

020 Abbreviated EPA Annual Conference

(selected portions from article by John W. Coleman in *NEWSpirit Alert*)

To ensure members' safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 234th Eastern PA Annual Conference conducted its business session solely online Wednesday, October 13, with an agreed-upon, reduced agenda that it processed in under four hours via a Zoom video-conferencing webinar. The historic, perhaps shortest session on record, presided over by Bishop Peggy Johnson, featured worship and presentations of only essential resolutions and reports—all pre-recorded. The live portion included legislative questions and answers but no amendments or debate. Non-voting persons could view the live-streamed session on the Conference's Facebook page. Votes were cast using the secure, online eBallot system and a Zoom vote by telephone option.

Nine key, time-sensitive 2020 Resolutions were presented and passed. (Other 2020 resolutions not presented to this session may be presented to the 2021 Annual Conference.) Two controversial resolutions each drew about a half-dozen questions.

Camp Innabah land sale authorized

A resolution (#2020-09) to authorize Conference Trustees to sell up to 50 +/- acres of Innabah Camp & Retreat Center property to pay off Camp & Retreat Ministries (CRM) budget deficits passed by 522 to 74 votes, with 11 abstentions. The 2020 and anticipated 2021 deficits are partially the result of the pandemic that forced cancellation of summer camps and retreats this year and will probably also limit retreats in early 2021. A five-year accumulated payroll debt at Innabah—totaling nearly \$400,000, with budget shortfalls in 2015, 2018 and 2019—also necessitated the land sale proposal. CRM may sell the land for residential use but is also considering selling it to a conservancy land trust that would “guarantee non-development of the property for anything other than camp use for the foreseeable future.” The land being considered contains no structures and its sale would not hinder camp programs.

Grandview UMC disaffiliation request approved

The other controversial resolution (#2020-05) was to approve the disaffiliation of Grandview UMC in Lancaster, in accordance with temporary church disaffiliation rules adopted by the 2019 Special General Conference. Those rules, in effect until December 2023, allow for churches to disaffiliate and retain their church properties if their decision is prompted by United Methodist Church disciplinary laws regarding the rights of “self-avowed, practicing” lesbian and gay members.

(Church properties are typically held in trust and would revert back to the annual conference.) The disciplinary laws, upheld by the 2019 general church session, continue to deny such members the rights to be ordained clergy and to be married in UM churches or by UM clergy.

The Grandview congregation legally voted to seek disaffiliation for reasons of conscience in February 2020, as it awaited any hoped-for changes that might be made by the 2020 General Conference. However, General Conference was postponed until August 2021. Grandview has agreed to March 31, 2021, a Conference Trustees deadline, as its “date of disaffiliation,” once it has fulfilled all financial and organizational obligations. The church may choose to rescind its request before then or follow through with its departure. When asked if she intends to leave the denomination with her congregation, the Rev. Andrea Brown, who is a Conference delegate to the 2021 General Conference, said she is currently “discerning my course.” The Grandview disaffiliation resolution was passed by a 466 to 115 vote, with 25 abstentions.

Three churches discontinued

The Annual Conference also approved discontinuances of three closed churches: Avondale, Gradyville, and Open Door in Kennett Square.

Other essential business conducted

Members also voted to shorten the name of the Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits to simply the Board of Benefits and approved for 2021 an updated agreement for the Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP), Rental/Housing Allowances for Retired or Disabled Clergy persons, and recommended Equitable Compensation. Also approved was the Council on Finance and Administration's 2021 Budget and the Committee on Leadership's 2020 Leadership Report for the new quadrennium.

Bishop Johnson called for "great rejoicing" in response to the announcement that the Conference has paid 100 percent so far of its pre-1982 clergy retiree pension liability, thanks to the former capital campaign and ongoing support.

Reports, rewards, retirees all celebrated

The Revs. Olivet Brown and Hun Ju Lee presented the Commission on Religion and Race's 2019 Call to Action anti-racism initiative report. Conference Lay Leader David Koch presented his 2020 Ministry of the Laity report. The Connectional Ministries' report was presented in a colorful, thematic video, using the song "Bind Us Together," that depicted staff tossing to one another a multicolored ball of yarn and conference ministry leaders bearing signs containing words from the Conference's vision and mission statements.

Other video reports came from:

- the UMC's Global Ministries missions agency
- Methodist Services, which provides residential care to children and adults
- Justice for Our Neighbors, the UM ministry that provides free legal assistance and hospitality to immigrants, including those that are undocumented
- UM Communications, which presented a new excellence in religious communications award, named the Epikoinonia (meaning "communication" in Greek) Award, to Conference Communications Director John Coleman.

Connectional Ministries also presented annual awards for excellence in ministry, all recorded on video. Awards received by pastors and/or churches in Lancaster County included:

- Harry Denman Award for Evangelism to clergy: Rev. Jason Perkowski of Faith UMC and Oregon Community UMC
- Harry Denman Award for Evangelism to laity: Donna Wert of Lampeter UMC
- Herbert E. Palmer Urban Ministry Award for West District: Anchorage Lancaster

Finally, the Conference also honored new clergy retirees with recorded, inspirational testimonies from each of them through Zoom.

Two services held on following day

The Annual Conference's Memorial Service for deceased clergy and clergy spouses and the Ordination and Commissioning Service for advancing clergy both occurred on Thursday, October 14, at Olivet UMC in Coatesville for invited clergy and family members.

Representatives from Covenant UMC

The Rev. Dr. Quentin Wallace in his role as senior pastor served as Covenant's clergy member to Annual Conference, and Lois Neidermyer attended online as Covenant's lay member to

Annual Conference. Covenant member Roger Kresge also attended as an Equalizing Lay Delegate.