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The Boston Globe

## Protestant churches shift slowly toward gay equality

**By Wendy Cadge and Laura Olson | September 1, 2009**

American religious organizations have rarely been leaders in national movements for gay rights. With few exceptions, they have been opposed or uninvolved. Yet some are slowly changing their views as they grapple with questions about homosexuality in light of public debates about same-sex marriage and increased visibility of gay men and lesbians in American life. Mainline Protestant denominations in particular are slowly, but deliberately, adopting more tolerant stances - leaving conservatives rather than liberals to split off from their churches.

The 4.6 million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is the most recent example, voting last week to allow people in committed same-sex relationships to serve as clergy. Until this vote, gay men and lesbians could be ordained only if they remained celibate. Gay and lesbian people in the ELCA may now be ordained provided they are single or in a "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationship," similar to the requirements for heterosexual clergy. Gay men and lesbians can be clergy, in other words, and have sex in lifelong relationships. While several mainline Protestant churches have supported gay civil rights since the 1970s, they now grant the civil right of equal employment to their gay and lesbian pastors.

The ELCA didn't make the change lightly. Its recent decision followed a 15-year process of internal study and reflection. When three Lutheran groups merged to form the ELCA in 1988, two of the three groups viewed homosexuality as "biblically a departure from the heterosexual structure of God's creation." National church leaders began studying and considering homosexuality in the early 1990s - and received 20,000 responses to a draft social statement. In 1996, the denomination called for all individuals to be respected regardless of sexuality and in 2001 initiated a churchwide study.

Our research on these education processes - which involved people gathering to read and discuss information about sexuality - revealed differences of opinion about homosexuality in most ELCA congregations. As recently as 2005, national church leaders voted to maintain church policies barring non-celibate gay men and lesbians from ordination. Last week's decision shows that attitudes and doctrine are evolving, particularly because gay and straight church activists worked to keep gay rights on the denomination's agenda.

With this decision, the ELCA joins the smaller United Church of Christ and Episcopal Church in allowing gay men and lesbians to be ordained. The United Church of Christ ordained a gay man in 1972, and the Episcopalians followed suit in the 1990s. The Episcopal Church recently clarified that "any ordained ministry" is open to gay men and lesbians. Delegates to the ELCA national assembly made this momentous decision despite the internal contention likely to result from the 559-to-451 vote. And they were fully aware of the ongoing conflicts that followed the Episcopal Church's decision to ordain openly gay Gene Robinson as a bishop in 2003.

It is too early to call the ELCA's decision a tipping point for mainline Protestants. The Presbyterian Church (USA) and the much larger United Methodist Church continue to prohibit gay people from being ordained. Demographics likely explain some of these differences - there are many more Methodists and Presbyterians in the most conservative regions of the country than members of the ELCA, Episcopal Church, or United Church of Christ.

The history of debate in individual denominations matters too - the Presbyterians and Methodists have been locked in divisive internal battles about homosexuality for longer than the ELCA - as do the formal ways denominations make decisions. The Presbyterians seem the most likely to follow the ELCA; their denominational vote on gay ordination this year was narrower than in the past.

These shifts within mainline Protestantism reflect liberalizing public opinion about homosexuality. They show that mainline Protestant denominations, like most religious traditions, are continually adapting and revising theological interpretations as their social environments change. We salute the ELCA for taking a bold step in the direction of justice and equality and hope the Presbyterians and United Methodists soon follow suit - fully tipping the mainline Protestant denominations toward complete equality for gay men and lesbians.

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