

Conference Charts New Pathways to a Future That Is Now
May 24, 2022 | By John W. Coleman, EPA Director of Communications

“Now” is a word that implies something “New” is about to happen; and that makes “Now” an apt theme for the 236th Session of the Eastern PA Annual Conference, May 20-21. The conference’s third online session was fully staged this time at West Chester UMC, using a mix of live, onsite “holy conferencing,” reports and worship, along with some recorded events, videos and presentations. And it once again engaged voting members in live video-conferencing on Zoom, while also being video-livestreamed for viewers on YouTube.

Following an uplifting welcome video, Bishop John Schol opened the session with an episcopal address that emphasized our timely missional focus to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the church and the world. He highlighted congregations that are pursuing that mission in innovative, exciting ways, even as they emerge from the COVID pandemic. And he called for creative, committed, transformational leaders to help nurture vital congregations. “We will also seek avenues to end the sin of racism as we develop paths that will lead to wholeness,” said the bishop. “Assistance will be available for working with congregations as they navigate the changes that are before us. Our goal is to remain in love with God; do no harm; and do all the good that we can.

“We are called to hear what God wants for us and be mission driven in our ministries,” proclaimed Schol, presiding at his first EPA Conference session. “Now is our time to deliver the Good News of God’s salvation.”

The passage of several historic resolutions seemed to echo his call. The **Path Toward Wholeness Economic Justice** resolution (#2022-07) promises to take to the next level the conference’s stated commitment to dismantling racism. Emerging from months of intensive research, discussion, planning, vetting and obtaining feedback, it includes investment in:

- new and revitalized ministries among churches of color, plus reducing the conference Connectional Ministries apportionment for churches in low-income communities;
- more equity in pastoral opportunities for clergy of color; and
- helping leaders to face and dismantle racism in their churches and communities.

The resolution, which received only speeches in favor, was approved by a vote margin of 431 to 49.

The perhaps equally historic **Discernment Pathways** resolution (#2022-08) recommends that all EPA congregations undergo a guided exploratory process to discern “what God has next for them.” While acknowledging that some congregations may seek to disaffiliate from the conference and denomination because of sharp philosophical and policy differences, Bishop Schol reminded members that the conference’s goal is to focus most attention on congregations that want to discern and tread pathways that may help them fulfill their core mission and values.

The identified discernment pathways include:

- increasing congregational vitality in worship, discipleship, stewardship and mission;
- enhancing financial strength and sustainability;
- learning and applying solutions to help end the sin of racism;
- assessing and planning missional use of church properties to serve communities;
- using a facilitated process to resolve and grow from church conflicts about mission, leadership or programing.

Following much discussion and clarification about when congregations should begin their discernment processes, with help from conference resource leaders, the resolution passed by 410 to 77 votes.

The “Building Fellowship in the Face of Division” resolution (#2022-09) called on the conference to create opportunities for fellowship and dialogue among groups and churches about “Our Different Viewpoints on Human Sexuality” among over the next two years. “Our purpose is to build trust and understanding by listening and hearing one another one on one,” said the Rev. Tim Anderman, who presented the resolution. While he acknowledged that some have tired of talking, he recommended sharing personal stories that might shed light on perspectives about “homosexuality in our churches and denomination.” His resolution passed 327 to 109. Bishop Schol ruled out of order resolution #2022–10 which called for “Clarity and Transparency for Congregations Transferring or Disaffiliating in the Eastern PA Conference. He referred to episcopal responsibilities outlined in the UMC’s constitution and recent Judicial Council rulings to support his action. While another conference member asked the body to challenge his parliamentary decision, the vote did not sustain that motion.

Other resolutions were approved by large margins, including:

- Rental Housing Allowance for Retired or Disabled Clergy.
- Adoption of Clergy Retirement Security Program.
- Advance Specials, which was expanded to add the Path Towards Wholeness initiative for second-mile Advance funding support.
- Equitable Compensation.
- The Committee on Leadership Nomination Report.
- Two recently closed churches’ discontinuances: Philadelphia: St. Thomas UMC of the Frankford Group Ministry; and Shamokin: Zion UMC.
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Also, approved was a report from the EPA delegation to General Conference, given by Judy Ehninger, that the delegation interviewed one prospective candidate for the episcopacy but did not endorse that person. In addition, the conference approved a proposed 2023 EPA Connectional Ministries Fund budget of \$3,510,000, a \$210,000 increase over 2022. (The 2023 General Church budget total is \$1,885,323.) And members elected William Thompson as the new Conference Lay Leader.

Among the numerous videos shown were the annual Harry Denman, Herbert E. Palmer and One Matters awards presentations, as well as the Leadership Ministries Report, presented by the Connectional Ministries Office. Another video featured recent scholarship recipients to support the annual offering to fund higher education scholarships. Annual Conference offerings are being received through May for scholarships and for clergy education through the Board of Ordained Ministry and for Conference Youth and Young Adult Ministries.

Worship anchored each day’s session proceedings. The Rev. Hector Burgos, a district superintendent in the Greater New Jersey Conference preached on Friday during the annual Memorial Service for deceased clergy and clergy spouses. And Bishop Schol preached at Saturday’s closing Service of Ordination and Commissioning of Clergy.