

The Washington Times

Lutheran schism feared after votes on gays

Traditionalist members threaten to defect

By [Julia Duin \(Contact\)](#) | Monday, August 24, 2009

MINNEAPOLIS | Last Friday, as members of the nation's largest Lutheran denomination were casting four historic votes recasting the role of homosexuals in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a mop-up operation had begun a few blocks away.

In a hospitality suite on the 12th floor of the Doubletree Hotel, Bill Sullivan's cell phone was ringing and ringing.

Mr. Sullivan, a former ELCA pastor, is national coordinator for the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), a collection of 226 congregations founded in March 2001 with 25 charter member churches dissatisfied with the denomination's liberal drift.

Now the trickle has turned into a flood.

"It's been going nonstop," he said of his phone.

On Friday alone, he scheduled three visits to ELCA churches in Buffalo, N.Y. Sioux City, Iowa and Jacksonville, Fla., for later this fall. They are thinking of leaving, as were the 15 people who had stopped by the hotel suite that day. Twenty-five inquiries had come in that week alone, and that was before all the vote tallies were in down the street at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

He glanced at his e-mail.

"The train wreck is just about over," he said, reading from a post sent by a delegate on the convention floor. "The first responders need to be ready."

He looked up.

"People have been calling all morning," he said. "They want this to be over. It's been going on for days. A small minority of people are changing 2,000 years of church teaching."

However, the "small minority" includes personages such as former ELCA Presiding Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom, who posted an open letter July 27 in response to traditionalists' concerns about the upcoming convention. In it, he explained that church teachings have changed over the millennia.

"I knew that our decisions to ordain women and retain some divorced pastors on our rosters were not decided exclusively on the basis of a few biblical texts or our long-standing tradition in either area," he wrote. "We believed there were deeper streams in the Holy Scriptures that we needed to listen to. When I came to sexuality issues, I knew I could not employ a method that differed from what I had used to deal with those two issues."

The majority of delegates at the churchwide assembly were apparently using similar logic: It was the final day for the most important votes and the traditionalists were losing every one.

For the one-third of ELCA delegates who decisively voted against ordaining homosexual clergy and other gay-friendly ballot measures, Mr. Sullivan's group is a possible lifeboat in a sea of heresy.

The group calls itself "post-denominational," meaning churches can associate with it while retaining membership in other bodies. The only requirement is an agreement with the LCMC's statement of faith and constitution. The loose confederation of churches does not have bishops, but it does have an annual conference, set this year for early October in Fargo, N.D.

Into the suite walked a young man dressed in a clerical suit who identifies himself as a pastor of a 450-member church in Nebraska.

"Here's an ELCA refugee," chortled a member of the LCMC's board of trustees sitting in the suite. The pastor said he's there to "look at options" for his church.

"I've a congregation with a significant number of members who will leave," he said. "The theology of the social statement bothered us," referring to a 34-page document the denomination approved Aug. 19 that sought to establish a theological framework for differing views on homosexuality.

Church liberals said the document was long overdue; conservatives said sexual practices forbidden in the Bible should not be given equal moral status.

Until now, conservative Lutheran churches that have wanted to leave have generally been allowed to take their property with them, unlike in the Episcopal Church, where the denomination has sued nearly every departing congregation.

Lutheran clergy and bishops interviewed last week said that situation could change if there is a substantial exodus or if the local synod - which is like a diocese - holds the title to the property.

There are several Lutheran denominations in the United States. They include the 390,000-member Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), which posted a statement on its Web site Friday condemning the ELCA's decisions.

"It's unfortunate that many headlines have referred to the recent decisions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as something 'Lutherans' have decided," WELS President Mark Schroeder said. "We are saddened that a group with the name Lutheran would take another decisive step away from the clear teaching of the Bible, which was the foundation of the Lutheran Reformation."

After the ELCA, the largest Lutheran denomination is the 2.4-million-member Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. Spokeswoman Vicki Biggs said Friday that her denomination has gotten inquiries from individual ELCA members.

"People are saying, 'If the ELCA goes this route, I might be looking at another church,' " she said.

However, neither the Wisconsin nor Missouri Synod churches ordain women, while the LCMC does - a factor important to many wishing to leave the ELCA.

The specter of departing congregations was one Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson addressed Friday as he begged conservative and liberal Lutherans to bear with one another.

"Those deeply disappointed today will have the expectation to continue to admonish and teach," he said. "Those who've experienced reconciliation today - you are called to humility. You are called to love."

Yet, Lutherans who testified and quoted the Bible during the lengthy legislative sessions repeatedly brought up the possibility of leaving.

"I believe what we are about to do in the social statement will split the church," John Seng, a member from the Northeastern Ohio Synod, told the crowd. "It saddens me that we are going this way."

Terri Stagner-Collier, a member of Southeastern Synod, tearfully told the delegates her family will leave the ELCA.

"I urge you not to do this to all those people in the pews and my family," she said before one of the votes.

In his final press conference Friday, the presiding bishop said gay Lutherans had stuck with the ELCA during the long years they were not accepted and he urged traditionalists, who felt the tables had been turned, to exercise similar patience.

"My appeal tonight is to those who feel they can't support the decisions this church has made," he said. "We need you in the conversation about the shape of our life together. ... It'd be tragic if we walked away from one another. Then the story I hoped to tell will not be the one told this week."

He repeated a few minutes later, "We must welcome to the table those who feel we have not been faithful Lutherans today ... I am pleading with people to stay with us in that conversation."