

In historic votes, Lutherans elect two African American women bishops

Patricia A. Davenport and Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld will each lead a regional body in the predominantly white mainline Protestant denomination.

by [Mark A. Kellner](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



Patricia A. Davenport speaking after being elected bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod on May 5, 2018. Photo via SEPAsynod video.

A synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America made history May 5 by electing Patricia A. Davenport as the denomination's first female African American bishop. The next day, a synod 900 miles away elected the second, Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld.

Delegates chose Davenport for the office of bishop in southeastern Pennsylvania. In the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, delegates voted for Thomas-Breitfeld to

become bishop.

The votes mark an inclusive step forward for the “most white” of the nation’s mainline Protestant denominations, according to Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

“We claim, over and over again, what God is calling us to be is a diverse, inclusive, multicultural church,” Eaton said. “We’ve been stuck for over 30 years, and I hope this is the start of a trend where God opens our eyes to see the giftedness of people who are not of European descent.”

With 3.5 million members, the ELCA is the largest Lutheran denomination in the U.S. It encompasses about 9,300 congregations, which are grouped together in 65 regional synods.

According to Leah Schade, assistant professor of preaching and worship at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky, the elections signify a poignant moment for the denomination. Schade spent 18 years in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod and worked with Davenport.

“This is a turning point for the ELCA,” Schade said. “It is incredibly important that, at a time when our society needs to see women of color reach the highest levels of leadership, that it’s the church where this is happening.”

Thomas-Breitfeld, a pastor in Beloit, Wisconsin, is an instructor in Christian public leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, the denomination’s largest seminary.

Davenport is evangelical mission director and assistant to the bishop in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. She spoke about her election in [a video](#) released after the vote, saying she is “grateful for the position that God has placed us in, moving out and moving forward into the brand-new things that God has placed before us.”

A version of this article, which was edited on May 22, appears in the print edition under the title “People: Patricia A. Davenport, Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld.”