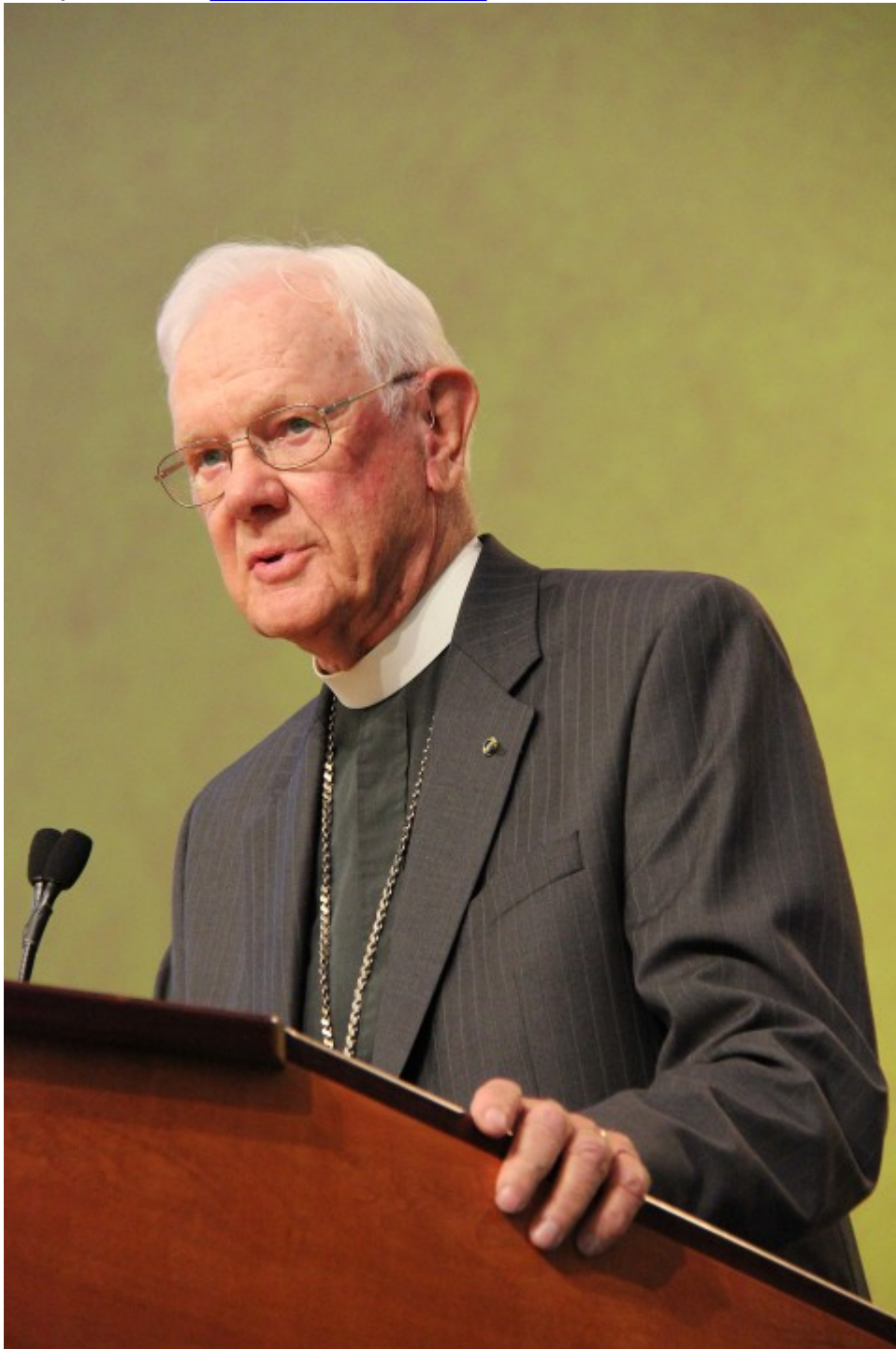


Herbert Chilstrom, ELCA's first presiding bishop, dies at 88

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Herbert Chilstrom (photo courtesy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)

Herbert Chilstrom, the first presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, died on January 19 at the age of 88.

The Minnesota pastor and former dean at Lutheran College in Teaneck, New Jersey, was elected to head the new ELCA denomination in 1987. It's widely believed that it was Chilstrom's leadership, at least in part, that made the historic merger of three Lutheran church bodies a success.

In a statement posted to the ELCA website, the current presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, praised Chilstrom's dedication to the fledgling denomination.

"I can't imagine the uncertainty and chaos of those first months, but all I know we were filled with hope for this new church the Spirit had brought into being," she wrote. "And I know that Bishop Chilstrom served out of the conviction that it was God's will to raise up an ELCA witness to the gospel, and with God, all things are possible."

Even after retiring in 1995, Chilstrom continued to push the denomination forward, particularly in regard to LGBTQ rights. When a 2009 vote to approve same-sex relationships for pastors precipitated a mass exodus from the ELCA, it was Chilstrom who penned an open letter to defecting congregations, asking them to reconsider.

Chilstrom served as a board member for various organizations, including the Lutheran World Federation, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, and the National Council of Churches. He was also awarded 15 honorary doctorates, named a commander of the Royal Order of the North Star by King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, and received the Pope John XXIII Award for Distinguished Service from Viterbo University. —*Christian Century* staff