

ELCA presiding bishop's neon sign goes viral

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [September 9, 2020](#) issue



(Video screengrab)

As churches closed to slow the spread of COVID-19, Elizabeth Eaton, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, began offering weekly video messages from her home.

But viewers were captivated by more than her words of comfort or calls for prayer and action to address issues like systemic racism. On the wall behind her was a neon sign in the shape of the Luther rose—a coat of arms Martin Luther designed more than 500 years ago for the Protestant Reformation he ignited.

Almost immediately, the sign became a focus that generated nearly as many comments from those tuning in as Eaton's messages.

On August 7, after a slight delay for repairs, Eaton ceremoniously lit the neon Luther rose for the first time.

The lighting was accompanied by the buzz of neon and a trumpet blast from Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress"—the version from the opening of the popular 1960s Lutheran children's series *Davey and Goliath*, which also prominently featured the Luther rose.

The sign was a gift from Eaton's husband, an Episcopal priest and a neon sign enthusiast. He commissioned it for her birthday several years ago, she said.

"This has been a very stressful time," said Eaton. "I think by now almost all of us either knows somebody who's been infected or might even know someone who died [of COVID-19] . . . and now it's just this long haul. I think it just gets so heavy, and this rose is bright."

Eaton explained that the Luther rose includes a black cross inside a red heart—a reminder of the Lutheran belief that "we're justified by grace through faith," she said—on a white rose, symbolizing hope. It is circled by blue and gold, a symbol of the "eternal joy that we have in heaven," she said.

Jeffrey Roberts, the ELCA's social media manager, said viewers first noticed the neon sign in Eaton's weekly messages posted to Facebook in early April.

Some asked where they could get a neon Luther rose of their own. Others joked about starting an Order of the Neon Luther Rose.

"I had no idea this (neon Luther rose) would be close to viral," Eaton tweeted in June. The tweet quickly became one of her most popular posts of all time, according to Roberts.

Many asked the presiding bishop to turn on the sign during her messages. But somewhere in the undetermined past it had stopped working.

Earlier this summer, Eaton announced she was having the sign repaired. One Twitter user called it the "(neon)light at the end of the tunnel." —Religion News Service