



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on June 6, 2013

Nation's Largest Lutheran Denomination Elects First Homosexual Bishop

Four years after voting to allow openly homosexual clergy, the four million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has elected its first openly homosexual bishop. The [ELCA announced](#) June 1 that the Rev. R. Guy Erwin (shown), who holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard and a doctorate from Yale, was elected at the annual meeting of the ELCA's Southwest California Synod to serve the next six years as that synod's bishop. Erwin was chosen on a 210-171 vote of the synod's pastors and church leaders.



Erwin currently serves as interim pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Canoga Park, California, as well as professor of Lutheran confessional theology at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. He is also the ELCA's representative to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

Ordained by the denomination in May 2011, "Erwin is the ELCA's first synod bishop who is gay and in a partnered relationship with Rob Flynn, a member of the ELCA," the [ELCA announced](#) with no apparent sense of shame. The denomination added that the newly elected bishop is also "part Osage Indian and is active in the Osage Indian Nation."

Despite living a lifestyle plainly condemned by the Christian faith for 2,000 years, Erwin nonetheless claimed that he would bring to his new position of pastoral leadership a "deep faith in Christ's presence in his church lived out in 20 years of parish experience blended with university and seminary-level teaching."

According to [Religion News Service](#) (RNS), Erwin said he "waited until 2011 to become ordained, after the denomination's 2009 change to allow people in 'publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.'"

Erwin told the homosexual group GLAAD that he knew many would see his election "as a significant milestone for both LGBT people and Native Americans, and I pray that I can be a positive representation for both communities." He recalled that there "was a time when I believed that I would not be able to serve as a pastor in the ELCA. Our church has now recognized the God-given gifts and abilities that LGBT people can bring to the denomination."

Liberal theologian Martin Marty, a professor at the University of Chicago and a member of the ELCA, applauded Erwin's election as "historic and a turning point, as was the ordination of women. This is just one of many indications that the culture has shifted."

That shift has caused significant upheaval in the ELCA, with the denomination suffering a loss of nearly 500,000 members a year after its decision to ordain gay clergy. That exodus has been mirrored in other denominations that have been moving toward the embrace of homosexuality, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Church.



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The decision ten years ago by America's Episcopal Church to name the Rev. Gene Robinson as its first openly homosexual bishop led to a dramatic split in that denomination and caused [a similar mass exodus](#) of both members and congregations.

RNS reported that since the Lutheran denomination's decision to ordain homosexuals, many U.S. congregations have departed the ELCA "to join the North American Lutheran Church [NALC], and some overseas churches have severed ties with the denomination. Earlier this year, the Lutheran church in Ethiopia parted ways with the ELCA."

Robert Benne, a religion professor at Roanoke College in Virginia and a member of both the ELCA and the NALC, told RNS that naming Erwin as a bishop is "a decisive move by the ELCA" that will impact the denomination globally. "There's a big sorting-out going on in American and world Christianity, so it'll have some repercussions, but the larger repercussions will be worldwide," he said.

In an article published by the conservative [Institute on Religion and Democracy](#), Benne predicted that there will be more than a few pastors and laypeople in the ELCA who find the election of an openly homosexual bishop "more than they can stomach" and will depart for the more conservative synods that have been popping up, including the NALC and the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). "The Southwest California Synod has already lost many of its largest churches to the LCMC," noted Benne. "How many more will leave is unclear. Maybe the wave of leavings of the ELCA is over, though a continuing stream of churches has been departing even before this decision. The larger effects on the ELCA will consist of individual Lutherans drifting off to other churches or simply withholding their money from the synodical and national expressions of the church"

Homosexual activists applauded Erwin's election, with Emily Eastwood of ReconcilingWorks, a group of pro-homosexual Lutherans, commenting that it marked a "new and brighter day for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Lutheran... Once again, today we are proud to be Lutherans."

Similarly, Amalia Vagts of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, another pro-homosexual ELCA subset, declared that the denomination "has come a long way in four years. More and more people are realizing all the time that LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] people have important ministry gifts, including the gifts to lead the church as a bishop. We are thrilled to see such a wonderful leader from the LGBTQ community called to the position of bishop at this time in history."

While most conservative Lutheran groups remained silent concerning Erwin's controversial election, the Rev. W. Stevens Shipman, director of the conservative [Lutheran Coalition for Renewal](#), noted that the election represents a broken promise by the ELCA, which vowed not to foist homosexuality on members and congregations who consider the lifestyle sinful. Shipman told [Fox News](#) that the ELCA promised that "no congregation would be required to call a pastor in a same-sex partnership. But now an entire synod has been forced to live under the authority of a bishop who is in such a relationship."

Some conservative Christian theologians have pointed out that Martin Luther, whose 16th century reform movement birthed the broad Lutheran tradition, would find himself militantly at odds with today's ELCA leadership. In his book *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, author Ewald Martin Plass quotes Luther as calling homosexuality — which he referred to by the term "sodomy" — as an "unparalleled enormity" that "departs from the natural passion and desire, planted into nature by God, according to which the male has a passionate desire for the female. Sodomy craves what is entirely contrary to nature."

Continued Luther in his condemnation of what he considered a wholly sinful lifestyle: "Whence comes



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this perversion? Without a doubt it comes from the devil. After a man has once turned aside from the fear of God, the devil puts such great pressure upon his nature that he extinguishes the fire of natural desire and stirs up another, which is contrary to nature.”

Photo of Rev. Guy Erwin: AP Images



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