



## News and Current Events :: Evangelical Lutheran church panel proposes allowing gay pastors

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Gays and lesbians in lifelong, committed relationships could become pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America under a proposed exception to church policy drafted Monday by the Church Council following a three-day meeting in Chicago.

The church will consider the proposal, which emerged from a church task force on sexuality studies, at its national meeting in August in Orlando, Fla. The churchwide assembly is the chief legislative authority of the ELCA and its nearly 5.1 million members.

Current ELCA policy forbids ordination of gay pastors who are not celibate, although some such ordinations have taken place without punishment.

The church expects single, heterosexual Lutheran pastors to abstain from sex until marriage. But homosexuals in ministry are required to be celibate for life or face disciplinary action.

Under the proposed policy change, released at the conclusion of a meeting at ELCA headquarters, the bishop of a synod could seek an exception to that rule for a gay clergy candidate.

The proposal also states the candidate must provide "evidence of intent to live in a life-long, committed and faithful same-sex relationship."

Carlos Pena, chair of the church council and ELCA vice president, said the proposal created a process that would allow gay and lesbian pastors a space in the church.

"I think it's a good reflection of where we are as a church," said Pena, of Galveston, Texas, who is the highest elected layperson in the church. "We need to create some opportunity for candidates who are living in a committed relationship to be ordained."

But advocacy groups on both sides of the homosexuality issue were unsatisfied with the proposal, saying it created more problems and no resolutions.

The Rev. Jeff R. Johnson, pastor of University Lutheran Chapel in Berkeley, Calif., said the process would put more obstacles in the path of Lutheran gays and lesbians. Johnson presented a petition with more than 1,200 signatures to the Church Council seeking removal of all policies that obstruct the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people as ministers.

"This exception process is creating a second-class status for homosexual pastors and it's a little disturbing," Johnson said. "We want to be treated the same way as other pastors because we are called to God in the same way."

After a three-year study, the task force issued its report and recommendations in January. Gay rights supporters expressed disappointment with the recommendations, which called for no major changes to church rules that ban gay clergy and same-sex unions.

The first of three recommendations called for the church to "live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements." The second recommended the church continue to oppose the blessing of homosexual relationships, following guidance from a 1993 statement by ELCA bishops. That resolution also stated that the church remains open to pastors wanting to provide pastoral care for gay and lesbian Lutherans.

Both of those recommendations were approved at the weekend meeting.

But the issue of ordaining gay pastors proved more divisive. The task force recommended that bishops be allowed to ref

rain from disciplining gay or lesbian clergy as church policy requires.

After three days of wrangling with the issue, the church council decided to craft the exception policy instead.

Conservative Lutherans said Monday that the proposal contradicts church rules on same-sex unions. The Rev. Roy A. Harrisville III, executive director of Solid Rock Lutherans, said the exception policy would seek evidence of committed same-sex relationships even as the church forbids blessing such unions.

"I'm concerned that they have forwarded a policy to the assembly that creates a double standard," Harrisville said. And I doubt we will be able to live with that very long."