



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 25, 2011

Homosexuality Issue May Divide Two Lutheran Groups

One of the nation's largest denominational social services networks is in danger of a major split over the decision by one of the participants to take a tolerant stance on homosexuality. According to a report by the Associated Press, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (logo, top left), a theologically conservative denomination, has announced "that direct work with its larger and more liberal counterpart, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA, logo, bottom left], has become 'difficult if not impossible,' because of doctrinal differences," including the 2009 decision by the ELCA to allow for the ordination of homosexuals as clergy members.



The AP report noted that like [Catholic Charities](#), "Lutheran agencies are some of the biggest service providers in their communities and have been struggling to meet increased demand for help during the recession. Just one of the joint Lutheran agencies, [Lutheran Services in America](#), said on its website that it encompasses more than 300 health and human services organizations with a combined annual budget of more than \$16 billion."

The Rev. Herb Mueller, first vice president for the St. Louis-based Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, said his denomination recognizes that "this is a difficult issue. It's complicated. We're trying to take a nuanced and caring approach to all of these situations that's also faithful to what the Bible teaches on these issues." Similarly, the Rev. Donald McCoid, a spokesman for the Chicago-based ELCA, said that his denomination is "deeply concerned about the ministries of care that may be challenged by the recent action of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."

Among the cooperative social service agencies between the 4.5-million-member ELCA and the 2.3 million-member Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination "are organizations that offer health care to senior citizens, support for the disabled, job training, tutoring and housing, along with finding homes for foster children," reported the AP. "Mueller said in an interview that 81 of the 120 recognized service organizations of the Missouri Synod cooperate in some way with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Twenty-two of the agencies offer adoption services or foster care, he said."

Over the past year the Missouri Synod's [Commission on Theology and Church Relations](#) has analyzed the increasing moral and theological chasm that exists between it and the ELCA, and recently came out with a [set of guidelines](#) to help its churches, ministries, and members determine how closely to work with ELCA social efforts.

For now the only break announced by the Missouri Synod was "to stop its decades-old practice of training military chaplains with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," reported the AP. According to a statement by the Rev. Matthew Harrison, president of the Missouri Synod, that decision



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was based on the ELCA's policy change allowing for the ordination of homosexuals, along with the anticipated lifting of the ban on homosexuals serving in the military.

Nonetheless, the conservative synod's new guidelines seem to indicate that an irrevocable fracture between the two groups may be imminent, with the document recommending that synod congregations and members determine future ministry relationships based on, among other issues, whether or not potential ELCA partner agencies:

- Pursue organizational goals based on principles that are "alien or contrary" to Scripture.
- Employ staff or leadership whose lifestyles are "scandalous or openly and unrepentantly sinful."
- Have board members who "become conflicted because of differing beliefs."
- Include staff who endorse or advocate policies that are "contrary to the Christian faith."

According to the AP, the Missouri Synod committee "used its most direct language to discuss the future of its corps of chaplains who work outside of the military, in nursing homes and hospitals, and on college campuses, among other assignments. 'The ELCA's current theological course presents serious theological challenges to any continued cooperation in endorsement procedures,' according to the Missouri-Synod report."



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