

# ELCA

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which synod to join. Hope Lutheran has taken its first official vote to leave ELCA, but the second vote to make it final is not scheduled until July.

However, Jacobson made the decision to retire prior to any votes of the two churches. He said he wanted members to make their decision solely on the question, rather than voting "to leave the ELCA to get rid of me."

Jacobson and his wife, Twila, have moved to an acreage north-west of Aberdeen on the shores of Richmond Lake. He said they chose that area because they have three grandsons living in rural Bath; plus the cost of living there is much less than it would be in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, where their three granddaughters live. They also were able to move Twila's father, who had been living in Tripp, to an assisted-living facility in Groton.

Even though the retirement came a year early, Jacobson said, "it turned out this was a good time for us, because of the incentives for buying houses." Imagine, he said, being a first-time homebuyer at age 65.

When First American did vote, however, it was to leave the ELCA. The second vote on the motion to leave the ELCA was May 9, the required 90 days before the final vote. In between, a meeting with the ELCA bishop was held.

Darold Bitterman, First American's president, said "there were some other churches that were ahead of us that voted out, like East Lake Andes voted out, Platte voted out." Both, he said, voted to join the LCMC.

An informal vote taken between several options, Bitterman said, showed about 76 percent supporting alignment with the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, or 40 votes. There was one vote for LCMC, 13 undecided, two said they were leaving and one vote cast for the Missouri synod.

When First American started looking, Bitterman said, the congregation's members were more for LCMC, but that synod doesn't provide assistance in calling a pastor, nor does it have a seminary. Ministers can take their training at the Baptist seminary, and follow it with a year of Lutheran training.

Free Lutheran has its own seminary and will help find a pastor, Bitterman said. Most of its member churches have memberships of 400 or less.

However, Free Lutherans do not ordain women as ministers, which has some members hesitant since in the past they have had a woman in that position.

First American already has lost three families due to the decision, and several more are still considering leaving. Three board members resigned after the vote went through, said Bitterman.

"I don't know what I would have done; maybe I would have left" if the vote to leave had not been successful, said Bitterman. "So, I don't blame them — I will miss them. But if that's what they need to do, that's what they need to do."

One of the three departees, Carol Hieb, was a lay minister for the congregation.

Another of the church's lay ministers, Maurice Bueber, noted, "I was kind of a promoter that our church needed to look at leaving."

He said he and Albert Fink, a member of Hope Lutheran Church, attended a Lutheran CORE (a contraction of "Coalition for Renewal") meeting in Indianapolis last September. This was a meeting of a group of Lutheran people who thought the ELCA decision the month before "was wrong, and (they were) looking at steps to take from here," said Bueber.

Now, he said CORE is forming a new synod, the North American Lutheran Church.

CORE, formed in 2005, notes on its website that it is "a community of confessing Lutherans."

Bueber said he and Fink went "basically to get information." There were several members from East Lake Andes and from St. Peter's, rural Armour, who also attended, he said.

After their return home, Bueber said, he "thought it was really important to fill our congregation in on what was happening at the CORE meeting."

Now, he said, people are leaning toward the Free American Lutheran Church "because of their adherence to Scripture." The Free Americans, he said, originated and broke away in 1962 "when some mergers happened and they weren't comfortable with the way the church was going at that time."

The ELCA was formed some 20 years ago.

"I'd like to think everybody is in the same camp," said Bueber, but that is not the case.

"Anytime you make a decision, you are going to create some issues and challenges because not everybody is willing to look at the same issue with the same viewpoint," he said. "It would have been a lot easier to say it is not going to affect us, and go on and pretend it is not happening. For me, that just didn't work."

It didn't work for Fink, either. "For me, it is not the issue of sexuality, but overall it is moving away from the authority of Scripture," he said.

Fink, who served as president of Hope Lutheran for two years and was ineligible to be re-elected in January, said he had made it clear from the beginning that he was "done with the ELCA, and if Hope would vote to stay, I will leave."

Others may do the same, which would put a definite strain on a small church that counts 73 people, including children, as members of the congregation. Church secretary Wanda Anderson said the March 29 vote had 26 ballots, with 18 voting for the resolution to leave the ELCA, five voting no and three abstaining.

"My basic thought is that I want to keep our church open here in town," Anderson said.

She said elderly members "can't get out of town to attend church." There would be no way that Hope Lutheran could survive on its own. It has been partnered with First American for more than 40 years.

A survey taken at Hope earlier noted there were a dozen people who would definitely leave if the congregation decided to stay

with the ELCA, she said.

First American council member Gary Jerke said there were some people who have "been unhappy with the ELCA direction for a long time — this was the straw that broke the camel's back."

The votes have shown that there are others who feel the same way, he said, and others who do not.

"There is always a sense of remorse for those who see it otherwise, because this in no way is meant to be a statement against an individual or individuals ..."

"In the gay and lesbian community, the individual always will merit our love, but the practice merits our speaking out."

In the Scriptures, he said, it "points to the fact that the traditional marriage always has been viewed as man and wife. The ELCA has put a stamp of approval on something dramatically different."

Not having to accept locally someone with a gay or lesbian lifestyle as minister is not enough, Jerke said.

There are numerous ways you can say you believe differently than the national body, said Jerke, "but that is not the way I choose to live my life."

People in the middle find it difficult, said Jacobson before he moved. It was frustrating for him, he said, that "by importing this national controversy to the local congregation, it causes difficulty ... when you make morality a majority vote, those on the losing side are not going to be happy."

# JOBS

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unemployment rate. Sioux Falls was at 4.8 percent, while Mitchell stood at 4.2 percent.

Unemployment in seven area counties went down in April:

- 4.7 percent in Bon Homme

County, down from 5.4 percent in March;

- 3.5 percent in Cedar County (Neb.), down from 4.3 percent in March;

- 4.4 percent in Charles Mix County, down from 4.7 percent in March;

- 3.5 percent in Clay County, down from 4.1 percent in March;

- 3.8 percent in Hutchinson County, down from 4.6 percent in March;

- 4.1 percent in Knox County (Neb.), down from 5.4 percent in March; and

- 4.2 percent in Turner County, down from 5.7 percent in March.

Editor's note: Some unemployment data is adjusted slightly after its initial release and may not reflect numbers reported in a previous *Press & Dakotan* report.

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