

Synod may lose large Omaha church

BY TODD VON KAMPEN

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

January 12, 2002

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is on the verge of losing its largest Nebraska church, only 14 years after hopes for greater Christian unity spawned America's largest Lutheran church body.

And when the Rev. David deFreese thinks of Sunday's decisive vote at Omaha's Lutheran Church of the Master, he mourns the souls he fears will be lost if church members decide Christians don't really want to be one in Christ.

"The greater world says, 'Does Jesus make a difference? You keep saying it does, and yet He can't keep you at the table talking,'" the ELCA Nebraska Synod bishop said about the potential departure of the 2,374-member congregation at 2617 S. 114th St.

Sadness also can be heard at Lutheran Church of the Master, which will decide

whether to ratify its Oct. 14 vote to leave the ELCA over a 1999 fellowship agreement with the Episcopal Church USA and a perceived liberal drift on sexual issues.

But leaders of the Omaha church and the nationwide dissident movement they helped found say external unity isn't as important as maintaining Christian truths that are under assault.

Other Christians "are brothers and sisters in the faith," said the Rev. Kip Tyler, Lutheran Church of the Master's senior pastor. But "it's not a manmade invention that makes this happen."

Church member John Chatelain said such distrust in human structures is steeped in the 16th-century Protestant Reformation but has been lost in the ELCA, formed by the 1988 melding of three liberal to moderate Lutheran church bodies after 240 years of mergers.

Those who stress external unity make "a good argument for disbanding the Lutheran Church altogether and everybody becoming Catholic," said Chatelain, a co-founder of the WordAlone Network and its spinoff, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ.

His church would be the third of the latter's 48 congregations to quit the ELCA if two-thirds of those voting agree at a Sunday congregational meeting. About 81 percent agreed in October.

Chatelain is a board member of WordAlone, organized shortly after the ELCA-Episcopal "Called to Common Mission" agreement - one of five between the ELCA and Protestant churches to share clergy and admit each other's members to Holy Communion.

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, launched last March, has

two leaders from Lutheran Church of the Master - Chatelain as treasurer and Deborah Lingen as a trustee.

Interim Executive Director Robin Lake said he expects membership to grow as ELCA congregations hold annual meetings early this year. The new church body doesn't require members to leave the ELCA.

The protest movement reflects the struggles of many churches over "sex and authority," said the Rev. Martin Marty, an ELCA pastor and an expert on American Christianity.

Those struggles don't end with a new church body, said Marty, who left the conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod during a 1970s schism. "If they start a new church body, in five years it's the same issues."

Marty and other former Missouri Synod moderates helped form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in 1976. ELCA leaders say the impetus for their 1988 merger came from that group, the smallest of the three merger partners.

Its only Nebraska member was Omaha's First Lutheran Church, whose retired pastor, the Rev. Harold

Schmidt, said members disliked the Missouri Synod's limits on women in the church and worship and ministry with other Christians.

Such dissent "can only be done out of deepest concerns and conscience," said Schmidt, who believes protesters are misreading the church's positions.

Dissidents oppose a requirement that the ELCA enter the Episcopal Church's "historic episcopate," in which new pastors and bishops receive the "laying on of hands" by bishops linked in an "apostolic succession" from Jesus' time.

Although some Lutherans worldwide follow the rite, dissidents say, Lutheran doctrine insists it cannot be forced.

But deFreese noted that the ELCA's August convention permitted ordinations without the rite. In the 1999 agreement, he said, the Episcopal Church recognized ELCA pastors ordained before it - including himself.

"Called to Common Mission" allows differing beliefs on the rite's effects, said deFreese, Nebraska Synod bishop since 2000. "Is it magic? I don't know."

Tyler said Lutheran Church of the Master has no argument with the Nebraska Synod. But members fear the ELCA doesn't want dialogue on the Episcopal agreement and has resolved to loosen its stances on sexual issues.

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ lets women be pastors, like the ELCA but unlike the Missouri Synod. But its leaders decry ELCA health-insurance plans covering some abortions and favor current bans on ordination of active homosexuals and same-sex unions.

They cite the permissive tone of a shelved 1993 ELCA sexuality statement, the April 2001 ordination of active lesbian Anita Hill in St. Paul, Minn., and the August convention's vote to complete a major study on sexuality and gay issues by 2005.

DeFreese and the Rev. Eric Schafer, the ELCA's national spokesman, say it's not inevitable that the ELCA will reverse its policies on sexual issues.

The national body does not recognize Hill's ordination and censured the congregation that permitted it, Schafer said.