

Lutherans to address issues of homosexuality: Recommendations due from sexuality studies task force

by [John Dart](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

After nearly four years—some say 15 years—of discussion the largest U.S. Lutheran denomination will soon hear if it has some practical and moral wisdom for dealing with homosexual issues that have divided other mainline church bodies for decades.

The biennial Churchwide Assembly of the 5-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is expected to decide this summer in Orlando whether to ordain ministers who are in committed homosexual relationships and whether to write a union blessing for gay or lesbian partners.

But first, an ELCA sexuality studies task force formed in 2001 will announce January 13 at church headquarters in Chicago whether it will recommend dramatic changes or definitive prohibitions—or, more likely, an approach somewhere in between. Current policy calls on clergy to refrain from all sexual relations outside marriage, which is defined as a covenant between a man and a woman. Same-gender blessings have not been addressed officially, although the ELCA Conference of Bishops, an advisory body, said in 1993 that it did not approve of such rites.

Following the 14-member task force's final meeting two weekends before Christmas, New England Bishop Margaret G. Payne, who is chair of the group, did not indicate what directions it would take. She and James M. Childs Jr., director of the ELCA Studies on Sexuality, described only the struggle the members had with their divergent views. "We are committed to making an honest report," said Childs.

Gay advocacy groups within Lutheranism were not optimistic that any substantial changes will be proposed. Spokespersons were dismayed by the mid-November vote of the ELCA Church Council, the top legislative authority between churchwide assemblies, that any amendment to church laws or any vote to alter policies at the August 8-14 convention should require a two-thirds majority to pass.

During the council's debate, ELCA Secretary Lowell G. Almen noted that rules proposed by the council "are subject to amendment by the churchwide assembly," the ELCA News Service reported. But to gay activists, the high-level decision appeared to aid those favoring the status quo.

"It would be hard enough to get a simple majority" on ordaining gay pastors and approving same-sex rites, said Greg Egertson of San Francisco, cochair of Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministries. "The battle may already have been lost." Emily Eastwood, executive director of the St. Paul-based Lutherans Concerned/North America (LC/NA), said her organization was "surprised and saddened by the timing and nature of this preemptive maneuver."

In addition, the activists criticized the removal of a mission church in San Bernardino, California, from the ELCA roster of congregations and the placing of its senior pastor on leave of absence after the Central City Lutheran Mission installed an openly lesbian minister as an associate pastor in April. In contrast to that disciplinary action by the Pacifica Synod headed by Bishop Murray D. Finck, two other congregations that called gay or lesbian pastors last year received only letters of censure from their synod councils.

"Many congregations, pastors and people in our synod have indicated they stand behind the [synod] council's difficult decision," Finck told ELCA News Service. Finck said his synod belongs to the LC/NA "Reconciling in Christ" program of congregations that welcome gay and lesbian worshipers, but the governing council said the mission was "out of compliance" with church rules.

Senior Pastor David Kalke of the mission church said he was surprised by the synod's strong action taken October 29 and reaffirmed December 4 with minor modifications. Eastwood of Lutherans Concerned lamented "the uneven application of current policies" in different regions of the denomination.

The recent decision in California worried Egertson. "The harshness of the Pacifica Synod's action may signal a change in attitude within the ELCA leading up to the churchwide assembly and could represent the beginning of a backlash," he said. "At a minimum, it will significantly intimidate other congregations" from calling pastoral candidates from the unofficial Extraordinary Candidacy Project formed by Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministries "in active resistance to the ELCA policy," as Egertson put it.

The intermittent disobedience in the denomination goes back at least to January 1990 when two ELCA congregations in San Francisco—First United Lutheran and St. Francis—ordained three seminary graduates who were openly gay or lesbian. After a church trial, the two congregations were suspended.

“The five-year suspension back then was for the purpose of giving the ELCA time to study and resolve the matter,” Egertson said. “Fifteen years later, they are still studying.”

The two congregations, expelled and operating independently ever since, “have grown and prospered,” according to organizers of a 15th-year dinner celebration January 20. The event will honor the main speaker, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who last year authorized marriage licenses for gay couples until a California court voided them.

Egertson’s father, now-retired ELCA Bishop Paul W. Egertson of Los Angeles, was one of four bishops who participated in an April 2001 ordination service in Minnesota of an openly lesbian pastor. About 500 other Lutheran clergy lent their support. Bishop Mark Hanson, then head of the St. Paul Area Synod, ruled the ordination invalid, and some restrictions were placed on participating congregations.

Eastwood said she believes that the task force has been faithful in its work “and has struggled mightily to discern the will of God” in this time in Lutheran history. But “for the ELCA to function with integrity. . . we need policies which give congregations the flexibility they require to respond pastorally in their settings,” she said.

The task force plans to share its report and recommendations confidentially with ELCA lay and ordained leaders via e-mail on January 12. The report and recommendations will be released the next day at a news conference at the Lutheran Center.

The documents will then be studied in the ELCA’s 10,657 congregations and regional bodies, and by the denomination’s bishops and its many boards through the end of March. The ELCA Church Council, meeting on April 8-11, will prepare a resolution for action on the recommendations by the Churchwide Assembly.