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ELCA Synod Bishops, Voting Members Respond to Assembly Actions
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CHICAGO (ELCA) -- Most of the 65 synodical bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) want leaders, congregations and pastors to stay in conversation following the adoption of a social statement on human sexuality and the opening of the ELCA's ministry to people in committed same-gender relationships.

Many bishops wrote to their respective synods following the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Some letters are posted on synod Web sites.

"It will be good for all our leaders and members to take a bit of a breath over this," wrote the Rev. James A. Justman, bishop of the ELCA East Central Wisconsin Synod.

The churchwide assembly, the chief legislative authority of the ELCA, met Aug. 17-23 at the Minneapolis Convention Center. About 2,300 people participated, including 1,045 ELCA voting members. The theme for the biennial assembly was "God's work. Our hands."

During the assembly voting members decided that ELCA will "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," according to a resolution that passed 559-451.

"I cannot envision there will ever be a time when nearly 5 million Lutherans will be of one mind on every matter," wrote the Rev. Michael A. Last, bishop of the Western Iowa synod.

Many of the bishops said it was important for those who favor and those who oppose the change to ministry policies to stay in conversation with one another.

"This vote means that many in our church will be bitterly disappointed and angry," wrote the Rev. Craig E. Johnson, bishop of the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod. "Let us strive to live together as the Holy Scripture calls us to live together amid our disagreements."

Most bishops also lifted up voting members for the way they handled the issue and each other.

"However you feel about these decisions, you should be proud of the transparency, integrity, care and prayerful nature of the process we used to make them," wrote the Rev. David H. Brauer-Rieke, bishop of the ELCA Oregon synod. "This in and of itself is an amazing witness."

Bishops also stressed that congregations will not be forced to accept pastors against their wishes.

"The actions of the assembly create options and opportunities -- they do not demand change on a congregational level," said the Rev. Wayne N. Miller, bishop of the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod. "Nothing in these decisions requires any congregation to change its current practice or even its current teaching about human sexuality."

At least two bishops revealed their voting record to their synods -- the Rev. Claire S. Burkat, bishop of the ELCA Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod and the Rev. Thomas A. Skrenes, bishop of the ELCA Northern Great Lakes Synod. Burkat supported the resolution, Skrenes did not.

Burkat and Skrenes committed to continuing conversation with members of the ELCA who do not agree with them.

"I voted against all of these proposals because I believe the theological and biblical case for change was not made," Skrenes wrote in his letter. "My renewed pledge to you is to be honest, fair and pastoral as we enter the future."

Burkat wrote that she supported the change and stressed that no congregation will be forced to call a pastor against its will.

"My prayer is for us to move forward with love and respect for one another," Burkat wrote.

The Rev. David L. deFreese, bishop of the ELCA Nebraska Synod, wrote that he is "uncertain" about the actions of the assembly.

"I am uncertain of the rightness of this current decision," deFreese wrote, "but I trust that God's Holy Spirit will correct where we are wrong, encourage where we are right and act if we are somewhere in between."

Voting members of the ELCA Southwestern Minnesota Synod sent out a letter saying that members should not divide the church into an "us and them" circumstance.

"We encourage you to go to God's Word, deepen your faith, seek to understand the other and listen to what the Spirit is saying to you through these decisions," the letter said.

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