

Lutheran Renewal Leader 'Ashamed' Over ELCA Vote

✖ A prominent Lutheran renewal leader said his denomination's vote on Friday to allow noncelibate homosexuals to serve as clergy has left him feeling ashamed but he has no plans to leave the church.

Larry Christenson (pictured), former head of International Lutheran Renewal (ILR), said the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's (ELCA) affirmation of homosexual ministers left him with "a feeling of shame that was so palpable I could have cut it with a knife."

Although he knows of ministers who already have left the ELCA and supports their decision, he also understands the view of Lutheran leaders who say conservatives can "speak truth" to their denomination if they remain.

"I think if this went out and every member of the ELCA were to vote, it wouldn't be the same as it went at that convention because the people are more conservative than the church at its national headquarters," said Christenson, who has been a leader in the Lutheran renewal movement for 50 years.

"If you leave you'd be leaving an awful lot of people who basically believe what you believe," he added. "I just don't think you can make a judgment that's universal for the whole country."

In a 559-451 vote in Minneapolis last week that left some conservative ministers in tears, the 4.7 million-member ELCA voted to allow homosexuals in committed relationships to serve as clergy. Before the change, the denomination allowed gays and lesbians who remained celibate to serve as pastors. The resolution does not require Lutheran ministers to hire gay clergy.

Before Friday's vote, the ELCA narrowly adopted a social statement on human sexuality that acknowledges differing views on homosexuality among congregations. The document also recommends that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to recognize lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, which conservatives say is a veiled way to eventually approve gay marriage.

The vote made the ELCA the largest denomination to allow homosexual ministers and alarmed many evangelical leaders who generally viewed the denomination as theologically orthodox. "It's a huge, huge departure for a church like that," Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, told the Associated Press.

Current ILR director Paul Anderson said his organization encourages each church to prayerfully decide whether to stay or leave.

"Those who leave can depart without shame from a church that has lost its moorings," he told *Charisma* in a statement. "Those who stay to be a voice from within must pray for courage and focus, lest they lose their cutting edge and sink into trivialities rather than kingdom issues."

Although he "blesses" pastors who "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit choose to stay," he expects many of their members to eventually find another church home.

"I suspect that many individuals will leave churches that decide to stay and be a witness," he said. "May they not be mocked, and may they find a good new home."

Anderson said renewal continues to spread among Lutherans, with some 10,000 people participating in an ILR conference in Norway last month. He said congregations have been leaving the ELCA for years. Some, like his own, have aligned with the Alliance of Renewal Churches, a network of charismatic Lutheran congregations that is affiliated with the ILR. Others

are affiliated with Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, another conservative network.

After Friday's vote, the Lutheran Coalition for Reform, which had been officially recognized by the ELCA, severed ties with the denomination and declared itself an independent Lutheran organization. The group plans to host a gathering next month in Indianapolis to discuss the future of "faithful Lutherans."

Christenson says the controversy over homosexuality has been brewing for nearly 20 years. He believes the authority of Scripture is at the root of the debate.

"Both [sides] would agree with the Apostle's Creed, but they disagree that on this issue that the Bible clearly is binding on us today," he told *Charisma*. "That's the issue. I think that not either group has thrown Scripture to the side. They have looked at it and seen it differently."

Nationwide, Lutheran congregations had mixed reactions to the votes. Members of Holy Trinity Lutheran in Chicago celebrated the gay-affirming vote, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, while the pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Charleston, ., covered the name "Lutheran" on the church's sign.

"I asked that be done because I'm ashamed," the Rev. Richard Mahan told the *Charleston Daily Mail*. "I'm ashamed of what the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has done to a church I've loved for 40 years."

Although their Lutheran church is theologically conservative, Christenson and his wife, Nordis, wore black to church on Sunday and put ashes on their foreheads "as a sign of sorrow for the church we grew up in, love and belong to."