

Bishop's Webinar explains rescheduled conferences, 'huge changes'

Mar 03, 2021 | John W. Coleman

The Eastern PA Conference Town Hall Webinar on Zoom, March 1, hosted by Bishop Peggy Johnson and her Cabinet, began with the end in mind.

The Rev. Steve Morton, Superintendent of the North District, opened with a homily on Deuteronomy 31:8. That's where Moses bids an encouraging farewell to his beloved Hebrew people, who will soon march into Canaan without him to take the Promised Land. ("The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.").

The meeting ended an hour later, with Bishop Johnson likewise bidding an encouraging farewell, as she prepares to retire this summer. She urged members to "Go forth and spread the news, and help people understand" the "huge changes" about to happen, and to "do the best we can in the meantime."

The bishop, who will retire after the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference in July, carefully outlined five major legislative events ahead:

- A one-day Special General Conference will convene virtually May 8 to enable a quorum of delegates to approve the use of mail ballots for voting on 12 urgent matters.
- A regular session of the Eastern PA Annual Conference will meet online May 20-22.
- A shortened Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference will gather, also online, the week of July 19 to approve the retirement of three bishops and realign episcopal areas as needed.
- A full General Conference will convene onsite August 29-Sept. 6, 2022, in Minneapolis, Minn.
- A full Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference will likewise meet onsite in 2022, shortly after General Conference.

The Annual Conference in May is the only one of those forthcoming events that was not postponed and rescheduled from 2020, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have been discerning our future for a long time,” said the Rev. Bumkoo Chung, West District Superintendent, in his opening prayer. “But we put our trust in you, Lord, because we believe that your plan is better than our plans.”

Postponement of 2020 General Conference

Bishop Johnson gave valid reasons for the second postponement of the 2020 General Conference:

- The continuing effects of the Coronavirus and the health hazard of large crowds gathering in one place.
- The international challenges with COVID, testing required for air travel, and visa uncertainties.
- The justice issue of full inclusion of our international delegates (who compose 44% of the global lawmaking body) if they are not able to come due to the complications of the virus.

The online Special Session May 8—which will be livestreamed for public viewing—will require only a 50% quorum (431 delegates) and a two-thirds vote to suspend its rules and allow for mail-ballot voting—up or down with no debate—on [12 Disciplinary measures](#). Those measures are necessary for ongoing denominational operations. The votes will be cast by paper ballots and will become effective when returned results are announced by July 13.

Delegates elected to the postponed 2020 General Conference will be allowed to proceed with their representation in 2021 and 2022. Eastern PA’s delegates were elected in June 2019 at the last onsite session of Annual Conference. [See the updated list of delegates.](#)

Bishop Johnson explained the Commission on General Conference’s decision to delay the full, in-person global assembly and its obligation to “ensure full participation of all General Conference delegates. (*Discipline*, para 511.4)”

The commission’s “Technology Study Team” determined that an online session was not feasible, given the variations of connectivity, electricity, translation, and 24 time zones across our global church. Full participation could not be guaranteed; so the paper option and a very limited agenda was decided by the commission.

The Rev. Joseph DiPaolo, a member of that commission since 2016, further explained its reasoning and joined Bishop Johnson is addressing questions.

He said most commission members wanted to proceed with the conference but recognized that they could not.

Among the few questions asked were several about the [Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#), the joint proposal for denominational division that has the widest support. At least two persons asked if it could not be voted on prior to the full General Conference in 2022. And several members asked about the financial provisions of the negotiated proposal.

“It is the widespread belief that the delicate deliberations around issues of separation, which inevitably will involve extensive debate and amendments, cannot be conducted with integrity and full participation of each delegate in an online format,” the bishop reported. “It will need to wait until the next in-person General Conference in 2022.

Eastern PA Annual Conference Plans

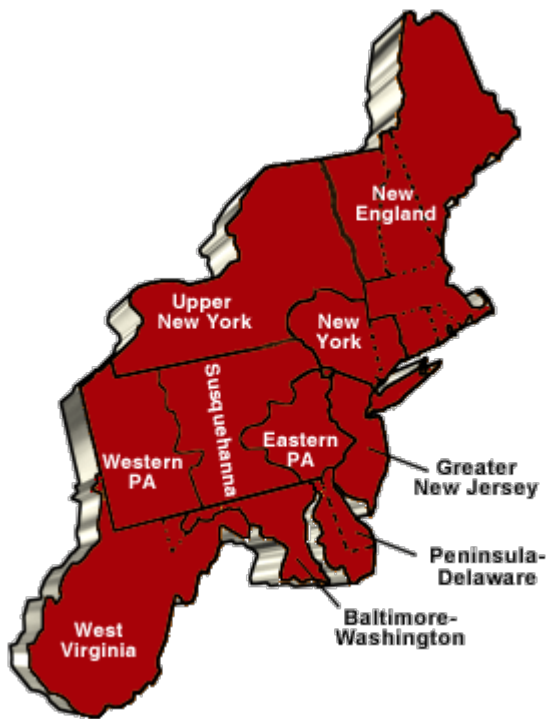


The Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, Connectional Ministries Director, reviewed [plans for the online Annual Conference](#)—our second—May 20-22, including an appeal for legislative resolutions to be few in number to limit the

need for amendments and debate during the abbreviated session. The deadline for resolutions is March 5. All acceptable resolutions will be made available online for feedback comments and “friendly suggestions.” Then they may then be modified and resubmitted by the presenter by April 2.

This year’s session will use the Zoom webinar poll function instead of e-Ballot for easier online voting. All voting members must use computers to participate. The Conference will provide satellite locations with computer access for online participation. But there will be no voting by telephone this time. While voting members will participate via Zoom, others may view the session livestreamed on the Conference’s Facebook page.

Members to Annual Conference must again vote in advance to suspend the Rules of Order for the online session. They will do so on Sunday, April 18, at a 3 PM online Special Session, followed by separate District Conferences at 4 PM—all of it conducted again on Zoom.



Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference plans

The Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference will also happen virtually for about three days between July 20 and 23. Bishop Johnson, Bishop Jeremiah Park of the Central PA Conference and Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar of the New England Conference will be officially retired.

The NEJ Conference will realign bishops' assignments as needed to cover the 10 conferences, which should require several multiple-conference assignments. And delegates will determine if any—and how many—bishops will be elected when the Jurisdictional Conference reconvenes in the fall of 2022.

The Council of Bishops is recommending that no new bishops be elected at all before 2024, because of a fast-dwindling Episcopal Fund budget and the uncertainty of the denomination's impending schism in 2022 and the membership shifts that may result.

The Peninsula-Delaware Conference, now part of the Philadelphia Episcopal Area with Eastern PA, is expected to be led by Bishop Latrelle Easterling of the Baltimore-Washington Conference after the NEJ Conference in July. Eastern PA will likely share a bishop with another conference, probably either Greater New Jersey or Central PA.

“Just as Eastern PA partners with the Peninsula-Delaware Conference now on various events, training opportunities and mission collaboration, EPAC's new partner conference will be in like manner,” said Bishop Johnson. But, she added, “there will not be any changes in conference boundaries or mergers happening at this time.”

Additional shared episcopal assignments, or the temporary assignment of retired bishops, may be needed to cover 10 conferences with six remaining active bishops. Nothing will be decided for sure until the Jurisdictional Conference in July. New U.S. episcopal assignments begin Sept. 1, 2021.

While she will not reach her mandatory retirement age before 2024, Bishop Johnson is requesting voluntary retirement effective Sept. 1, 2021, after 13 years of serving the Philadelphia Episcopal Area. She and her husband, the Rev. Michael Johnson, will move to Carrollton, Va., to live near their oldest son and his family.