

Bachmann's church defends anti-Catholic views

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Jul. 18, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The Lutheran denomination that GOP presidential candidate Rep. Michele Bachmann quit in June sought to explain its belief that the papacy is the anti-Christ after reports questioned whether Bachmann is anti-Catholic.

Six days before Bachmann officially launched her presidential campaign last month, the Minnesota Republican and her family left Salem Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minn., which is part of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

Synod spokesman Joel Hochmuth said Thursday (July 14) the Bachmanns had been members of Salem Lutheran for more than a decade, but had not attended the church for at least two years. They did not request a transfer to another congregation, he said.

The denomination says on its website: "We identify the Antichrist as the papacy. This is an historical judgment based on Scripture."

Bachmann's campaign did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The Republican, who has surged in recent presidential polls, denied that she is anti-Catholic in a 2006 debate. "It's abhorrent, it's religious bigotry. I love Catholics, I'm a Christian, and my church does not believe that the pope is the anti-Christ, that's absolutely false."

Bachmann also said that her pastor, the Rev. Marcus Birkholz, told her he was "appalled that someone would put that out."

According to Hochmuth, the pastor told Bachmann that WELS "primarily views the office of the papacy as the Antichrist, not the individual popes themselves."

Asked for comment, Birkholz said Thursday, "I have been asked by my congregation not to give any more interviews."

An online report in *The Atlantic* magazine on Thursday (July 14) reported on WELS' anti-papal doctrine, and questioned whether Bachmann also subscribes to the view.

Bill Donohue, president of the watchdog Catholic League, said he does not believe Bachmann is anti-Catholic, but that "it is not inappropriate to ask some pointed questions of Rep. Bachmann and her religion's tenets."

Hochmuth said in an interview the anti-papal doctrine is "not one of our driving views, and certainly not something that we preach from the pulpit." Hochmuth said he doubts whether many members of WELS are aware of the doctrine, which dates to Protestant Reformer Martin Luther.

"As a confessional Lutheran church, we hold to the teachings of Martin Luther who himself maintained the

papacy, and in turn the pope, has set himself up in place of Christ, and so is the Antichrist," Hochmuth said.

He also described the anti-Christ as a theological principle, not a "cartoon character with horns."

Hochmuth added that "we love and respect Catholic Christians ... Yet we pray that they would come to see the errors of their church's official doctrine that the pope is infallible and that no one can be saved outside of the Roman Catholic Church."

Lutherans believe that individual salvation comes through faith alone, not through obedience to church doctrine or leaders.

With about 1,300 congregations and 400,000 members, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is one of the smallest and most conservative Lutheran denominations in the U.S.

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