

Lutherans elect first openly gay bishop

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

A prominent Lutheran scholar and theologian in California will become the first openly gay bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a denomination that opened its ministry to gay and partnered pastors only four years ago.

R. Guy Erwin, who teaches theology and Christian history at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks and serves as an interim pastor in Canoga Park, was elected on the sixth ballot May 31 at a meeting of the Southwest California Synod based in Glendale.

“My election came as a surprise to everyone,” said Erwin, who limited his remarks to reporters in the immediate aftermath.

Erwin’s election marks “a brighter day” for LGBT Lutherans, said Emily Eastwood, executive director of ReconcilingWorks, a gay advocacy group. “One of our own has been chosen not in spite of being gay, but because he is truly gifted and skilled for the office,” she said.

The Oklahoma native who is part Osage Indian and active in the Osage Indian Nation also now has the distinction of being the first gay Native American to become an ELCA bishop. He will be installed September 21.

Erwin earned an undergraduate degree in history from Harvard and two masters degrees and a doctorate at Yale University, where he also lectured in church history and historical theology from 1993 to 1999. He also served as a parish associate at a Lutheran congregation in New Haven, Connecticut.

He joined the Cal Lutheran faculty in 2000, accepting an endowed chair to teach Lutheran confessional theology. In 2008, he was appointed to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He is the only U.S. Lutheran on the 120-member commission.

Erwin was not ordained until May 2011. He served as interim pastor for two ELCA congregations in California about that time. His 20 years of parish experience and academics brought him “deep faith in Christ’s presence in his church,” according to his autobiographical accounts.

“In the years I’ve waited for the day I could be ordained, I lived out both vocations at the same time,” he wrote. “They have been mutually enriching, and I am a stronger scholar (and a better pastor) for having done both.”

Erwin and his partner, Rob Flynn, attend St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church in North Hollywood, which is not far from the Southwest California Synod headquarters in Glendale. The jurisdiction includes more than 120 congregations in five counties.

“I know that many will see my 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,” Erwin told GLAAD, a gay activist group. “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.”

An ELCA bishop serves a six-year term, which conceivably could put a crimp in Erwin’s book projects.

His faculty profile at Cal Lutheran says he is working on “Introduction to World Lutheranism” for Cambridge University Press and is planning his third book on Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish scientist and religious visionary—even as he plans an anthology of Martin Luther’s writings designed for undergraduate courses.