

Lutherans elect female presiding bishop

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

What started as just another church assembly turned into a historic one for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as members elected Elizabeth Eaton the denomination's first female presiding bishop.

Eaton will take over from Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, who will step down after 12 years of overseeing the ELCA, which at more than 4 million members is one of the largest mainline denominations.

"I'm still in a state of shock," Eaton said on August 15. "We wanted to open up a conversation and, as I said to the assembly, it looks like the conversation got out of hand."

Eaton suggested that Hanson's forward-looking tenure paved the way for her election. "The election of a woman to the office of presiding bishop is a fulfillment of his ministry of making this church a welcoming place," she said.

It was under Hanson's leadership that the denomination voted in 2009 to allow openly gay and lesbian clergy. Los Angeles area Lutherans elected the denomination's first gay bishop on May 31.

The 2009 vote "was a costly decision for our denomination," Eaton said. The ELCA, which has lost members nearly every year since a three-way merger in 1987, saw the biggest drop when it lost nearly half a million members in 2010 and 2011. Many conservatives upset with the decision to allow gay clergy defected to a new denomination, the North American Lutheran Church.

"We've thrived on paradox, that's always been part of Lutheran history," said Eaton, who received 600 votes against Hanson's 287 in the final ballot. She will begin her six-year term November 1.

Eaton, who supported the denomination's decision on gay clergy, said it's important to include those who disagree. "We can disagree on decisions as long as we agree on the cross," she said. "My goal is to make sure we make room for the possibility that people disagree, that they are fully Lutheran, fully valued and fully part of this denomination."

(Eaton, 58, was considered a centrist compared to other finalists who were regarded as theologically liberal, according to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. In remarks before the third ballot, Eaton was the only one of the four remaining nominees to address directly the concerns of conservatives who had remained in the ELCA. "Those people also have a voice in this church," Eaton said. She vaulted from a distant third in balloting to supplant another woman bishop, Jessica Crist of Montana, who had been ahead of Hanson.)

"Do I have a killer app or program that's going to (perform a) turnaround in six years? No, I don't," said Eaton, who has been bishop for the 77,000-member Northeastern Ohio Synod since 2007. "I see a sense that we have to be missionaries again."

David Wendel, an official in the rebel NALC, who attended the assembly as an ecumenical guest, said: "We'll watch to see if the actions of this bishop change in any commitment to scriptural values. We're certainly hopeful . . . but a new election of a presiding bishop doesn't indicate a change in the direction of the ELCA."

There were murmurings among bishops who wanted to elect the first presiding bishop of color or a woman, said April Ulring Larson, the first woman bishop in the ELCA. It was somewhat awkward, she said, when Hanson ran for a third term.

"I don't think any of us expected the outcome," she said. "The women were less organized. I think it was the men who were thinking it's time for a new leader."

Among those initially on the ballot was Barbara Lundblad, a professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, who is now married to her longtime lesbian partner. Lundblad, who didn't attend the assembly, removed herself from consideration, saying she didn't feel called.

Lundblad said she knew no one who went into the assembly saying "Boy we're going to elect a woman this time." Noting this year is the denomination's 25th anniversary, Lundblad added, "People had a lot of respect for Mark, but I think they

felt in this anniversary year, they needed new leadership.”

The Episcopal Church’s presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, who in 2006 became the first woman to serve at that level in the worldwide Anglican Communion, praised Eaton’s election in a statement.

“There are excellent foundations already in our common work, and I expect further growth as we seek to serve God’s mission as ministers of justice and healers of the breach,” Schori said. The denominations have a full communion agreement that allows shared clergy and joint ministry.

A native of Cleveland and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, Eaton is married to Conrad Selnick, an Episcopal priest, and they have two adult daughters.

Noting other changes in church leadership this year, including the elections of Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Pope Francis, Eaton said hers was a little different.

“This was just like the papal election,” Eaton said jokingly. “No, we don’t do it in secret. It’s all out in the open. And we had a conference room. It’s a lovely conference room, but there are no frescoes. Michelangelo didn’t paint anything.”

—RNS

This article was edited on August 31, 2013.