

## Summary of 2019 Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference

By John W. Coleman, Director of Communications

The 2019 Eastern PA Annual Conference, meeting June 13-15 in Oaks, PA, elected eight delegates to represent it at the 2020 General Conference (GC2020), May 5-15, in Minneapolis, and elected eight more delegates to join them at the next Northeastern Jurisdictional (NEJ) Conference in July 2020.

Meanwhile, the annual conference declared itself, by a narrow vote, “a One Church Plan Conference in spirit.” The declaration counters new church laws enforcing restrictions that forbid LGBT members from being married or serving in ordained ministry in United Methodist churches.

Those laws were passed by the Special General Conference in February 2019, where the conservative Traditional Plan narrowly defeated the centrist One Church Plan. The resolution, presented by the Rev. James McIntire, calls for ongoing efforts to embrace LGBTQ people and to support “ministry to, for and with all persons, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.”

“We are broken. We are in disagreement. We are hurting. We are afraid,” read McIntire, pastor of Royersford UMC, in beginning his presentation statement. “We are apologetic to the communities in which we minister. We need healing.” McIntire cowrote the resolution with the Rev. Lydia Muñoz, his wife who was reelected to General Conference during the session. “We as an Annual Conference say, ‘Do no harm. Do good. And stay in love with God.’,” he concluded, quoting John Wesley.

The hotly debated resolution passed by just 66 votes; after one attempt to alter it with new wording and another to table it indefinitely, both failed. When challenged for letting the resolution proceed to a vote despite its disagreement with church law, presiding Bishop Peggy Johnson called the measure “aspirational” and thus admissible, according to a recent UMC Judicial Council ruling. Nonetheless, conference members voted to appeal her decision to the Judicial Council.

The controversial resolution was one of 18 the body approved, while only one was voted down: an attempt to adopt and recommend to the denomination a modified, more Bible-centered advertising slogan. That resolution, #2019-10, which did receive some support, asked that “Open Bibles” be added to the popular but unofficial UMC slogan “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.”

### **The GC2020 primary delegates elected are:**

**Clergy:** The Revs. Dawn Taylor-Storm; Andrea Brown; Lydia Muñoz; and Johnson Dodla.

**Laity:** Judy Ehninger; Krystl Johnson; Ann Jacob; and Lenora Thompson

Taylor-Storm and Ehninger were each elected first. They were also elected first to the 2016 General Conference and co-led that delegation in 2016 and 2019.

Eight additional Eastern PA conference members were elected to attend the 2020 Northeast Jurisdictional Conference along with the newly-elected General Conference delegates. Then six more members were elected as alternates for the Jurisdictional Conference. The full delegation is half-clergy and half-laity, as required.

While only one of the eight primary General Conference delegates is male, the entire delegation is diverse in gender, generation—seven are under 40—and race and ethnicity—including Caucasian, African American, Latino and Indian-American members.

The elections took all three days and many ballots to complete, as nominees attracting fewer votes began withdrawing from the balloting to facilitate completion. Five of the 22 delegates were nominated on the floor of the conference or as write-in candidates.

## Other resolutions that passed included:

- New temporary rules allowing churches that wish to disaffiliate from the conference and denomination by December 31, 2023, to retain their properties under certain conditions and in compliance with annual conference policies and protocols. Those protocols include paying all apportioned obligations and remittances due, and satisfying prescribed clergy pension obligations. Resolution 2019–19L temporarily supersedes rules adopted by the 2015 Annual Conference when Wesley UMC Quarryville left the denomination and was able to take its heavily mortgaged church building at a cost.
- Resolution #2019-18L, also requires compliance with the Book of Discipline’s new ¶2553 mandate that allows a church to disaffiliate from the UMC after paying its “withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference.”
- The recently reconstituted Healing the Wounds of Racism (HWR) Core Accountability Team will again supervise all required mandated training to help clergy, lay ministers and conference staff understand and help to dismantle racism through their ministries. That training will now include basic and advanced courses, still provided by the current training firm Visions, Inc. (Resolutions #2019-9, #2019-11 and #2019-15.)
- Approving Resolution #2019-14, the conference agreed to advocate for protection of and respect for Native American land rights based on treaties between Native tribes and the U.S. government.

Other approved resolutions addressed economic, pension and health care concerns of clergy retirees, plus updated housing allowance and equitable compensation amounts for active pastors.

Two recently closed churches (Diamond UMC in Hazleton and CC Hancock UMC in Springfield, Pa.) were discontinued. Ten Advance Special mission projects were approved for local church funding.

Thanks to passage of Resolution 2019-02, organized clusters of neighboring churches working together in mission, known as “Mission ConneXions” since 2013, are now “EPA Mission Links.” The name change is in response to a copyright challenge by a national mission training and support agency based in Oregon.

The final vote taken, on Resolution #2019-17, came quickly, with limited debate, in the waning moments before a time-mandated adjournment at 5 PM on Saturday. Members affirmed asking the denomination to allow all local pastors and provisional clergy—including those who have not completed seminary or the course of study—as well as student pastors to be eligible for election as delegates to General and Jurisdictional conferences and allowed to vote on constitutional amendments.

The changes would be made to the UM Constitution and Discipline if first approved by the 2020 General Conference and then by an aggregate of two-thirds of annual conferences.