

## Alternative Lutheran Certification Committee Formed to Approve Lesbian & Gay Candidates for Ordination

SAN FRANCISCO -- A national committee of Lutherans has been formed to provide an alternative avenue to ordination and ministerial service for lesbian and gay candidates rejected by the 5.3 million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The "Extraordinary Candidacy Committee" (ECC) has been organized to evaluate the credentials of and approve for ordination lesbian and gay candidates who are qualified to serve as pastors. This committee will then present these candidates to ELCA congregations which would like to hire these pastors.

Dr. Mari G. Irvin of Stockton, California is a founding member of the ECC. "It is imperative that the denomination be held accountable for its immoral behavior in constructing a code of conduct in God's name which prohibits lesbian, gay and bisexual persons from ordination. I believe the time is right for the church to be held accountable. We are not afraid of this process nor where it will take us, or our denomination!"

Currently the ECC has organized two regional committees in California and Michigan which will evaluate the qualifications of candidates. In addition, the National Extraordinary Placement Committee (NEPC) has been formed to locate Lutheran congregations throughout the nation which are interested in hiring openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual pastors. The ECC has been endorsed by a number of Lutheran organizations and ELCA congregations throughout the country.

Bishop Emeritus Stanley E. Olson, a member of the Western Regional ECC in California, believes it is time for this strong action. "I have witnessed the unscriptural burdens the ELCA has placed on all of its many gay and lesbian members, whether lay or ordained. As one who has held the office of bishop in the church I cannot remain passive or silent."

Existing ELCA policy precludes practicing homosexuals from the ordained ministry, and expects "ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships." Candidates for ordination within the official channels of the ELCA have had their approvals rescinded because these candidates were unwilling to pledge compliance with this requirement.

The Rev. Gerald C. Abenth of the Eastern Regional ECC in Michigan believes the time has come for this alternative process. "The ELCA needs to pull its head out of the sand -- wake up and follow Jesus' command to love -- and be reconciled. Lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians need to know they are part of the church and can serve and be served in their church."

Dr. Irvin believes that this project will bring much needed hope to the lives of many who would otherwise be denied a chance to work within congregations of the ELCA. "Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are called by God just as are heterosexual persons. It is the ELCA as an organizational structure which is denying these people from responding to their calls unless they violate themselves through deception of self or others."

On Sunday, July 18, 1993 openly gay seminarian, Bill Kunisch, was approved for ordination by the Western Regional ECC at a meeting in Berkeley, California. A 1993 graduate of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley with a Master of Divinity degree, Mr. Kunisch was previously rejected by the ELCA because of the denomination's policies. He was evaluated by the ECC in July and unanimously approved for ordination by this nine-person committee composed of Lutherans from the San Francisco Greater Bay Area. A Lutheran congregation or ministry is now being sought which would be interested in hiring this gifted candidate.

"The total lack of leadership for change within the ELCA has made me realize that working for change within the hierarchy is futile," comments Dr. Margaret Moreland of the Western Regional ECC. "The Extraordinary Candidacy Committee gives me a chance to do something to help those gay, lesbian and bisexual people who are called by God to professional ministry within the Lutheran church. The active 'doing something' is particularly important for me. That any lesbian, gay or bisexual people remain in this church is truly amazing to me. Their witness must be recognized and nurtured to help us all know the love of God."

As members of the ELCA, individual congregations agree to hire only those pastors who have been officially approved by the national church. Because lesbian and gay candidates who are approved in this alternative ECC process will not have the official sanction of the denomination, it is anticipated that ELCA congregations which choose to hire these candidates will face possible discipline from the ELCA....

The Rev. Mark R. Heuter of New York City, a member of the National Extraordinary Placement Committee, believes that this will unfortunately be the price some congregations and clergy have to pay for justice and change. "My patience, and trust that the ELCA will ever change its policies has faded away. If anything's going to change -- if justice will be done -- it will take initiative and action from outside the ELCA bureaucracy."

Frank Loulan of Phoenix Arizona, another member of the National Extraordinary Placement Committee, believes that, "the ELCA must -- and eventually will -- accommodate the changes we are trying to implement as a result of this alternative process. I want to hasten this inevitability as it needs to happen now."

The ECC is currently seeking applications of openly lesbian, gay and bisexual candidates as well as Lutheran congregations throughout the country interested in hiring these qualified persons to be their pastors.