

1021-07

The request for an episcopal ruling from a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference:

In light of Judicial Council Decision 1409, which noted that until the delayed 2020 General Conference meets, we remain legally within the 2017-2020 quadrennium, and that “All recommendations submitted by the General Council on Finance and Administration as part of the process set forth in ¶ 806 require approval of the General Conference,” is it therefore permissible as a matter of church law for annual conferences and local churches to regard all general church apportionments beginning January 1, 2021, as voluntarily and not required until such time as the General Conference meets to pass a new budget for the new quadrennium?

Source: the official minutes received directly from the Secretary of the Annual Conference

[Judicial Council Notation: Pursuant to the requirement added to Discipline ¶ 2608.1 by the 2012 General Conference, the exact wording of the question raised is provided herein above.]

The Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church

BISHOPS DECISION OF LAW

Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

June 15, 2021

SYNOPSIS OF RULING

Because the requested ruling of law does not call into question the legality of any actual or proposed Annual Conference action, it is outside the limited scope of episcopal judicial authority.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

The 2021 Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference was presided over by, the undersigned, Bishop Peggy A. Johnson. It began on May 20, 2021 and ended on May 22, 2021. During discussion of the Connectional Ministries Budget, the Rev. Joe DiPaolo requested a ruling of law on the issue of whether Judicial Council Decision No. 1409¹ rendered 2021 general church apportionments as voluntary for local churches and Annual Conferences.

Bishop Johnson requested that discussion of this issue be postponed until after the Connectional Ministries Fund Budget passed, after which, the Reverend DiPaolo submitted a written request for a Bishop's determination of law, the exact text of which is attached as Exhibit A. Discussion and a vote followed. However, pursuant to 2609.6 of the *Book of Discipline*, no vote was required.

¹ Judicial Council Decision No. 1409 held that, absent General Conference approval, the General Council on Finance and Administration, could not use a Base Percentage for calculating 2021 apportionments that differs from that last passed in 2016 for the 2017-2020 quadrennium.

RATIONALE

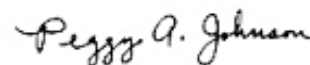
Bishops do not have unlimited authority to address any question relating to church law posed during the business of an Annual Conference. Indeed, to address the substance of this purported question of law would exceed the limited scope of episcopal judicial authority. It is a fundamental principal of United Methodist jurisprudence that requests for rulings of law from the presiding Bishop must “be based upon some action taken or proposed to be taken by such Conference, wherein under the specific facts in each case some doubt may have arisen as to the legality of the action taken or proposed.” *JCD 33*. Further, “it is not the duty of the presiding Bishop to rule upon any hypothetical question which may be propounded.” *Ibid*.

A valid request for a decision of law must “state the connection to a specific action” taken by the annual conference. *JCD 799*. Further, it may not presuppose future action that has not yet occurred. *JCD 1393*.

While this request for a purported decision of law may be germane or relevant to the business of the Annual Conference, no question as to the legality of Annual Conference action has been raised without presupposing future actions of the Annual Conference or a local church. Further, the request does not state the connection to a specific annual conference action.

RULING

The request for a purported decision of law is not within the scope of episcopal authority to answer, because it does question the legality of any proposed or actual Annual Conference action. For these reasons, the undersigned declines to address the substance of the request.



Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

The 236th Session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference May 20-22, 2021

Minutes submitted by Rev. Carlotta Madison

Theme: 'Come to the Water'

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. Featured in the Connectional Ministries video report, it evoked the conference's emphasis on encouraging creative community outreach and faith-sharing ministries.

The 236th session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference took place via Zoom with pre-recorded content, including preaching, teaching, legislating, reports and recognitions.

Session was opened shortly after 9:00 A.M. by Bishop Johnson with prayer. She thanked everyone who helped make this virtual experience possible. Everyone was reminded to be patient because of the dependency on the Internet. Rev. Hines conducted a practice. Vote so that everyone would be familiar with the process of voting. There were questions but little debate over resolutions. There were questions about conference trustees having permission to distribute payments from Grandview Church, Lancaster - formerly Grandview UMC - to the conference as part of its 2020 conditional agreement to disaffiliate from the denomination and retain its property. Since distribution of the funds was not included in the agreement that the 2020th Annual Conference approved there was limited discussion on the topic. Attendees were assured that Conference Trustees will use the funds to help pay conference debts.

Conference passed all eight resolutions presented as well as the budget

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 increase for pre -1982 clergy retirees.

There was a pension increase, from \$502 to \$515 monthly which was the first in five years. This was possible because the conference was able to reach 100% funding of its Pre-1982 account, thanks to the 2014 -2017.

The session body also approved six ministries as Advance Special Projects for 2021-2022: Amigos Community Center of Casa Del Pueblo - \$10,000; Cokesbury Summer Reading and Lunch Program for \$4,000; Liberia Education Project for \$7,100; Light of Marnie for \$10,000; Luminia for \$10,000; and Spiritual Renewal Ministries, Inc., for \$10,000.

Resolution 2021-05, which related to the discontinuance of First UMC of Perkasio and Resolution 2021-07, which related to the discontinuance of Norristown, Asbury United Methodist Church passed. Both churches were part of the East District and District Superintendent Rev. Dr. Andrew Foster, III answered questions about what led to their closing. He then offered prayer for their ministries to the community.

The conference passed a 2022 Connectional Ministries Fund spending budget of \$3.3 million, \$74,500 or 2.3 percent more than in 2021 but the same amount as in 2020. “The overall spending for the connection of ministries fund has remained fairly flat over the past decade,” reported Irene Dickinson, chair of the Conference 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.”

Significant 2022 budget increases are provided for “Latino (ministries) outreach congregational development and urban ministries,” Treasurer James Brown reported. There were questions about why the budget was not going down as the conference was downsizing and churches were closing. The response was that additional money is being put into ministry.

He 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,” according to Mr. Brown.

The Rev. Joseph DiPaolo requested a ruling of law on whether churches and the conference are obligated to pay general church apportionments (which are separate from the conference’s Connectional Ministries Fund) prior to the next General Conference in 2022, or if such payments should instead be considered voluntary.

He suggested that if we are still operating with the general church’s 2017-2020 budget legally, “Is it therefore permissible as a matter of church law for annual conferences and local churches to regard all general church apportionments beginning January 1 as voluntary and not required until such time as the General Conference meets to pass a new budget for the new quadrennium?”

DiPaolo’s Request:

In light of Judicial Council decision 1409, which noted that until the delayed 2020m General conference meets, we remain legally within the 2017-2020 quadrennium, and that “All recommendations submitted by the General Council on Finance and Administration as part of the process set forth in ¶806 require approval of the General Conference,” is it therefore permissible as a matter of church law for annual conferences and local churches to regard all general church apportionments beginning January 1, 2021 as voluntary and not required, until such time as the General Conference meets to pass a new budget for the new quadrennium?

Bishop Johnson suggested that churches continue to pay their apportionments as a show of their faith and commitment to the United Methodist Church.

The conference approved DiPaolo’s request for a ruling by the required 20 percent vote. Bishop Johnson now has up to 60 days to render her decision before it goes automatically to the Judicial Council.

The conference believed that DiPaolo's request for a ruling of law needed to be approved by 20 percent of the body, a vote was taken, and the request was approved. The body also believed that Bishop Johnson has up to 60 days to render her decision. [Editor's note: a

bishop's decision of law does not require a vote of the annual conference to be reviewed by the Judicial Council. Every decision of law by a bishop is automatically reviewed. The Discipline also allows only 30 days for the bishop to submit a decision of law to the Judicial Council for review.]

Keynote speakers who addressed the conference.

Rev. Jacqueline King was the Laity Session keynote speaker on May 20,

Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé, pastor of First Spanish UMC in New York City, preached at our opening worship service on May 21st.

Rev. Frederick Douglas Powe Jr. Presented focusing on, “Church Revitalization through Community Outreach.”

Bishop Mark Webb, leader of the Upper New York Episcopal Area, preached at our closing Service of Ordination and Commissioning on Saturday at Olivet UMC in Coatesville, following the Memorial Service.

Ordained & Commissioned

Rev. Jane Dutton was ordained a deacon, and Rev. Correen Russo was commissioned a deacon. Rev. Karen Bartkowski, Noe Gabriel Lopez, Jason Perkowski, and Mark Salvacion were commissioned elders.

Bishop Peggy Johnson presided over the business session, led the commissioning and ordination ceremonies, also preached and celebrated Communion at Saturday’s Memorial Service. This was her final Annual Conference. She will be retiring in August after 13 years of serving the Philadelphia Episcopal Area.

Retirees

Twenty clergy were featured in a video about their special moments in ministry.

Annual Conference members were introduced to 20 other new clergy retirees, featured in a revealing video with personal remembrances of lives spent in ministry. And 10 new Certified Lay Ministers (CLMs) were also introduced by Judy Ehninger, who coordinates CLM training. The conference now has 71 active CLMs, 14 of whom serve as church pastors.

Video reports:

- Committee on Native American Ministries (CONAM) presented a video on challenges to Native Americans’ voting rights on reservations.
- Video update on the conference’s Racial Justice Transformation process, part of its 2021 Northeastern Jurisdiction Call to Action Initiative was presented.

- Conference Lay Leader David Koch’s presented the Annual Report on Lay Ministries and their concerns.
- A video about Camp & Retreat Ministries was presented by 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 to Bishop Peggy Johnson from the Rev. Scott McDermott, who chairs the conference’s Episcopacy Committee.

Summary of vote on Resolutions:	Yes	No	Abstain
Resolution 2021 – 01 Clergy Retirement	499		
Resolution 2021 – 02 Pertaining Past Service	506	8	14
Resolution 2021 – 03 Housing	525	3	10
Resolution 2021 – 04 Advance Special	509	10	21
Resolution 2021 – 05 Discontinuance Perkasio	521	8	18
Resolution 2021 – 06 Funds Disaffiliation	441	45	55
Resolution 2021 – 07 Discontinuance Asbury	513	14	17
Resolution 2021 – 08 Equitable Compensation	516	7	11

The 236th Session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference was closed with prayer by David Koch at 12:45 P.M. on May 20, 2021.

1021-7 Eastern Pennsylvania Interested Persons
Review of Bishop's Ruling

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