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Underscoring deep divisions in the nation's largest Lutheran denomination, a task force on Thursday called for retaining the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's prohibition against ordaining noncelibate homosexuals, but urged caution in disciplining congregations and clergy who ignored the ban.

At the same time, the church's Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality called for no change in the denomination's practice of permitting local congregations to decide whether to bless the unions of same-sex couples.

The matter will be up to the Churchwide Assembly, the 5-million member denomination's highest legislative body, to act on the panel's recommendations in August.

Church leaders said Thursday's compromise recommendations were aimed at avoiding the divisions that came to a head last year in the worldwide Anglican Communion. In that case, the Episcopal Church ordained an openly gay priest in a committed same-sex relationship as Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. In response, some other Anglican national churches in Africa, Southeast Asia and South America broke or downgraded their ties with the Episcopal Church, the self-governing U.S. branch of Anglicanism.

In the last year, three Evangelical Lutheran congregations, including two in Southern California, have defied church law by hiring gay and lesbian ministers in committed same-sex relationships. Two of the congregations, Hollywood Lutheran Church and Bethany Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, received letters of censure from their bishops. But a third congregation, Central City Lutheran Mission in San Bernardino, was stripped of its congregational status by the Pacifica Synod Council after hiring a lesbian minister who was in a committed same-sex relationship.