

After a day at the office, the Rev. Dave Brauer-Rieke, bishop of 43,000 Oregonians who are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, tends to goats Delliah and Sammy at his home in Milwaukie. Brauer-Rieke is determined to listen to all perspectives as congregations respond to the denomination's recent decisions on blessing same-sex unions and gay and lesbian clergy.

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# Church OKs gay pastors, a bishop preaches calm

The Rev. Dave Brauer-Rieke urges Oregon's largest Lutheran synod to discuss the ELCA's policy shift

By **NANCY HAUGHT** | THE OREGONIAN

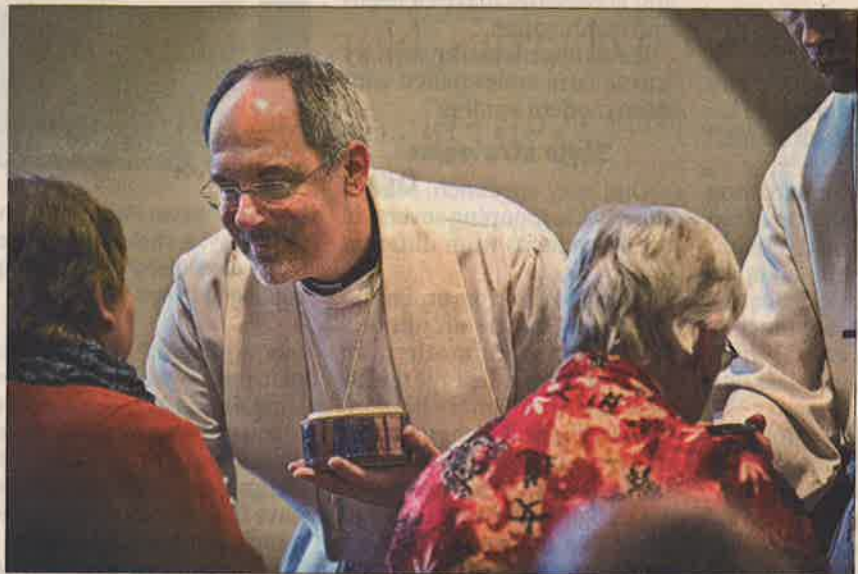
**L**AST MONTH, MORE THAN 1,000 members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America met in Minneapolis to decide whether partnered gay and lesbian people could become pastors. Two long lines formed behind microphones designated "yes" and "no."

"Every 20 minutes, we'd stop to pray," said the Rev. Dave Brauer-Rieke, bishop of Oregon's 43,000 ELCA members.

During breaks in the testimony, people from each line reached across the aisle, put their hands on each other's shoulders and bowed their heads, he said. "People listened, heard and prayed together. There were no protests, no lockouts, no placards. It wasn't a town-hall meeting about health care."

Civil discourse prevailed at the churchwide assembly, even as 1,045 voting members passed the following controversial resolutions:

- Acknowledging disagreements about blessing



same-sex unions and calling gay and lesbian pastors, but deciding to pursue options for interested congregations;

- Asking the national church council to create a blessing for same-sex unions;
- Deciding that gay or lesbian people involved in monogamous, life-long and publicly accountable relationships may be "rostered," or considered as potential pastors of congregations.

The resolutions are connected to an overarching

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**Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke, who serves 115 Oregon congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, offers Communion at St. Andrew Church in Beaverton in January.**

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# Lutheran: 'If you're madder than hell, tell me'

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social statement called "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," which the ELCA has been studying and revising for seven years. The statement passed at the assembly with a close two-thirds majority, Brauer-Rieke said.

The ELCA, with 4.7 million members, is the largest Lutheran group in the United States. The second-largest, the 2.4 million-member Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, believes that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior as intrinsically sinful.

The ELCA is the most recent Protestant denomination to change its policy on gay and lesbian clergy. In July, a national convention of the Episcopal Church recognized that gay and lesbian members are involved in ordained and lay ministry and moved toward blessing same-sex relationships, though they have not adopted an official rite.

Back in his Northeast Portland office, Brauer-Rieke tries to be evenhanded as he hears from ministers and church members who object to the changes and those who applaud them. As bishop of 115 ELCA congregations that include a variety of viewpoints, he doesn't talk about his own perspective.

"It's my job to ask, 'How are you doing? If you're madder than hell, tell me about it. If you're happy, tell me about it,'" he said.

In a recent interview, he talked about why these decisions are difficult to make and to live with. His answers have been edited for space and clarity.

**Q: For some Christians, gay or lesbian sex is an abomination. Others argue same-sex relationships are acceptable. Is it a yes-or-no question?**

**A:** It's not a black-and-white situation for hardly anybody. Someone may have a niece or a nephew who's gay, and they're happy that the church is moving this way. And someone else has a niece or nephew who's gay — and they do care about them — but they don't want the church to change.

It's a complex collage, and it doesn't help to describe people as in favor or against the changes. It's not about good people or bad people. It's a matter of how we understand

**Q: How does the ELCA understand the Bible?**

**A:** We take Scripture very seriously. We're defined by the ecumenical creeds — the Apostles' and Nicene creeds — the Lutheran confessions, the plain meaning of Scripture — how it was understood in its day — and the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. If Scripture says two things, you look for hints within Scripture to resolve the difference.

The Bible deals with same-gender sexuality as a violation of assumed, heterosexual norms. But it also says to welcome the stranger, love your neighbor and bear one another's burdens.

**Q: What implications do these decisions have on the church's understanding of marriage?**

**A:** For Lutherans, marriage is a secular reality and a religious rite. I won't marry people if they won't sign the documents at the courthouse. A couple has to be publicly accountable; there may be children

involved, cars, houses. It's a way of ordering a relationship. Such public accountability, which benefits everybody, is not always an option for same-sex couples. This is what civil union or domestic partnership laws seek to provide. Our question as a church is how might a religious rite of blessing also serve to strengthen same-sex couples or households led by such couples.

**Q: As bishop, will you recommend gay or lesbian candidates to a congregation searching for a pastor?**

**A:** Only to congregations that are open to such a placement. Thirty-seven years ago, when we started ordaining women, some congregations didn't want to call a woman pastor. A congregation could say no. In the church, that would not be a violation of civil rights, as it would be in a secular context.

**Q: What has been the reaction to these changes as you visit Oregon congregations?**

**A:** Some people want to talk about it. Some don't. It's not on everyone's agenda.

**Q: What is?**

**A:** The economy.

**Q: When the conversation does turn to same-sex relationships, what do you advise?**

**A:** I encourage pastors to be sensitive, to find out where people are and have conversations with them. We're engaged in a process that won't happen overnight. We need to take a deep breath and keep talking.

**Q: Will some congregations leave the denomination?**

**A:** There may be some. But I don't expect a lot of division. I am proud of my church for two reasons: for being willing to tackle these questions, and the way we tackled them. We are called to bear one another's burden. That's the core of what the church is called to be.

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