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Conservative Lutherans form new denomination

by Kevin Eckstrom by Religion News Service

Saying they're done with efforts to reform the nation's largest Lutheran body, dissidents unveiled blueprints Feb. 18 for a rival denomination, the North American Lutheran Church (NALC).

The new body, which will hew to a more traditional line on issues of human sexuality, is expected to be formally launched in August as a conservative alternative to the 4.6 million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

So far, at least seven ELCA congregations have voted to leave after the Chicago-based denomination lifted restrictions last summer on non-celibate gay clergy. An additional 28 congregations appear poised to leave.

The ultimate size of the new denomination remains unclear. Congregations seeking to leave the ELCA must garner a two-thirds majority in back-to-back votes. So far, 64 of the 220 ELCA parishes that moved to secede couldn't muster the necessary votes, both sides said.

The new denomination will be "faithful in its preaching and practice to the Holy Bible and to the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions," organizers said. Still, they said remaining in the ELCA is also a "faithful course" for individuals or congregations that choose to stay.

Organizers are "united in a common confession of the Christian faith and commitment to submit to the authority of God's Word over all matters of faith," said the Rev. Mark Chavez of Landisville, Pa., director of the group Lutheran CORE, which is overseeing the breakaway.

Chavez said Lutheran CORE would remain as a network of Lutherans across the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, NALC and perhaps even the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Lutheran CORE expects to work alongside the new denomination on evangelism, theological training and social services. Former ELCA Bishop Paul Spring, who chairs Lutheran CORE's steering committee, said there are no plans to dissolve Lutheran CORE into the new NALC.

Whatever the group's future, organizers made clear they're fed up with years-long fights within the ELCA.

"These proposals are a way for Lutherans to move forward ... while leaving behind past struggles to reform the ELCA," said Ryan Schwarz, a NALC organizer from Washington, D.C.

The new body would mark the second major U.S. church schism over homosexuality in as many years. In 2009, conservative Episcopalians launched the rival Anglican Church in North America, which now claims some 800 congregations in the U.S. and Canada; Episcopal Church headquarters puts the number of breakaway congregations at no more than several dozen.

The new Lutheran church body was announced on the 464th anniversary of the death of Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, a date on which Lutherans celebrate their founder as "a renewer of the Christian church," officials said.

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Recently released ELCA membership figures reported a 1.6 percent drop in 2008 -- losses incurred well before last year's policy change.

For its part, the ELCA issued a statement saying church leaders will go forward on implementing the policy changes while regretting the decision of "a few congregations" to leave the denomination.

"As the ELCA carries out the directives of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, we continue to encourage congregations, synods and the churchwide organization to remain in conversation about these matters," the ELCA statement said.

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