

Female Elected to Head Nation's Largest Lutheran Denomination

The liberal-leaning Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has elected a woman as its new leader.

Northeast Ohio Bishop Elizabeth Eaton defeated Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, who has held the position since 2001, with about two-thirds of the vote on the fifth ballot.

The election was part of the country's largest Lutheran denomination's national meeting Wednesday in Pittsburgh. Eaton's election is historic for the denomination.

Eaton, 58, commended Hanson for keeping the ELCA intact during one of "the most tumultuous times" in the church and thanked bishops for staying.

"I am proud of my brother and sister bishops. Not a single one of us resigned in protest," the *Chicago Tribune* reported Eaton saying Wednesday after her victory. "We don't agree on everything in this church. But we do agree on the cross of Christ, and we do agree we're going to stick together to have that conversation."

The denomination cleared the way for partnered homosexuals to be ordained in 2009, causing 647 of its 10,000 congregations to leave. In June, it elected its first openly gay bishop, the Rev. R. Guy Erwin, to oversee churches in Southern California.

Eaton said she supported the decision to allow partnered gay clergy but that the church must respect those with a different understanding of Scripture and doctrine.

"Those people also have a voice in this church. We need to make room for those who do not agree with us but agree with

our claim upon the cross," she said, according to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

The ECLA, based in Chicago, has about 4 million members. It was formed when three Lutheran groups merged 25 years ago. Only about 23 percent of the clergy in the denomination are women, a church spokeswoman said.