

## Lutheran church to quit ELCA

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Members of Lutheran Church of the Master on Sunday completed their withdrawal from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over disagreements on ecumenical and social issues.

About 576 voting members of the congregation at 2617 S. 114th St. gave 89 percent final approval to a resolution to quit the ELCA, said the Rev. Kip Tyler, Lutheran Church of the Master's senior pastor. A two-thirds majority was needed.

Voters gave 81 percent initial approval Oct. 14 to leaving the ELCA, with which the 2,374-member congregation has been at odds over a 1999 fellowship

agreement with the Episcopal Church USA and a perceived liberal trend on sexual issues.

Lutheran Church of the Master, which was the largest congregation in the ELCA's Nebraska Synod, became the third member of the fledgling Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ to leave the larger, 14-year-old church body.

Leaders of the Omaha church helped found the new group in March 2001 and its parent, the WordAlone Network, in December 1999.

Both groups oppose the ELCA's entrance into the Episcopal "historic episcopate," in which new pastors and bishops receive the "laying on of hands" by

bishops linked by "apostolic succession" to Jesus' time.

Other issues include the ELCA's inclusion of some abortions in its health-insurance plans and fears that a study of sexual issues due by 2005 will pave the way for the ordination of active homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions. The ELCA now permits neither.

Tyler said Sunday afternoon's 90-minute meeting was very cordial with little discussion of the issues. Members seemed to have reached a consensus and were ready to vote, he said. There was no vocal opposition.

"I have very mixed feelings about the vote," Tyler said after the action was taken. "I

wasn't surprised by it, but I have a major concern that we continue to listen, minister and reach out to the other 11 percent, and be bold in our witness."

Some members of Lutheran Church of the Master wanted to stay in the ELCA and work for change, Tyler said last week.

But those favoring withdrawal "feel this has distracted us from things we should be about as a congregation," especially support of social ministries, he said.

Some members may leave over the split, but "our desire is for the family to stay together," Tyler said. That will take prayer, listening and "understanding it is our joint ministry in Christ that we share together."

The congregation's objections to the ELCA-Episcopal agreement is not directed at the Episcopal Church or the Nebraska Synod, Tyler said. It hopes to remain a partner in some ELCA ministries and support of the state's ELCA colleges, Midland in Fremont and Dana in Blair.

Nebraska Synod Bishop David deFreese met with Lutheran Church of the Master members Dec. 19.

DeFreese, who was out of town, said in a statement Sunday:

"There is no doubt a need for the church to circle the wagons at times, but you don't shoot inward. While this decision saddens us, we know through various consultations we have had in the recent past that this has been a direction in which this congregation has been moving for some time."

The congregation's members seemed "resigned to their decision," said Chip Borgstadt, the bishop's assistant, who represented the bishop at Sunday's meeting.

In a recent interview, deFreese said Christians' witness to the Gospel suffers when people see the greater church divided. He said he hopes that God will somehow bring good out of the disagreements in the ELCA.

"The church is at its best when it is in trouble, when

we have to be focused on who we are and what we are about," he said.

"The church is its most dangerous when it is complacent. I trust God's hand. That doesn't mean things don't happen that are wrong, but God will redeem."

St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Farmersville, Ohio, was the first member of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ to leave the ELCA on Sept. 30. Charity Lutheran Church in Bismarck, N.D., joined it Dec. 16.

A final withdrawal vote is set for next Sunday at Community of Hope Lutheran Church in Tucson, Ariz. An initial vote may take place the same day at St. John Lutheran Church in Sterling, Neb., said the latter's pastor, the Rev. Doyle Karst.

Elk Horn Lutheran Church in Iowa will hold its final withdrawal vote Feb. 24, said its pastor, the Rev. Michael Williams.

All six churches once belonged to the American Lutheran Church, the most

conservative of three church bodies that formed the ELCA on Jan. 1, 1988.