005.

"Because we are very much in the study phase now, [for me] to anticipate what the results will be is just not appropriate," Hanson said. The sexuality task force asked congregations for feedback this year, and the presiding bishop said he was encouraged by increased requests for study materials in recent weeks.

Hanson said he was glad that Americans have been prodded by recent court decisions to discuss the moral and legal implications of gay marriages. "It's an issue for the whole culture; it helps us to see that this isn't something that we are doing in isolation," he said. "Now, the question for us as people of faith is when, out of conscience, do we challenge civil society as being wrong and when do we embrace the decisions of civil society as it orders its life hopefully for the sake of order and justice.

"I'm not at all minimizing a potential divisiveness emerging," Hanson said. But he objects to those who say the 2005 decisions on homosexuality, or the additionally mandated goal of adopting a statement in 2007 on all aspects of human sexuality, amount to church-defining, church-dividing votes. The gospel encompasses more than sexuality, he said.

Catchy expressions nevertheless stimulate reflection, Hanson indicated. He has posed the question more than once on whether this Lutheran denomination is "a church in trouble or a troubled church." Declining membership and necessary budget cuts, exacerbated by bitter fights on sexuality, may present the picture of a church in trouble, he said.

But some things should be "troubling," he said. "It better trouble us that the ELCA is still 94 percent descendants of European immigrants in this wonderfully rich and pluralistic country." Likewise, he recalled the frustration that he and other faith leaders have had in trying to be heard in Washington on war and Middle East issues in contrast to the success of what he called "the conservative Christian right."

Hanson questioned whether he should accept a nomination and election as president of the LWF. "I hesitated accepting because I simply did not think that the global Lutheran communion needed a northern male religious figure to lead the organization right now. " However, an African, Ishmael Noko, is the LWF's general secretary at the Geneva headquarters.

What Hanson kept hearing, however, was that many Lutherans in the Southern Hemisphere were "looking for a U.S. religious leader who doesn't always echo the dominant economic, military and political voices heard emanating from the United States." He also was persuaded that he could help churches in the Northern Hemisphere engage with African churches in dealing with war, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Facing issues of sexuality and taking measures to stem the AIDS pandemic have been difficult for Africans, according to numerous reports and news stories from the continent. But Americans should not be smug about their sexual candor just because the subject is pervasive in the mass media, according to the bishop.

The tackling of tough questions on sexuality by the ELCA "is long overdue," he said. "I always ask church groups, 'How many of you were raised in families that talked openly about sexuality?' I'm averaging about 1 percent of adult Lutherans saying, 'I learned how to do this in my family of origin.' So I say, 'Now 5 million people are going to do together what none of us ever learned to do in the security of our family.'"