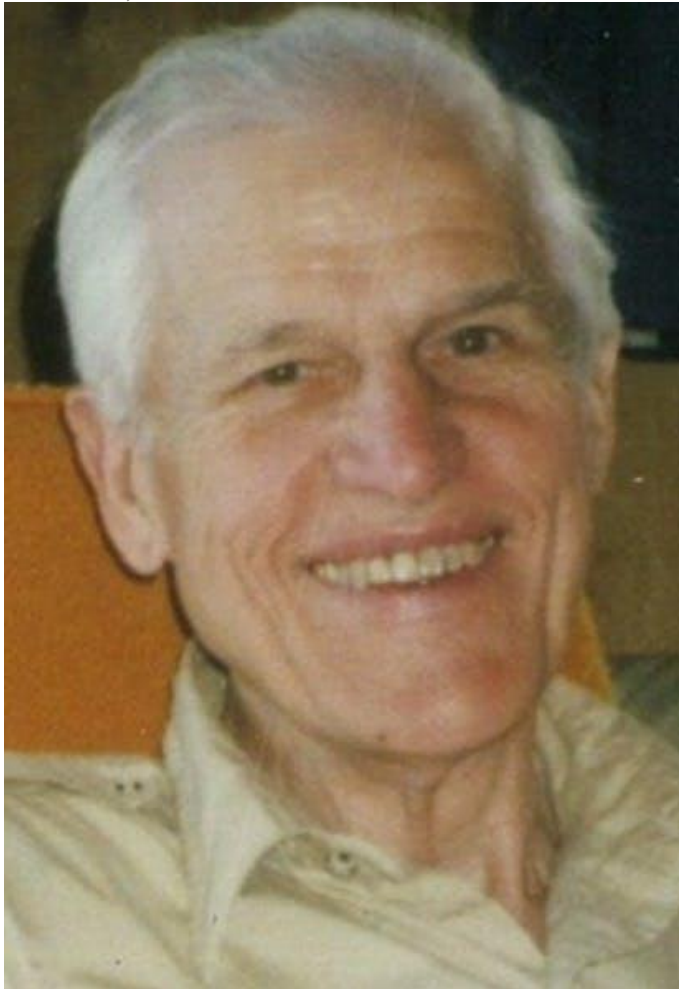


David Preus, Lutheran bishop and pastor, dies at 99

By [Greg Stanley](#) Star Tribune

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David Preus

At the height of the Cold War, David Preus led a Lutheran delegation into East Germany. The World War II veteran and longtime Twin Cities pastor was then the bishop of the American Lutheran Church.

"We were followed the whole time, and knew everything was being recorded and bugged," said Elizabeth Eaton, now presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who was there with him. "Our church hosts were nervous, to say the least."

The cultural minister of East Germany dismissively opened talks by saying, "You trust in God, we trust in science. History will tell us who was correct," Eaton said.

"Bishop Preus, just as calmly as can be, said, 'We'll wait,' " she said. "Seven years later the wall came down."

Preus, who exuded a calm confidence and joyful faith in even the most complicated situations, died July 23 of heart failure at the age of 99.

He was a churchman, in the best sense of the word, Eaton said.

"He thought it was a matter of faith and his vocation as a Christian to be engaged in working for a better society for all people," she said.

Preus was born in Madison, Wis., in 1922 and grew up in Decorah, Iowa, where his family moved when his father became president of Luther College. Preus attended Luther and starred on its basketball team. His coach called him his "bread and butter man," a title Preus took great pride in. He was inducted into the school's athletic hall fame, and at one point considered becoming a coach, said his daughter Martha Preus. "Then the war came," she said.

His entire class was graduated a year early, in 1943, to give the men a chance to enlist.

"The way he would tell it is, 'Seventeen of us went down to sign up with the Navy that day and 16 of us were accepted,' " Martha Preus said.

Young David Preus, it turned out, was colorblind and therefore couldn't enlist in the Navy. Instead, he joined the U.S. Army, serving in signal intelligence in the Pacific Theater until the end of the war.

After the war, he attended law school at the University of Minnesota for one year but decided he was being called to religious life. He went to Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul and was ordained in 1950. He had opportunities to become a theologian, to work his way into prominent posts. But in his heart he was still a bread and butter man — a towel and basin man, in biblical terms — and felt called to serve as a parish pastor, said his daughter Laura Preus.

His first parish was in Brookings, S.D., where he knocked on the screen door of Ann Margaret Overgaard Madsen.

The two were married for 70 years.

In the mid-1950s, Preus became a pastor in the Twin Cities. After a Black couple at his parish couldn't find a place to live, he called parishioners until he found them an apartment. "As he became more aware of what was happening, he got increasingly engaged," Martha Preus said.

He became a tireless advocate for fair housing, eventually joining Minneapolis' planning commission to help change land use and zoning laws. He became chair of the Minneapolis school board. He served as presiding bishop of the American Lutheran Church for 15 years, leading the church into the merger that created the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

He was adept at reaching across aisles, faiths and backgrounds to get people together for the common good.

"He just loved, loved people, and they loved him back," Martha Preus said.

Preus is survived by his wife and five children: Martha, David, Stephen, Louise and Laura; nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Services have been held.

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