

EPA Annual Conference Meets Virtually Second Year in a Row

The 2021 session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference convened May 20-22 via Zoom webinar. This being the second time for virtual conferencing, the sessions mixed live with pre-recorded content for the preaching, teaching, legislating, reports and recognitions. The Annual Conference drew 712 total registrants, including the Rev. Dr. Quentin Wallace and Lay Member Lois Neidermyer from Covenant United Methodist Church.

The conference theme, “Come to the Water,” drawn from Acts 8:26-40, was “a reminder of our baptism that unites us, transforms us and directs our discipleship,” said the Rev. Dawn Taylor-Storm, Director of Connectional Ministries. The Connectional Ministries video report featured the conference’s emphasis on encouraging creative community outreach, including faith-sharing and justice-seeking ministries. “I pray that this theme will continue to resonate with our churches throughout the year,” she said, “as we offer the living water of Jesus Christ to our communities and as we seek to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”

Eight resolutions in total were addressed at the conference, eliciting some questions but little debate. Four approved resolutions addressed Clergy Equitable Compensation levels and Clergy Benefits, including retirement payments, rental/housing allowances for retired or disabled clergy, and pension past-service-rate increases for pre-1982 clergy retirees. This pension increase is the first in at least five years. It is directly related to the conference having achieved 100% funding in its Pre-1982 account, a result of its successful 2014-2017 capital campaign.

The session body also approved six ministries as Advance Special Projects for 2021-2022, endorsing them to seek funding support from local churches. The Conference Global Ministries Team recommended the projects.

The conference also voted to officially discontinue two East District churches that closed recently due to membership losses: First UMC in Perkasio and Asbury UMC in Norristown.

One resolution approved conference trustees’ clarification of how to distribute required payments received from churches that want to disaffiliate from the denomination and retain their property. The 2019 Special General Conference determined that churches may disaffiliate for reasons of conscience—prompted by UMC policies toward LGBTQ members’ rights—and retain their property if they meet conditions approved by their annual conferences, including making required, negotiated payments. Typically, a UM church’s property is owned by the denomination through the annual conference but held in trust by the congregation.

In regard to the budget, the conference passed a 2022 Connectional Ministries Fund spending budget of \$3.3 million, 2.3 percent more than in 2021 but actually the same amount as in 2020. “The overall spending for the Connectional Ministries Fund has remained fairly flat over the past decade,” reported Irene Dickinson, chair of the conference’s Council on Finance and Administration (CFA). “The average increase has been 1.5 percent. The conference continues to be strategically frugal and strives to be a good steward of the finances.” Treasurer James Brown reported that significant 2022 budget increases are provided for Latino ministries, outreach congregational development, and urban ministries.

Dickinson also announced a Connectional Ministries Fund 2021 Holiday “to celebrate the good financial standing of the annual conference.” CFA approved a one-month payment holiday for local churches that have satisfied their 2021 Connectional Ministries Fund (CMF) apportioned

payment for 11 months. Those churches “will be considered as having paid 100 percent (12 months) of their Connectional Ministries Fund apportionments.” All other payments, including remittances and general church apportionments, should be paid in full.

A diverse line-up of guest preachers and keynote speakers addressed the conference. The Rev. Jacqueline King, who promotes virtual ministry outreach, was the Laity Session keynoter May 20. The Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé, pastor of First Spanish UMC in New York City, preached at the opening worship service May 21. The Rev. Frederick Douglas Powe, Jr., from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. taught a well-attended, two-hour session on “Church Revitalization through Community Outreach.”

On Saturday, May 22, a Memorial Service remembered the clergy and clergy spouses who went to their heavenly home this past year, including our beloved Rev. Ted Mefferd. The service was held at Olivet UMC in Coatesville by invitation as was the Service of Ordination and Commissioning that followed. Bishop Mark Webb, leader of the Upper New York Episcopal Area, returned to his native Pennsylvania to preach at the service for ordination and commissioning. The Rev. Jane Dutton was ordained a deacon, and the Rev. Correen Russo from LUMINA in Lancaster was commissioned a deacon. Four clergy were commissioned elders: the Revs. Karen Bartkowski, Noe Gabriel Lopez, Jason Perkowski of Faith UMC and Oregon Community UMC (Lititz), and Mark Salvacion.

Annual Conference members also honored 20 newly retired clergy, featured in a revealing video with personal remembrances of lives spent in ministry. Ten new Certified Lay Ministers (CLMs) were introduced by Judy Ehninger, who coordinates CLM training. The conference now has 71 active CLMs, 14 of whom serve as church pastors.

Other video reports included:

- A Committee on Native American Ministries (CONAM) video on challenges to Native Americans’ electoral voting rights on reservations.
- An update on the conference’s Racial Justice Transformation process, part of its 2021 Northeastern Jurisdiction Call to Action Initiative.
- Conference Lay Leader David Koch’s annual report on lay ministries and concerns.
- An encouraging Camp & Retreat Ministries update from the Rev. Don Keller.
- Presentations of the annual One Matters, Denman Evangelism and Herbert E. Palmer Urban Ministry awards, plus the new Narberth Grant award.
- The Higher Education Scholarships Fund, which featured three scholarship recipients.
- A grateful farewell report honoring Bishop Peggy Johnson from the Rev. Scott McDermott, who chairs the conference’s Episcopacy Committee.

Bishop Peggy Johnson presided over the business session, led the commissioning and ordination ceremonies, and also preached and celebrated Communion at the Memorial Service. It was her final Annual Conference here as Presiding Bishop after 13 years of faithfully serving the Philadelphia Episcopal Area (Eastern Pennsylvania Conference and Peninsula-Delaware Conference). She will retire September 1, 2021.

Submitted by Lois Neidermyer and adapted from a NEWSpirit article by John Coleman