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Roanoke Lutheran church opts out of national assembly in dispute over gay clergy

Members of St. John Lutheran in Roanoke voted Sunday; a dispute over gay clergy led to the split.

By [Mike Gangloff](#)

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Members of Roanoke's St. John Lutheran Church voted Sunday to leave the church's national organization in a dispute about gay clergy.

The vote affirms a September ballot that also was in favor of leaving the national Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which stirred controversy in August with a statement that gay people in committed relationships could serve as clergy. St. John will join the smaller Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, one of several national groups that have formed over the past decade in response to what is sometimes described as the ELCA's increasingly liberal take on Lutheran theology.

The Rev. Mark Graham, pastor of St. John, said today's vote was 350-104, well more than the two-thirds majority that church rules required to re-affiliate.

Graham and other supporters of leaving the ELCA said they hoped the vote would be seen as a stand in support of the central authority of Scripture rather than as homophobic or anti-gay.

"We have to work hard at love as well as truth. ... We all can follow Christ together," Graham said.

Graham said the vote might prompt the departure of some of the church's congregation, which recently stood at 1,200 people. He hoped that as people have time to fully consider the vote and the church as a whole, the loss would be held to 10 percent to 20 percent. Those who do leave the church are still friends and "they'll be in our love and prayers," Graham said.

The association St. John is joining, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, holds to what had been the standard Lutheran position on gay clergy, which is that only a celibate gay person may be a minister. The reasoning is that sexual activity is only condoned within marriage, and that marriage is to be between a man and a woman, Graham said.

The vote came after St. John's 11 a.m. service, with congregation members retiring to a hall in the church and more than a dozen people making short statements for or against the motion to change national associations.

Longtime congregation member Richard Herring, whose family helped found St. John and who opposed leaving the ELCA, said he repeated a question he'd asked earlier in the church's debate: "How much do you have to hate somebody else to live as our Lord commands?"

Herring said he was not surprised by today's vote but was sorry to see "secessionists" prevail.

"I prefer to call us loyalists. We didn't dissent. They did," Herring said.

But Mark Peters, who supported leaving the ELCA, saw the vote as confirming Lutheran conservatism.

"How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?" he asked after the votes were counted.

"None, because Lutherans don't believe in change.

"We're staying the course" formed by historic church leaders Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Peters said.

St. John was thought to be among the largest of about 165 congregations in the ELCA's Virginia synod, perhaps the largest.

About 100 other congregations have voted to leave the ELCA, which has about 10,400 member congregations in the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ has about 260 member congregations.

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