

ELCA elects first Black presiding bishop, calls Israel's actions in Gaza a genocide

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Yehiel Curry (Photo courtesy of Metropolitan Chicago Synod)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America elected its first Black leader on Wednesday at its churchwide assembly meeting in Phoenix.

Yehiel Curry, bishop of the ELCA's Metropolitan Chicago Synod since 2019, will serve a six-year term as the denomination's presiding bishop, the top leadership role. He succeeds Elizabeth Eaton, who has served two terms as presiding bishop.

The 2.7 million-member Protestant group also passed a strongly worded resolution calling on members "to petition U.S. leaders to recognize and act to end the

genocide against Palestinians, halt military aid to Israel used in Gaza, and support Palestinian statehood and U.N. membership.” The resolution, called a memorial, passed overwhelmingly, 742-38.

Other Protestant groups have weighed in with statements calling Israel’s actions in Gaza a genocide. The United Church of Christ, which met earlier this summer, passed a [resolution](#) for an end to genocide. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) last year wrote a [pastoral letter](#) that said, “What Palestinians are experiencing is nothing less than genocide.”

The ELCA has sister groups in the embattled region: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and the World Council of Churches/Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. The Lutheran World Federation operates Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem, which provides care for Palestinians in the West Bank. One of the strongest critics of Israel’s assault on Gaza is Palestinian pastor Munther Isaac of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem.

The assembly also passed a statement acknowledging its complicity with Indian boarding schools. It commits the church to observing the National Day of Remembrance for Indian Boarding Schools annually and developing educational programs and materials surrounding the history and ELCA’s involvement in the government policy that abducted Indian children and then placed them in church-run schools where they were denied their Native practices and abused when they spoke their Native languages.

Curry, who is 52, was elected on the fifth ballot during voting on the floor of the Phoenix Convention Center. He received 562 votes out of 799 votes cast.

He has been serving a synod or regional church group of 165 congregations in the Chicago area.

He spoke to the assembly about his initial hesitation in accepting a calling to ministry.

“I never saw myself as good enough, so for two years, I said no,” Curry said. “I finally said yes. When I said yes, your support, this church’s support, of that ministry meant everything. So if you want to know what your benevolence dollars look like, it looks like me. And I want to say thank you. Thank you for your investment.”

He previously served as pastor of Shekinah Chapel Lutheran Church in Riverdale, Illinois, and as mission developer at the church, which is predominantly Black.

Curry grew up Catholic on the South Side of Chicago and became a seventh grade public school teacher and later a social worker. An unexpected invitation to a worship service in St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, back in the 1990s, led him to discover a calling to ordination.

He earned a Bachelor of Arts from Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois, in 1995 and a Master of Divinity in 2013 from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, one of seven ELCA seminaries.

He and his wife, LaShonda, are the parents of three daughters. —Religion News Service