

ELCA Church Council rejects pleas for 2/3 majority

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In spite of requests from 15 ELCA synods and a significant majority of ELCA bishops asking for a two-thirds majority vote, the ELCA Church Council voted to stick with its November decision to propose rules of procedure for the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly that would require only a simple majority vote on resolutions about changes in church teaching and policy to allow practicing homosexuals to serve as ELCA ministers. The Church Council met March 27-30 in Chicago.

The council's Legal and Constitutional Committee presented a proposed rule for the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly that was nearly identical to the rule it had recommended in November. The Church Council had voted 19-10 to delete the two-thirds majority requirement at its November meeting. In presenting the rule at the March meeting, the committee made no recommendation for approval or disapproval. Ten council members voted for the two-thirds majority rule for the ministry policy resolutions, 21 opposed it and two abstained in the Saturday, March 28, vote.

In recent weeks, 15 ELCA Synod Councils had asked the Church Council to propose a two-thirds majority rule on all the sexuality matters to be considered by the Churchwide Assembly. Three Synod Councils had supported a simple majority rule.

The ELCA Conference of Bishops voted by a two-to-one margin in support of a two-thirds majority rule at their meeting in early March. Because it was a closed session, the ELCA had not reported the bishops' vote. However, when a council member requested that the council hear the Conference of Bishops' advice on this matter, the bishops' views were made public.

Some council members said that if they changed their minds on the rule, it might look like the council was succumbing to pressure from "a few synods." One member suggested that perhaps all of the other synods agreed with the simple majority rule.

Some council members also said that by making the decision in November — prior to the release of the task force report — their decision was neutral with respect to the content of the task force report. If they changed their minds now, it might look like they were commenting on the content of the task force report.

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly will adopt its rules of procedure at its first session and could amend the rules to reinstate the two-thirds majority requirement for changes in ministry standards.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson set the tone for all of the council's discussions with his report at the start of the meeting on March 28. He said, "We are at the intersection of fear and hope," and went on to say that the council and the ELCA should not let fear keep them from doing what they ought to do and be who they ought to be. He urged them to move forward boldly in hope.

Sunday, March 29, the council dealt with the proposed social statement on human sexuality and the ministry policies resolutions from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Human Sexuality.

The Rev. Steve Loy, chair of the council's Program and Services Committee, which had reviewed the proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, before the meeting, said that the committee considered the proposed social statement to be credible and therefore recommended that the Church Council pass it along to the Churchwide Assembly with minimal changes.

When the Churchwide staff and leaders presented the social statement to the Church Council for consideration, they praised the task force for its work.

The Rev. Roger Thompson, chair of the Church in Society Program Committee, said the task force accurately reflected the diversity of views in the ELCA and that the social statement is a "very admirable document."

The Rev. Roger Willer, director of the ELCA Department of Studies, Church in Society, reported that the task force took seriously the feedback to the 2008 *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* and made significant revisions in the proposed statement including: writing a shorter statement (1,000 words less); placing sexual ethics within the doctrine of creation; clarifying the role of the Law; using less technical language; locating sexuality in God's left-handed ruling; and noting that disagreements on sexual ethics are not matters in which salvation is at stake.

The Church Council unanimously approved amendments to the proposed social statement, which the task force regarded as friendly amendments that further the intent of the social statement. Then the council voted by a strong majority to "transmit" the social statement to the Churchwide Assembly as amended.

The Church Council also voted to transmit implementing resolutions related to the proposed statement, with some amendments, to the Churchwide Assembly. Some council members opposed this action.

The amended social statement and implementing resolutions as they will be presented to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly will be available online at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney April 2.

The Church Council then took up the *Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies* resolutions from the task force. The Rev. Rebecca Larson, head of the Church in Society Unit said that, contrary to some news reports, the ELCA is not proposing a change in rostering policies but proposing a process by which the ELCA will decide if it wants to consider a change in policies.

The task force recommended a series of four resolutions that would allow ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

The Rev. Peter Strommen, chair of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, repeated that the task force had not proposed what the ELCA ought to do, but rather a process for how to proceed when there is no consensus on the sexuality issues.

The Rev. Stan Olson, head of the Vocation and Education unit, said that “structured flexibility” is a shorthand way to refer to what already exists in the ELCA candidacy process. He said that “structured flexibility” is not a proposal for local option because the ELCA does not currently have a local option. If the ELCA already had a local option then it would be accurate to say the task force recommendation is a proposal for local option.

Later in the meeting, Olson clarified that Resolution #4 would allow for different practices among ELCA synods and congregations.

The Church Council voted overwhelmingly to transmit Resolutions #1 and #2 to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Resolution #1 asks the ELCA to “commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” The council amended this proposal to delete a reference to synods.

Resolution #2 asks “that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

The Church Council also voted overwhelmingly to transmit Resolutions #3 and #4, but after much more discussion.

Resolution #3 states that “in the implementation of these resolutions, the ELCA commits itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”

Questions were raised about the definition of “bound conscience” — prominent in the third resolution. Is it a proper definition? Is it a new definition?

Pastor Willer said that the Church in Society Unit is preparing a document that will show that the definition of “bound conscience” used by the task force is long-standing in Lutheran and Christian teaching. He said it hasn’t been used in recent years, which is why it appears to be new. Willer asserted that Martin Luther understood “bound conscience” to apply not only to central matters of salvation but also to other matters, and that Luther understood it to mean the ability to judge moral doctrine. The document is to be available later this month.

Resolution #4 details the policy changes necessary to current ELCA teaching and policy to enact the previous resolutions.

After much discussion, Resolution #4 was substantially amended and shortened. One council member said that the amendments are more transparent in that they make it clear that the resolution allows a congregation to introduce a practice in a synod that might otherwise not accept the practice.

Throughout all of the discussions on the sexuality issues, only a few people spoke in opposition to the content of the task force documents.

The Church Council made its decisions on the sexuality documents after hearing grim news about the financial situation of the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Canadian Bishop Susan Johnson was first to report its grim financial situation. She has had to cut her staff by 30 percent. There are now only 10 full-time employees in the ELCIC national office. She is trying to run the office with one-third the real funds they had in 1986. Individual income in Canada has kept pace with inflation, but giving to congregations and giving to synods and Churchwide has not. She believes they will need to reduce the number of synods or to downsize them. "We're running out of runway," Johnson said. She added they still have some time to make choices, but they soon won't.

When the ELCA's financial condition was reported, the Rev. Wyvetta Bullock, the Executive for Administration, said that the ELCA is close to being on the edge like the Canadian church.

The ELCA has had a significant decline in mission support from synods thus far this year. January 2009 was the second lowest January in the ELCA's history, February was down, and March is down. In fiscal year 2008 the Churchwide unit received 95.8 percent of planned mission support. The estimate is for only 93 percent in 2009. The ELCA treasurer reported that factoring for inflation, mission support is down 42 percent from 1989.

Because of the revised income estimates, 35.5 Churchwide staff positions were eliminated in recent weeks — 23.5 occupied staff positions and 12 vacant positions. All Churchwide units have made reductions, a partial hiring freeze is in place, and salaries for the highest pay grades will be reduced by 3 percent.

In another action the Church Council approved, with no discussion, the ELCA bishops' response to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly resolution that called for a report from the bishops to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on their accountability to ELCA policies. The bishops have concluded that no new document is needed for the 2009 assembly because they had been regularly reviewing accountability all along and the current ELCA documents are sufficient.

The Church Council used process observers throughout the meeting to report on the freedom in the meeting for all to express themselves and for all voices to be heard. Ironically, at the very end of the meeting when advisers to the council were making reports, the Rev. Khader N. El-Yateem, chair of the Multicultural Ministries Program Committee informed the council that none of the Arab or Middle Eastern ELCA congregations had participated in the sexuality studies and feedback in the past several years. The leaders of those congregations did not present the sexuality studies and documents in their congregations because it would have been unhelpful and troublesome. He said many other ethnic congregations had also not participated for the same reasons. He warned the Church Council that it does not have the input or participation of many of these congregations.