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Lutheran conservatives delay leaving ELCA

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

Conservatives upset over the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's recent decision to allow non-celibate gay clergy have voted to create a free-standing synod and study for a year whether to leave the denomination.

"Basically, what we're saying is that a year from now, we're going to have a proposal of some form," said the Rev. David Baer of Whitewood, S.D., a member of Lutheran CORE, which hosted the meeting of 1,200 conservatives in an Indianapolis suburb last week (Sept. 25-26).

The group approved a constitution for CORE and asked a steering committee to return in a year with recommendations on whether to leave the ELCA, merge with another Lutheran denomination, or start their own. Ultimately, the group hopes to "reconfigure" Lutheranism in North America to accord with traditional views of Scripture and homosexuality.

In August, the ELCA voted to allow Lutherans in "lifelong, publicly accountable, monogamous, same-gender relationships," to serve as clergy. The 4.6 million-member church also voted to allow congregations to "recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships."

But regional synods and local congregations are not required to hire gay or lesbian pastors or recognize same-sex couples, a compromise intended to acknowledge the deep divisions on homosexuality within the ELCA.

Already, though, some congregations are leaving. On Sunday (Sept. 27), Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Ariz., which was the ELCA's 10th largest congregation, voted to split from the denomination and join the more conservative Lutheran Congregations in Missions for Christ, according to the ELCA's news service. The Arizona church took the first vote to secede -- two votes are required under ELCA

guidelines -- in June, before the ELCA decided to allow non-celibate gay clergy.

The free-standing synod CORE created on Saturday (Sept. 26) includes members of the ELCA, but is not affiliated with the denomination, according to CORE, which has asked members to funnel donations away from the ELCA's Chicago headquarters.

CORE leaders say their synod will assume the tasks of regular ELCA synods: providing congregational resources, planting new congregations, supporting global missionaries, and offering theological education.

'God is calling us to do something,' said CORE's chair, the Rev. Paul Spring of State College, Pa. 'The ELCA has fallen into heresy. It is a time for confession and a time to resist.'

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