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# A Reforming Tradition Struggles with Change: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Historic Vote on LGBT Ordination, One Year Later

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## A Reforming Tradition Struggles With Change

### The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's Historic Vote on LGBT Ordination, One Year Later

By Brent Hege



Change is good. Image from the ELCA archives.

Brent Hege

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At the end of last summer the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted to amend its ordination policies to include gay and lesbian clergy who are in committed, monogamous, lifelong, publicly accountable relationships. The assembly also voted to recommend a process whereby those pastors who had either left the ELCA or been forced out for violating the now-defunct ordination policies could be reinstated to the active clergy roster.

For progressives in the ELCA, the wider Christian church and society at large, the vote was a thrilling victory after decades of struggle and setback. For conservatives, the vote signaled a decisive break with scripture and tradition and called the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the this denomination into question. Almost one year later, we can take a step back to consider what happened in Minneapolis and to map some of the trajectories of this historic vote.

#### **A Fundamental Injustice?**

Discussions of sexuality, ordination practices, and related issues have been a regular feature of the the church's conversations since before the merger of its predecessor bodies in 1988. Numerous studies have been conducted to determine how the ELCA might faithfully minister to LGBTQ persons while remaining faithful to scripture,

tradition, and the confessions (the most recent of these studies is “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” the social statement adopted by the 2009 churchwide assembly).

Alongside these official studies has been a growing sense among Lutherans that the official policy denying ordination to non-celibate gay and lesbian persons might be a fundamental injustice. Three groups in particular have been at the forefront of these discussions. Lutherans Concerned/North America and Goodsoil have been tireless advocates for the full inclusion of LGBTQ Lutherans into the life of the church. A third organization, Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM), oversees the candidacies of Lutheran clergy of all sexual orientations and gender identities for ordained ministry in the Lutheran church—and one result of last summer’s vote is that pastors credentialed by the ELM will be eligible for inclusion on the ELCA’s roster of active clergy.

As in years past, the debates leading up to Minneapolis (and still ongoing) focused on three issues: scripture, tradition, and justice. Both sides of the debate claim scriptural justification for their positions and both sides claim to be standing within the tradition of the church: opponents arguing that changing ordination policies made a decisive break with historic tradition, proponents arguing that Lutherans understand tradition to be a fluid, ever-reforming process of conforming to the gospel in each new age. The third issue—justice—represents the most lopsided of the three. Opponents do not typically consider justice to be a relevant category, while proponents insist that justice lies at the very heart of the issue. In Minneapolis LGBTQ Lutherans and their allies finally won a victory for which they had fought for so long, but that historic moment in the life of the ELCA was hardly the last word on the subject.

Immediately after the vote and at the close of the 2009 churchwide assembly, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson anticipated the full spectrum of emotions that would emerge as a result of the votes. As it stands now, one year later, a growing number of disgruntled Lutherans have ignored the Presiding Bishop’s pleas for reconciliation and are taking public steps to leave the ELCA or to remain with certain reservations. A dissenting group called Lutheran CORE (formerly Coalition for Reform, now Coalition for Renewal) met in assembly in September of 2009 to discuss the possibility of forming a new Lutheran church body in North America. Those discussions resulted in the announcement of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), which will include disaffected “confessional” Lutherans from the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Lutheran CORE will remain as a network for dissenting Lutherans not wishing to leave their current denominations.

### **Lutheranism is at Heart a Reforming Tradition**

What are the issues at stake in these discussions? First, I put the term “confessional” in quotes because I consider its use in this context to be disingenuous; it implies that only those Lutherans who are opposed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ Lutherans are faithful to the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church (The Book of Concord). It also assumes that the supporters of full inclusion are apostates who willfully abandon scripture, tradition, and the confessions to appease contemporary cultural sensibilities.

Neither charge is accurate, of course. Progressive Lutherans win their convictions for justice and inclusion with appeals to scripture, tradition, and the confessions. We make arguments based on the clear biblical demand for justice, citing the myriad instances in scripture, tradition, and the confessions urging the primacy of the gospel of radical love and acceptance of all people by the God who is called love. We bear in mind that Lutheranism is at heart a reforming tradition as well as the source of modern biblical criticism, and we remember that a failure to read scripture (and tradition, and the confessions) critically through the lens of the gospel is a flirtation with idolatry. We listen to our LGBTQ sisters and brothers when they share stories of pain, betrayal, and suffering over years of being treated as second-class members of their churches and being denied their vocations as clergy because of who they love.

If the broader culture is any indicator, conservatives within the ELCA (and the new NALC) are fighting a rear-guard action that will become increasingly irrelevant. Surveys consistently show that younger generations of Americans are becoming more accepting of LGBTQ persons, and none other than former first lady Laura Bush admitted recently that same-sex marriage “will come.” It is also important to remember that the ELCA is not a denomination on the far-left fringes of American Protestantism; it is a traditionally moderate, left-of-center body whose historic heartlands are the Mid-Atlantic and the Upper Midwest. If the this denomination is making moves toward full inclusion, other Protestant bodies can’t be far behind.

### **Female Clergy Oblivious to Irony**

This is not the first time the ELCA has had these conversations. In fact, almost identical arguments were made forty years ago when the issue was the ordination of women. Opponents protested that ordaining women was a clear violation of scripture, tradition, and the confessions; while proponents contended that ordaining women was consistent with the gospel, justice, and the historic teachings of the Lutheran church on ordination. Women now comprise over 30% of the ELCA roster of pastors, diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, and deaconesses, and currently the number of women and men preparing for ministry in ELCA seminaries is roughly equal (Susan Candea, “Wisdom Has Blessed Us”). While there are certainly some in the ELCA who continue to oppose women’s ordination, those numbers are small and grow smaller with each passing year. The same, I suspect, will be the case for the issue of gay and lesbian ordination forty years from now.

Ironically, these two issues are closely related and contribute to the perceived need for a new Lutheran church body in North America. The ELCA is the only major Lutheran body in the United States to ordain women, and the number of dissenting ELCA Lutherans includes many female clergy who cannot simply leave the ELCA for another existing Lutheran body (such as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod), where they would be denied ordination as women.

Some female clergy standing on the shoulders of foremothers who protested the injustice of barring women from ordained ministry now deny that vocation to gay and lesbian

pastors who desire the joys and blessings of a committed relationship, yet these women do not recognize the inconsistency (at best) or hypocrisy (at worst) in their position. And thus there is a perceived need for a new church body that will continue to ordain women (itself a departure from their own reading of scripture, tradition, and the confessions) but will deny that right to gay and lesbian persons in committed, monogamous, lifelong, publicly accountable relationships.

The ELCA has decided, for now, to live with this tension and to avoid active measures to discourage the exodus of congregations and members from the church. I think this is a wise and prudent decision. After years of fence-straddling and multiple “studies,” the ELCA has taken its stand for justice and has given every indication of being committed to that stand, come whatever may.

Additionally, the church has repeatedly insisted that it will respect the “bound conscience” of dissenters and will work to continue in faithful and productive mission and ministry with those who disagree with the actions taken at the 2009 churchwide assembly. Already, though, there are signs of pressure to rescind the decisions made in Minneapolis last summer, as memorials are currently making their way through some local conferences and synod assemblies asking for voting members of the next biennial churchwide assembly (to be held in Orlando in August 2011) to repeal the new ordination policies and revert to the discriminatory policies of the past.

And here I can only say that those Lutherans considering such a plan of attack might be better served to leave the ELCA and join the new NALC, allowing the ELCA to pursue its mission to manifest God’s grace and Christ’s love in the world, with no exceptions.