



Lutheranism

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A portrait of Martin Luther (1483-1546) painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1529.

Lutheranism, which is riven into numerous denominations, is a major branch of Christianity, as well as a reform movement within Christianity. As a branch of Christianity, it counts almost 70,000,000 adherents, about half of whom live in Europe, especially in the Nordic countries. Africa and North America also have large numbers of Lutherans.

The Lutheran Church is the largest denomination in Germany; and in most of the Nordic countries, it is not only the largest denomination, but also the state church. Even when it is not officially recognized as the state church (as in Finland), most Scandinavians consider themselves Lutheran, at least culturally.

In the United States, the two largest Lutheran denominations are the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA, which formed in 1988 after a merger of three "synods" or church bodies) and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), but there are many other smaller Lutheran denominations and independent churches.

The largest Lutheran denomination in Canada is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), which was organized in 1986 through a merger of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada and the Lutheran Church in America-Canada Section.

History and Belief

The history of Lutheranism may be dated to 1517, when German monk Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* condemning corrupt practices within the Roman Catholic Church.

Although Luther initially advocated for reform within the Church rather than a separation from it, he and his followers eventually left the Catholic Church. Braving excommunication and threats to his life, he continued his teachings, and in the process both developed a comprehensive theology distinct from that of Roman Catholicism and launched the Protestant Reformation that divided Western Christianity and precipitated the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Central to Lutheranism is the belief that salvation comes only by the grace of God and through faith in Christ alone. Luther's doctrine of "justification" contradicts the Roman Catholic doctrine of "faith and works." In Luther's view, "good works" are the product of faith rather than a means of salvation.

Luther believed that many of the rituals and good works prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church are not only unnecessary to salvation but actually impediments to it.

Further, he rejected not only the supremacy of the Pope, but also the intermediary function of priests, teaching that each individual has the capacity to reach God through scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

He considered the Bible the authoritative source of God and advocated that it be translated into vernacular

languages to enable uneducated individuals to read it in their native languages rather than in Latin or Greek.

Luther believed that the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, such as baptism and communion, were not essential to salvation but could nevertheless be valuable as aids to faith.

He rejected such Roman Catholic traditions as priestly celibacy, purgatory, and the belief in transubstantiation (the "real presence" of God in the bread and wine of communion).

Lutheranism differs from other Protestant traditions in that it rejects the concept that some individuals are predestined to damnation, accepts some Roman Catholic traditions that do not contradict the scriptures, and rejects the notion of "once saved, always saved." Other theological differences that distinguish Lutheranism from Calvinism and other reform traditions involve fine points of Christology and the workings of grace.

Most Lutheran denominations embrace the Book of Concord, which collects the historical "confessions" of Luther and other early church leaders, as the authority for doctrine and practice, though not all denominations believe that it is binding in all respects.

Lutheranism expanded throughout the German states and into Scandinavia so that by the end of the sixteenth century, it was a major European branch of Christianity. It subsequently spread to all the inhabited continents.

Lutheranism first made its presence felt in North America in the seventeenth century, but it became a major denomination in the United States in the nineteenth century, with the emigration of German and Scandinavian believers. Although Lutheran churches are now found throughout the United States and Canada, they are most prolific in areas with large populations of descendants of German and Scandinavian immigrants, especially the Upper Midwest of the United States.

Styles of Worship and Governance

Because Lutheranism is riven into so many different denominations, it is difficult to generalize about Lutheran liturgy and style of worship. Some Lutheran churches practice infant baptism, while others practice only adult baptism. Some Lutheran churches feature worship services that are similar to Roman Catholic or high-church Anglican services, while others favor more austere liturgical practices.

Lutheran church architecture varies greatly, generally reflecting the differences in styles of worship. Especially in Europe, the architecture of mainstream Lutheran churches is similar to that of Roman Catholic churches, while that of the smaller Lutheran denominations tend to be more similar to that of Protestant churches.

Some Lutheran denominations are governed by an episcopate (i.e., bishops), and organized into dioceses and parishes, much like the governing structure of the Roman Catholic Church, though the Lutheran tradition is democratic and congregationally focused rather than hierarchical and centralized. The governing structure of other denominations are congregationally based, and includes districts and synods, councils and conferences, presided over by elders and presidents.

Lutheranism and Homosexuality

Lutheran denominations vary widely in their acceptance of homosexuals as full participants in church life. Some denominations permit celibate homosexuals to be ordained to the ministry, while others do not. Some

ordain sexually active homosexuals, at least those in monogamous, committed relationships, while others do not.

Some Lutheran churches perform blessings for same-sex couples and some perform marriages for same-sex couples, while others do not recognize same-sex couples at all.

European Lutheran denominations tend to be liberal in policies on church membership, on the participation of gay men and lesbians in church life, and on recognizing same-sex relationships. While most of these churches do not regard homosexual orientation as sinful in and of itself, many are vague as to whether homosexual acts are sinful, often simply acknowledging a range of views on the subject.

The largest Lutheran denomination, the Evangelical Church in Germany, issued a position paper in 1996, "Living in Tension," that called for the full acceptance of homosexuals in all areas of church life and for the blessing of same-sex partnerships. However, it also recommended that marriage be reserved for heterosexual couples.

The Scandinavian churches, in the face of the populace's widespread skepticism about religion and religious beliefs, see themselves as "folk churches." From this perspective, dogma is less important than inclusiveness on the basis of ancestry and nationality. Hence, they make no distinctions on the basis of sexual orientation in membership.

There have, however, been controversies within Scandinavian churches as to whether sexually active gay men and lesbians are eligible for ordination to the clergy and as to whether same-sex partnerships may be blessed or same-sex couples may be married in the church.

In many of these churches, considerable discretion is given to individual bishops and clergy as to whether to ordain non-celibate gay men and lesbians and whether to perform same-sex marriages and blessings of same-sex couples. This "local option" solution may reflect a division between rural and urban attitudes toward homosexuality, with clergy and congregations in rural areas less likely to be as fully accepting of gay men and lesbians as those in urban areas.

Sexually active gay men and lesbians serve as clergy in the Evangelical Church of Germany, the Church of Denmark, the Church of Norway, and the Church of Sweden.

In 2008, Horst Gorski, a respected theologian from Hamburg and the founder of a center for gay and lesbian Lutheran pastors, was one of two finalists for the position of bishop in the Evangelical Church of Germany. Conservatives warned that the election of an openly gay bishop would divide the German church, and he was not elected.

In 2009, however, Eva Brunne, a lesbian who is the partner of another priest, Gunilla Linden, was elected Bishop of Stockholm in the Church of Sweden. Tellingly, the election of Bishop Brunne sparked none of the bitter controversy that attended the election of Bishop V. Gene Robinson in the Episcopal Church of the United States.

North American Lutherans

There is no controversy about homosexuality and homosexuals in the second largest Lutheran denomination in the United States, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS, often referred to by its detractors as the "Misery Synod" because of its crabbed and dogmatic approach to moral issues). It is among the most homophobic religious organizations in the United States.

Founded in 1847, the LCMS counts more than 2,000,000 members. It practices closed communion, which means that only baptized and confirmed members of the church may receive Holy Communion. It does not

ordain women; nor does it knowingly ordain homosexuals, whether celibate or sexually active.

The LCMS has declared that homosexuality is "intrinsically sinful" and that homosexuals stand "under the condemnation of God's Word." It refuses membership to those who persist in homosexual acts, and sponsors Keys Ministries, a secretive organization devoted to helping individuals overcome homosexual desire, perhaps through reparative therapy.

The LCMS actively works against the movement to secure equal civil rights for homosexuals, and especially opposes same-sex marriage, despite the fact that Lutherans do not consider marriage itself a sacrament.

In contrast, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are more moderate and more accepting of homosexuals than the LCMS, though until recently neither denomination was as welcoming as most of the European Lutheran denominations.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), consisting of some 160,000 members in more than 600 congregations, had officially considered homosexuality sinful, though that stance was modified by a new report on human sexuality adopted by the National Conference in 2011.

In practice, there is a range of beliefs among members of the ELCIC, some firmly holding to the belief that Biblical passages and tradition mandate that homosexuality be considered intrinsically sinful, while others believe that the Gospel message of love, justice, and inclusion demand that homosexuality be considered an orientation as valid and morally neutral as heterosexuality.

The controversy in the ELCIC has centered on the issues of ordaining clergy who are sexually active homosexuals and on blessing same-sex marriages.

In contrast to leaders of the United Church of Canada, who lobbied in favor of same-sex marriage, the National Bishop of the ELCIC lobbied against same-sex marriage in a letter to Prime Minister Martin when the Canadian Parliament was set to vote on the issue in 2005.

While recognizing that his Church was divided over the question of same-sex marriage, Bishop Schulz argued that the institution of marriage was "a unique relationship between a man and woman" involving the raising of children (an argument that had already been rejected by numerous Canadian courts), and concluded that "I would prefer that the legal definition of marriage remain defined as the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others and would provide for the recognition of gay and lesbian relationships by way of another legal designation or a new social institution."

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada did not, of course, require churches to perform same-sex marriages and the ELCIC refused to perform same-sex marriages or to bless same-sex unions for many years after same-sex marriage became legal in Canada. In 2003, the Conference of Bishops declared: "Since the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada has no official policy authorizing clergy to bless same sex relationships, pastors are not permitted to perform such rites and will be disciplined for doing so. For the sake of the unity and good order of the church, it is important that any changes to this practice be authorized by this church acting together."

In 2004, the Eastern Synod of the ELCIC formally petitioned the National Church Council to "initiate a study of the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications of authorizing a parish-based local option to perform same-sex blessings."

In 2006, the Church Conference of the Eastern Synod overwhelmingly voted to allow a "local option" for congregations to offer blessings of same-sex unions. In response, the National Church Council ruled that the

question was under its jurisdiction, and the Eastern Synod relented.

Similarly, the question of ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian clergy was controversial within the ELCIC for many years. The official policy until 2011 was that "A self-declared and practicing homosexual is not to be approved for ordination and, if already ordained, is not to be recommended for call."

In 2008, however, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, in the Eastern Synod of ELCIC, ordained Lionel Ketola, who is legally married to another man. He was appointed Associate Pastor and "Ambassador of Reconciliation."

In response to his installation, which was attended by many fellow clergy, the Bishop and Synod Council of the Eastern Synod suspended Holy Cross from full participation in the conference, synod, and national conventions. The suspension of the congregation was to last until Ketola is no longer affiliated with the church or until his ordination is approved by the ELCIC.

Tellingly, the Bishop of the Eastern Synod added a paragraph to the suspension letter that he and the Council had pledged to work toward "changing policies that preclude the full participation of all God's people in our ecclesial life."

In 2009, Ketola left his position and the suspension of Holy Cross was lifted.

In 2011, however, the National Conference, meeting in Saskatoon, voted to allow same-sex marriages and the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian pastors in committed relationships.

Following more than two hours of debate, delegates approved by a vote of 213 to 134 a human sexuality social statement that developed out of a four-year national study of sexuality. The statement calls upon the ELCIC to "denounce discrimination, including sexual discrimination, in all its forms."

By a vote of 192 to 132, the delegates agreed to allow ELCIC clergy to preside at or bless same-sex marriages, according to their consciences.

By a vote of 205 to 114, delegates rescinded past actions that banned non-celibate gay and lesbian people from ordination and call.

During the debate over ordination, Eastern Synod Bishop Michael Pryse said of the policy that banned gay and lesbian clergy: "I've seen the terrible results of this policy: broken people, broken families, broken congregations, substance abuse, broken lives. That's what happens when you demand celibacy of those who don't have the gifts to live celibate lives. This motion provides the opportunity for willing congregations to consider these candidates."

Delegates also voted 204 to 133 to affirm a statement that church members who disagree with one another will remain in dialogue and unity, and refrain from church-dividing actions.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The largest North American Lutheran denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has gradually moved toward full inclusion of gay men and lesbians in ecclesial life. With almost 5,000,000 members, and almost 11,000 congregations, ELCA is the fifth largest American Christian denomination, and the largest to permit the ordination of sexually active gay men and lesbians.

ELCA is among the most socially progressive of American mainstream Christian denominations, often taking public stands on behalf of liberal causes, including civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender

Americans.

In August 2009, after more than three decades of controversy over questions related to human sexuality and to the acceptance of openly gay clergy, the ELCA National Assembly approved a new social statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," and also approved resolutions authorizing the denomination to find ways "to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" and to permit the ordination of clergymen in "lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships."

The new social statement acknowledges the diversity of opinion within the denomination as to whether homosexual acts are sinful and whether gay and lesbian relationships should be recognized, and asks that all sincerely held "conscience-bound" beliefs be respected.

More forcefully, the document reiterates the denomination's traditional advocacy for civil rights: "While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. It supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services. It has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection."

In addition, the document acknowledges the pain that church teachings have caused gay men and lesbians: "This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings concerning sexuality has harmed individuals, deepened suffering, or torn families apart. This includes actions that abandon or shun people . . . for a same-sex orientation. Hate crimes and violence against those who are regarded as sexually different sometimes have been publicly perpetrated in the name of Christ. Not only must such behaviors be denounced, but this church must work toward greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity."

The social statement, which needed a 2/3 vote of the delegates to be approved, was adopted on a vote of 676 to 338, the precise number needed.

The resolution that ELCA "commit itself to find ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" was passed by a vote of 619 to 402.

The resolution to permit the ordination of individuals in "publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" was passed by a vote of 559 to 451.

The adoption of the social statement and the new policies regarding the recognition of same-sex partnerships and ordination requirements was the culmination of decades of work on behalf of the inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the ecclesial life of the denomination. Growth in support of these changes was notable over the last two years, for in 2007 Assembly delegates rejected a proposal to permit sexually active clergy by a vote margin of 56 to 44 percent.

[The resolution "to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" did not change the Lutheran confessions that define marriage as between a man and a woman, but it has subsequently been interpreted to permit same-sex marriages in jurisdictions where marriage equality has been recognized.

The decision to perform and host same-sex marriages is up to the discretion of the pastor in consultation with his or her congregation and must comply with local law.]

Most of the news coverage following the 2009 Assembly emphasized the likelihood of a schism in the

denomination over the new policies, and indeed some congregations have already left and more are likely to do so. Many have affiliated with a group called Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal), which is dedicated to upholding "Biblical norms for marriage, family and sexuality."

But Lutherans have a long history of leaving denominations over points of doctrine and forming new associations. So there is nothing new in the fragmentation that may occur as the result of ELCA's new inclusiveness.

It may well be that new, currently independent congregations will join ELCA as a result of its decisions in favor of inclusiveness.

Indeed, two churches in San Francisco, St. Francis Lutheran Church and First United Lutheran Church, which were expelled from ELCA in 1995 for ordaining openly gay, sexually active pastors, were expected to return to the denomination. (In 2010, St. Francis did vote to return; however, the First United congregation has not followed suit.) Ebenezer Lutheran Church, an inclusive congregation in Chicago, was on the verge of leaving the denomination over the issue but has decided to remain in the fold.

While some conservative congregations have voted to withhold or redirect funds away from ELCA in protest of the 2009 Assembly's decisions, other congregations have voted to increase their contributions to the denomination.

Moreover, the 2009 decision in retrospect seems inevitable. At the 2007 Assembly more than 80 glbtq ministers had publicly identified themselves, thereby risking expulsion from the ministry. The Church simply could not function well if all its time were taken up with investigating the sexual orientation of its clergy and holding trials to expel those glbtq ministers who were in committed relationships.

In addition, several congregations had already defied the denomination by ordaining openly gay and lesbian clergy or by employing gay clergy who had been removed from the denomination's roster after having been disciplined for being in a committed homosexual relationship.

In recognition of these hard facts, the 2007 Assembly, while rejecting the resolution to permit sexually active clergy, passed a resolution that called for "restraint" in disciplining clergy who were in violation of the policy. These somewhat contradictory actions created a "don't ask, don't tell" policy that could not be sustained very long without sacrificing the denomination's integrity.

The movement toward inclusiveness in ELCA is the culmination of a long struggle. While as early as 1991, the Assembly had affirmed the right of gay men and lesbians to participate fully in the Church, proposals to acknowledge that there was a diversity of opinion in the Church about the sinfulness of homosexuality and to bless same-sex unions and ordain sexually active clergy had repeatedly been voted down until 2009.

The success in 2009 owes much to organizations that work within Lutheran denominations to further the acceptance of gay men and lesbians. They deserve credit for their persistence in the face of numerous rejections. Among them are the Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision and the umbrella group Goodsoil, which work within ELCA.

But perhaps the most effective of these "welcoming groups" is the largest and oldest, Lutherans Concerned/North America, which was founded in 1974. It works within ELCA, ELCIC, and other Lutheran churches to promote the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It sponsors a Reconciling in Christ program to identify and recognize Lutheran congregations that welcome glbtq believers.

Another Lutheran organization that has played an important role in the quest for full inclusion in Lutheran denominations is Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries. This organization credentials and rosters qualified candidates of all sexual orientations and gender identities for ministry within Lutheran churches, and

supports their ministries by connecting them with congregations who are committed to the full participation of all in ecclesial life.

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