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International Church Leaders urge ELCA to uphold biblical teaching on sexuality

Leaders of Lutheran Churches around the world are asking the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to uphold biblical teaching on marriage and on homosexual behavior.

Church leaders from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe have written letters to ELCA leaders asking the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Aug. 17-23 in Minneapolis, to reject proposed changes in church teaching on sexuality and policy changes that would allow ELCA pastors to be in same-sex relationships.

The international church leaders have explained that a decision to reject the clear teaching of Scripture would hurt the relationship between their churches and the ELCA. The ELCA is a member of the 68.5-million member Lutheran World Federation. In addition to shared LWF membership, the churches are in Companion Synod relationships with ELCA synods.

“This matter is also of great importance for us in Asia. Of special concern is the question of homosexual union blessings and the acceptance of ordained clergy in homosexual relationships. A decision to accept these two practices would be a source of profound embarrassment for the Lutheran Church in Asia,” the Rev. Nicholas Tai, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong, wrote in an open letter to ELCA Bishop Mark Hanson.

“Such a decision on the part of the ELCA would affect our companion relationships, as homosexual practice is regarded as sin in the vast ecumenical community in Asia.”

“We live in a morally and ethically shaped society. Non-Christians as well as Christians regard homosexual behavior as immoral. If the Church accepts and practices homosexual behavior, it will be a big stumbling block for the vast majority of 1.3 billion Chinese, who need the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong regards homosexual practice as a sin and expressly states this in our discipline handbook. If the ELCA accepts such practices, it will be quite an embarrassment to explain to our members why our companion Church allows something which goes against the clear biblical norms of our own Church. We, as part of the Lutheran Communion, could not escape the accusation that the Church is listening to the modern culture rather than to the clear teaching of the Word of God,” Bishop Tai said.

A similar warning came from the Rev. Bishop Stanislav Pietak, bishop of the Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran Church in the Czech Republic:

“We closely observe the discussion which is going on in your church body. We pray that your synod would take a clear Biblical stand this summer and vote against accepting the proposed social statement on human sexuality. Any other stand would be very disappointing for us and would threaten our partnership. According to our constitution, our ministry is incompatible with anyone or any organization which is in any way defending the homosexual lifestyle,” wrote Bishop Pietak.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania has repeatedly urged the ELCA to uphold biblical teaching on sexuality. The Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania issued the Bukoba Statement in 2004 which addresses homosexual behavior.

“Legalizing, authorizing or accepting same-sex relationships is to undermine the institution of marriage and its sanctity. This institution is the foundation of community welfare. To sabotage it is to sabotage God’s command that establishes this important institution,” the Bukoba Statement says.

In a 2009 letter, the Rev. Elisha Buberwa, bishop of the North-Western Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, noted the significance of the 2004 statement for Lutherans in Tanzania and said, “I, and many other Christian leaders like me, would strongly advise the ELCA leadership to do everything within their ability to delay voting on this matter which is said to be on the agenda of the Churchwide Assembly.”

“If the Churchwide Assembly votes in favor of, say, permitting pastors to bless same-sex unions and permitting bishops to ordain theologians who are actively homosexual in the practice; you can be sure, this is going to impact negatively on our (ELCA and ELCT) relationship,” Buberwa wrote.

The Lutheran World Federation reports 68.5 million Lutherans in its 140 member churches. There are more than 17 million Lutherans in Africa and 8.5 million Lutherans in Asia. The ELCA has 4.7 million members. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania is roughly the same size as the ELCA.

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