

Former Bishop Megan Rohrer, forced to resign, sues ELCA

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Bishop Meghan Rohrer speaks to the press before his installation ceremony at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco on September 11, 2021. (AP Photo/John Hefti, File)

When Megan Rohrer [was elected bishop](#) of the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2021, he was celebrated as the first openly transgender bishop in the country's largest Lutheran denomination.

Less than a year later, Rohrer was forced to resign after removing a Latino pastor, appearing at the pastor's church in Stockton, California, to announce the termination as the congregation gathered to celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Now Rohrer is suing the denomination, claiming he was “scapegoated” and cast as racist for following orders, and charging that Lutheran leaders discriminated against him.

“This case is about the significant obstacles that LGBTQIA+ individuals face in the workplace and religious institutions across the country,” according to the lawsuit filed March 1 in the US District Court for the Northern District of California.

Lawyers said that Rohrer is not commenting at this time.

Rohrer’s election by the members of the Sierra Pacific Synod, based in Oakland, was initially hailed by many in the ELCA. But the suit alleges denominational leaders demonstrated a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ people from “literally his first day on the job.”

In a recent interview with [the San Francisco Chronicle](#), Rohrer said he had expected some discomfort from the leadership when he first stepped into the role of bishop. But, he said, “I always thought the animus would be hidden better.”

Rohrer’s suit said the former bishop discovered an “openly hostile” work environment and a “synod in internal turmoil.” The synod had been investigating complaints of abuse against the pastor in Stockton, Nelson Rabell-González, for two years by the time Rohrer became bishop.

Rohrer claims he researched the case, consulting with dozens of victims, witnesses, and other stakeholders before recommending a rehabilitation plan to Rabell-González. When the pastor rejected the plan, Rohrer terminated his position.

Rohrer delivered the news to congregation Misión Latina Luterana on December 12, 2021, following instructions from the presiding bishop of the ELCA, the denomination and the synod council, according to the lawsuit.

The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a day of huge cultural and spiritual significance to many Latino Christians, and Rabell-González’s congregation was outraged, believing the action was a “vestige of the Church’s history of racial discrimination and colonization,” according to the suit.

As outcry over what had happened at Misión Latina Luterana spread across the denomination, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton [announced](#) a three-member listening team to investigate. Eaton received the team’s report in early June 2022.

Shortly thereafter, she [requested](#) Rohrer's resignation and later, at the listening team's urging, [made the report public](#).

The suit calls the investigation "pretextual" and claims that the report contains "numerous inaccuracies."

"One thing is true: the Church does have a tragic and utterly unjustifiable history of colonization and racism, the imprints of which exist to this day," the lawsuit reads.

"Also true is that the Church's treatment of Rohrer as alleged herein, evidences discrimination against him as a transgender person. The Church's history of prejudice far predated Megan Rohrer's entry into the Church, and the notion he was motivated by racial animus in any personnel decisions is an outright falsehood propagated by the Church to deflect blame. It has also had the tragic effect of turning marginalized communities against each other."

The suit also alleges that leaders of the denomination and the Sierra Pacific Synod "intentionally, repeatedly and publicly" misgendered Rohrer and mocked the ordination of another transgender pastor because, they said, drag queens had attended.

The suit also claims Rohrer was fired after he revealed he was being harassed for being transgender. He also had reported the synod for violating state and federal labor laws, and his whistleblowing was one of the denomination's motivations for removing him as bishop, it alleges.

Once recognized as a "pioneering, courageous individual who broke significant cultural barriers," the lawsuit reads, Rohrer has now become a "pariah" within his own faith community, receiving death threats and unable to work as a bishop or pastor in any Lutheran denomination.

"I get messages from people all the time who say, 'Your installation as bishop gave me so much hope, now what do I do?'" Rohrer told the *Chronicle*.

"Part of saying my story out loud right now is reminding people, particularly LGBTQ people, that we can continue to walk forward, even when there are setbacks."

Candice Buchbinder, public relations manager for the ELCA, said that the denomination is aware of the lawsuit but does not believe the suit has merit and will not comment further outside of the court.

The Sierra Pacific Synod did not respond to a request for comment. —Religion News Service