

Report about the 81st General Convention of the Episcopal Church

The General Convention is the governing body of The Episcopal Church and meets every three years. Its legislative process is an expression of The Episcopal Church's belief that, under God, the Church is ordered and governed by its people: laity, deacons, priests, and bishops.

Convention convened during the last week of June in Louisville, KY. Pittsburgh was represented by: Mr. Jamie McMahan (deputation chair), The Rev. Jeff Murph (vice-chair), The Rev. Canon Eric McIntosh, The Rev. Brandon Cooper, The Rev. Noah Evans, The Rev. Kris Opat (clergy alternate), Mr. Jon Delano, Mrs. Florence Atwood, Mr. Stephen Stagnitta, Ms. Lisa Brown (lay alternate), and Dr. Joan Gundersen (lay alternate). Of course, our bishop, the Rt. Rev. Ketlen Solak, also attended along with her husband, Scott.

The General Convention is our Church's highest temporal authority. As such, it has the power to amend the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, to amend the Book of Common Prayer and to authorize other liturgical texts, to adopt the budget for the Church, to create covenants and official relationships with other branches of the Church, to determine requirements for its clergy and other leaders, to approve resolutions on public policy, and to carry out other responsibilities and authority.

There are two legislative Houses of General Convention: the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops. Each of the two Houses has a presiding officer: the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies. The House of Deputies is composed of deputations elected from each diocese of The Episcopal Church (including dioceses in Colombia, Cuba, Dominican

Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, and the Virgin Islands); from Navajoland; from the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe; and from Liberia (which has seat and voice). Members of the Official Youth Presence also have seat and voice, and, overall, the House of Deputies includes over 850 people. The House of Bishops is composed of every bishop diocesan, suffragan, and assistant, as well as retired bishops and those who are serving the church in a different capacity.

Our ecclesiology teaches our belief that the Holy Spirit works through the actions of General Convention to express God's will for our church. A resolution becomes an Act of Convention only after both Houses adopt it in the same form and at the same General Convention. Over the six legislative days of convention almost 400 resolutions were considered during about 30 hours of legislative meetings. The schedule started with daily worship in the morning and concluded around 6pm each evening, although we did have evening sessions on two occasions. In addition, Legislative Committees met virtually to discuss legislation and hold public hearings in advance of convention. Several members of Pittsburgh's deputation served on one of these committees.

Two members of our deputation were new this year, and shared some of their thoughts and observations:

“The sheer scope and size of GC struck me. I knew the numbers beforehand but seeing that many people and that many legislative actions all being addressed, was overwhelming. If I didn't have a background in political science and experience working for a legislator, I would have been completely lost.” – The Rev. Brandon Cooper

“Diversity was expressed in many ways. I heard languages including Spanish, French, Navajo, Mandarin, Hawaiian, and others in addition to English that were used in worship and prayer. With a diversity of people comes a vast array of opinions and often conflict ensues. I expected some arguments, hard feelings, and contentious battles over resolutions. Instead, respectful dissent, considered and thoughtful changes to resolution language, and a dose of humor that helped to dispel tension were the norm. When a possibly difficult vote was to take place, our chaplain would lead us in prayer to calm our minds and allow the Holy Spirit time to intercede.” – Florence Atwood

While it would be impossible to list all of the actions taken by Convention this year, a few stand out.

First and foremost, the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, bishop diocesan of Northwest Pennsylvania and bishop provisional of Western New York, was elected June 26 on the first ballot by the House of Bishops to serve as the 28th presiding bishop. His election was confirmed by the House of Deputies. The traditional elaborate installation service at Washington National Cathedral will not occur as originally announced. Instead, a simpler rite will take place Nov. 2 in the small chapel at the Church Center in New York. Rowe said he has “decided to begin this ministry in a new way.” The service will be livestreamed, and simultaneous interpretation will be available in multiple languages to ensure churchwide access. Rowe becomes the youngest bishop ever elected to serve as the church’s presiding bishop and the second youngest overall since the first, William White, who was 41 when his first of two terms began in 1789.

House of Deputies President Julia Ayala Harris was reelected June 25, winning decisively on the first ballot and fending off challenges from the Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton, the deputies’ vice president, and Zena Link, a former Executive Council member. The election was unusual for featuring an incumbent House of Deputies president facing a challenge. A sitting president has only faced a challenger once in modern history. That was in 2003 when the Very Rev. George L. W. Werner was reelected after being challenged by Louie Crew, lay deputy from Newark. A related item is that Jon Delano was invited to give remarks to the House of Deputies in honor of George and his legacy across the Episcopal Church, in memoriam of his death in 2023.

General Convention adopted a \$143 million churchwide budget for 2025-27 without amendment and with little debate. The adopted plan maintains the 15 percent assessment on revenue that dioceses contribute to the churchwide budget. In a related action, convention rejected a proposal that would have set a target for sharply reducing the assessment to 10 percent by 2033. The adopted plan, however, still includes some flexibility as Rowe prepares to take office as presiding bishop.

The Book of Common Prayer now has a new constitutional definition: “Those liturgical forms and other texts authorized by the General Convention per this article and the Canons of this Church.” This was a change to Article X that was first approved two years ago by the 80th General Convention. Constitutional changes require affirmative votes at two successive conventions.

The previous version of Article X of the Constitution laid out how the Book of Common Prayer can be revised, but it did not address the status of other authorized liturgies that are not proposed revisions to the existing physical book. In a related matter, convention declined to take any action on a resolution which would have reviewed the requirement that only baptized persons receive Holy Communion.

One of the top issues heading into Louisville was how the church might reform its Title IV Canons governing clergy discipline. General Convention routinely reviews and updates Title IV, though this year a series of proposals were submitted specifically in response to concerns across the church that

the current disciplinary process sometimes causes secondary harm to complainants and that bishops are not always held to the same disciplinary standards as other clergy. Resolutions designed to improve accountability in the disciplinary process, mandate time limits on filing an intake report and convening a reference panel, and clarify the role and authority of the church attorney and investigators were passed by both houses.

The 81st convention approved an unprecedented level of changes to dioceses in a move that could presage greater consolidation and diocesan cooperation for mission and ministry. Bishops and deputies agreed to allow the dioceses of Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan to form the new Diocese of the Great Lakes, while Eau Claire, Fond du Lac and Milwaukee got the go-ahead to reunite as the Diocese of Wisconsin. Both houses agreed to Navajo Episcopalians' request to elevate their area mission to a missionary diocese.

Conflict in the Middle East is always a hot topic at General Convention, and with Israel's war on Hamas continuing to extend, many resolutions related to the conflict were proposed. Debate on those resolutions took place during a convention that saw two demonstrations and a Compline for Palestine prayer service and included intense discussion about the use of the words "genocide" and "apartheid." A substitute version of a resolution that was hammered out by a conference committee after fierce debate in both houses, emerged as a compromise that addresses more broadly the decades-old conflict and recent violence. While deploring the Oct. 7 attack on Israel by Hamas as "an indefensible act of terrorism," the resolution states that the Israeli government "continues to commit acts and pass laws that result in fragmentation, segregation, and dispossession against the Palestinian people and the Occupied Territories."

Last, but most certainly not least, Convention passed several resolutions recognizing and honoring this year's 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. July 29 is the proposed date for the commemoration of The Ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven, which was approved for trial use as a feast day in the church's calendar. In addition, throughout our time together, the election of the new presiding bishop was balanced with warm accolades to honor the tenure of Michael Curry as he prepares to retire after nine years in the role.

These are just a few of the many actions taken by the 81st General Convention. A complete summary can be found here:

<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/32551>

Overall, Pittsburgh's deputies came away from convention both tired from the pace of work but energized by how much was able to be accomplished in such a short amount of time. We spoke at length during the week we were together about how each of us was personally impacted by many of the actions discussed in this brief report and our excitement at where The Episcopal Church is going, particular with our new Presiding Bishop-elect. The General Convention next meets in 2027 in Phoenix, AZ. Deputies from Pittsburgh will be elected at diocesan convention in fall 2025.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jamie McMahan, Deputation Chair