

Lutheran dissidents at work on new body

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In late September, Lutheran dissidents said they would hunker down for a year and study whether to leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and create a new church body.

Less than two months later, on Wednesday (Nov. 19) Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal) announced that indeed such a body "will likely be necessary."

"What happened was the idea of a discussion for a year became kind of scary for people who want to leave now," said the Rev. David Baer, a CORE spokesman and pastor of an ELCA church in Whitewood, S.D.

Baer said his own church will vote this weekend on whether to join CORE, which he estimates counts around 700 congregations as members.

CORE said no "firm decisions" have been made about how the new church body will be structured; recommendations will be released in February. "The working committee is just beginning their work," Baer said. "What we've done is paint a little picture of what a church body will look like."

Conservative Lutherans have been distressed since the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly voted in August to allow gays and lesbians in committed, same-sex relationships to be ordained as clergy. The assembly also voted to allow congregations to recognize and support such relationships.

"The vote on sexuality opened the eyes of many to how far the ELCA has moved from biblical teaching," the Rev. Paull Spring, CORE's chair, said in a statement Wednesday.

ELCA spokesman John Brooks said CORE's announcement was expected. "We are staying focused on our clear priorities and clear mission. More than 10,000 congregations that want to be part of that mission."

Five congregations have taken the two votes necessary to leave the ELCA since the Churchwide Assembly, Brooks said. The ELCA has approximately 4.6 million members spread across 10,300 congregations. Eighty-seven congregations have taken the first vote, and 28 of those did not attain the two-thirds majority required to leave the denomination, Brooks said.

"That two-thirds hurdle is a big hurdle for some congregations," Baer said.