

Leading SEPA In Dance, To The Glory Of God



The Rev. Patricia Ann Curtis Davenport Is Installed As SEPA's New Bishop, Making History As The First African-American Woman To Hold This Position In The ELCA.

By Brenda Lange

A palpable sense of joyful history-in-the-making filled the New Covenant Church in Philadelphia September 22 as The Rev. Patricia Ann Curtis Davenport was installed as the fifth bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

The inspiring celebration of Bishop Davenport, who was elected to the office May 5 as the first African-American woman lifted up as a bishop of the 3.5-

million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, drew leaders of African-American Lutheranism and other traditionally Black churches who pointed out the historic import of the day and the challenges yet ahead for the 96-percent white mainline denomination.

“We must continue to see ourselves in God’s story,” the Rev. Dr. M. Wyvetta Bullock observed in her sermon. “For 30 years, black women have looked at the Conference of Bishops and asked, ‘Where am I?’ Well, here you are,” Bullock said, pointing at Bishop Davenport.



The Rev. Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld, elected the following day by the South Central Synod of Wisconsin as the ELCA’s second African-American woman bishop, prays with Bishop Davenport during the installation.

- [View a photo album from Bishop Davenport’s Installation](#)

Rev. Bullock, assistant to the ELCA presiding bishop and executive for administration, noted the lack of black leadership felt at times within the denomination. In this majority white church “Black women are in a crooked room trying to stand upright,” she said. “We must call on a God who said, ‘I will make the crooked places straight.’ And we must remember that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us.”

The joyous, celebratory tone was a fitting beginning for the new leadership role now held by Bishop Davenport—a woman known for her passionate spirituality and love of music and dance. “I’m often asked, ‘Why do you dance?’” the new bishop said in her remarks, and then smiled widely. She asked and answered this question repeatedly throughout her presentation, with each answer adding to the list of ways in which God has blessed her life. “I am grateful to God for all that he has given me,” she said. “I have been richly blessed and I trust that the synod that called me will accompany me on this journey.” The bishop then invited worshippers to join her in a dance of praise.

The two-hour service was a visual feast of vibrant hues, red dresses, suits, and hats to highlight the presence of the Holy Spirit, and multi-colored stoles, copes, scapulars, and altar cloths from Africa in recognition of the Bishop’s African heritage. Opening with an energetic liturgical dance, the liturgy continued with the ritual of pouring libations, an African ceremonial tradition that honors the ancestors and invites them to join in the day’s event.

The Rev. Dr. Albert Starr Jr., ELCA director for ethnic-specific and multicultural ministries, invited a church elder and a pre-teen boy to join him in the pouring of water from a cherry-red glass pitcher. With each invocation Starr poured some of the liquid into a bronze baptismal font, and to each, the congregation responded “Ashe”, a Yoruba word meaning the power to make things happen and create change.



The Rev. Dr. Albert Starr Jr. Leads the pouring of libations, a traditional African ritual honoring and inviting community ancestors to be present at the celebration.

“We pour water, the source of life, which we offer to God,” said Rev. Starr. “We pour for the generations who have gone before, for thanksgiving to God for who we are now, for the children we nurture now and for the generations yet to come.”

A scripture reading from Ephesians 3:14-21 set the tone of the day’s message: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

The Gospel reading from Luke 4:16-21, described how Jesus began his ministry in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, proclaiming that he would be bringing God’s Word to the poor, the sick, the widows and the otherwise disenfranchised among them. As the story continues, the crowd shifts from speaking well of Jesus to attempting to throw him over a cliff because the implications of the prophecy – that God’s love and healing are for all people – challenge their comfort zone.



The Rev. Dr. M. Wyvetta Bullock delivers the sermon.

This “good news for the poor” – Jesus’ message of inclusion, release, and recovery for all – similarly challenges the established church in our day, Rev. Bullock said in her sermon.

“We waited a long time, but God did it and now we have the first elected African-American female Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” she said to a standing ovation.

Jesus was led into the wilderness to prove who he was. We all are challenged to demonstrate our character at times, and when our purpose and the

opportunity to be who we are with the gifts we have been given coincide, “That is destiny. Kairos. To say yes requires courage and trust. Especially when you’re the first. We don’t always feel qualified or think we can handle what we’re asked to do, but God promises to be with you ... and he takes care of even those who are different from you. He reaches and blesses all,” said Rev. Bullock.

Then the preacher addressed the new bishop directly: “Leadership isn’t about a title or position. It’s what you bring to any situation. Leadership qualities needed in the ELCA include faith with a personal commitment to Jesus and someone with courage, vision, integrity and the ability to demonstrate one’s faith and values. These qualities all describe you, Bishop Davenport.”

The preacher pressed the congregation to recognize that responsibility to help the church live into its destiny lies with all the baptized, not just elected leaders.

“All of God’s people are gifted and equipped by God for the purpose to which God has called us,” Rev. Bullock said. Turning to Bishop Davenport, she said, “Don’t take on this Synod’s challenges as your fault or your failure, and don’t take on this church’s challenge to become the multicultural and inclusive church it says it believes that God wants it to be. Don’t let that be your problem to solve. Don’t believe that everything depends on you or allow the perception of others drive you to dissemblance. Don’t let anyone take away your love for the Spirit. Dance, my sister!”

She closed by ensuring Bishop Davenport and the congregation, as a whole, that God has called the church to continue his ministry and preach good news to the poor and to the oppressed.

“Jesus says, ‘As the father sends me, so I send you.’ And God is doing something in this church that is larger than the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, or any one congregation or individual. He wants to use us as a light to the nations, sharing the Good News, not only because it is morally right to do it, but because the one who created us tells us to. It’s our identity and purpose.”

Bishop Davenport was then formally installed into her new office. After answering a series of questions about her willingness to serve in this capacity, to which she answered with, “I will, and I ask God to help me,” she turned to face the congregation, which agreed to support her in her work.



The congregation affirms Bishop Davenport after she received the signs of office — a cross and crozier.

Several bishops, pastors of two of Philadelphia’s historic black churches and others came forward and, as she knelt at the altar, they each laid their hands on her head and whispered their blessings. After the last blessing was offered, the group encircled her as the presiding minister, The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, spoke a prayer of thanksgiving. “Pour out your Spirit upon Patricia to empower and enlighten her ministry as a bishop in your church. ... Give courage and fortitude to sustain her in this ministry ... the office of bishop is now committed to you ...”

Additional prayers were led by two of the bishop’s sons and her daughter as well as the Rev. Lyzette Rios-Sanchez of Iglesia Luterana Nueva Creacion. Bishop Davenport was given a pectoral cross to wear by the Rev. Claire Burkat, fourth bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod as a sign of her calling. Then, The Rev. Roy Almquist, third bishop of the synod, presented her with the crozier, or shepherd’s staff, as a sign of her pastoral office and encouraged her to “keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you.”

After Bishop Davenport’s presentation, throughout which she was visibly moved and joyful, she invited the whole congregation and all members of the ELCA to join her in this new journey. “I believe that our preacher for today told

me to show up and be me. Last night, the preacher said, ‘Just do it.’ Go forward and be Christ-like. Amen.”



ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton leads the assembly in applause for Bishop Davenport.

Interfaith partners also made brief presentations. Rabbi Shawn Zevit, Lead Rabbi Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia, spoke of the new position in which Bishop Davenport finds herself. “You are here at this crossing and bringing us all with you to this new day. Change is going to come, and no one needs to be outside God’s house. We are all chosen to be the best possibility we can be.

“Messiah means to draw forth,” he added. “It’s the future calling us. Not the past holding us back.”

Rabbi Zevit then sang a prayer in both Hebrew and English. “We are the rainbow of the covenant living into your many names. ... Grant her the qualities to live into her leadership role and may your light guard her all the way. May God enlighten your soul and shine through you into the world.”

“What an incredible thing you’ve done, ELCA. This is an historic moment and the Gospel hope and promise is exhibited in this person of Bishop Davenport,” said The Rev. Ruth Santana-Grace, Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of Philadelphia PCUSA. “Arise. Your light has come. You’ve been called to give a voice to many who would otherwise be invisible. It is time to rise up as a church, together, against violence and racism and isms of all kinds.”

Finally, The Rev. Dr. Stephen Munga, Bishop of the North Eastern Diocese of Tanzania, SEPA Global Companion Synod, brought greetings from Tanzania, where the church of more than 120,000 active members is celebrating 125 years.

“No matter how big we get, we are missionaries—evangelists and missionaries—sent to preach the Gospel. Congratulations, my friend,” he said to the bishop. “Enjoy this day. There is no guarantee the future will look like this day, but keep your trust in God.” With the reading of Psalm 117 in both Swahili and English from a Swahili bible, he ended in song, joined by his wife, the Rev. Dr. Anneth Munga, who is director of postgraduate studies, international relations and linkages of the Diocese’ Sebastian Kolowa Memorial University.

Bishop Davenport led the congregation in sharing the sign of peace and in communion. She then sent the congregation out with a blessing. The service ended as joyously as it had begun with the Bishop dancing out of the church to the strains of “We Are Marching in the Light of God.”

Brenda Lange is a freelance writer. Communications Director Bob Fisher contributed to this story.

Photographs by Rev. Jesse Brown and John Kahler



Bishop Davenport leads worshippers dancing in praise.