80th General Convention to proceed in person, but shorter and smaller, presiding officers say

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By David Paulsen

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Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies, speak during a May 11 special meeting of Executive Council. Maryland Bishop Eugene Sutton, right, speaks later in the day during a meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements.

[Episcopal News Service] The 80th General Convention will proceed in person this July in Baltimore, Maryland, but it likely will be shorter and smaller, with enhanced safety protocols to further minimize the risk of COVID-19 infections, according to an outline of potential changes presented May 11 by The Episcopal Church's presiding officers.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies, discussed their preliminary plan for a modified General Convention at a special meeting of Executive Council held online and livestreamed. They said that neither cancelation nor another postponement of General Convention is a viable option.



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/WJBMtCyVXrE

“There are essential matters for the governance and good order of the church which must be transacted. We are committed to holding the 80th General Convention in Baltimore this summer,” Curry said in his remarks. “I know how much this commitment to the city of Baltimore and to the Diocese of Maryland matters. But obviously, with the ongoing variation of the COVID pandemic, we are likewise committed to gathering in the safest and healthiest way possible.

“Love of neighbor is not simply a good idea. It is a commandment of Jesus based on the teaching of Moses to always seek the good and the well-being of each other.”

> A statement on #GC80, as presented to Executive Council earlier today:
>
> First, we are not calling for the postponement of the 80th General Convention. Let me say that again: we are not calling for the postponement of the 80th General Convention. 🧵
>
> — Presiding Bishop Michael Curry (@PB_Curry) May 11, 2022

That commitment means that this General Convention meeting will not look like past triennial gatherings of the church’s governing body. “As hard as it is to accept, we are not yet able to hold the big family reunion we’ve all been longing for,” Jennings said. Instead of an eight-day

meeting July 7-14 attended by thousands of deputies, bishops, staff members, vendors and visitors, Jennings said planners are working toward a “short, focused meeting, to hold elections, approve a budget and address other critical issues and essential legislation that cannot wait until 2024.”

She noted that election of her successor is among the actions that cannot be put off any longer. General Convention also will elect Executive Council members, and the House of Deputies will elect a new vice president. Jennings also reassured Executive Council that it was unlikely that General Convention would fail to reach a quorum, which requires a minimum of one clergy deputy and one lay deputy from half of the dioceses. A majority of bishops eligible to vote is required for quorum in the House of Bishops.

The changes under consideration partly are in response to growing anxiety churchwide over the potential threat of coronavirus infection at General Convention at a time when subvariants again are pushing case counts higher. Those risks were underscored by an outbreak of COVID-19 among members of Executive Council after their April 20-23 meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Jennings was one of at least eight people at that meeting who tested positive.

Deputies also have raised concerns after at least 41 people who attended a Diocese of Pennsylvania clergy conference from April 25-27 tested positive for the virus. Episcopal Communicators, on the other hand, held a four-day conference last week that drew more than 100 to Savannah, Georgia, and so far, attendees have avoided an outbreak. The latter conference required negative tests and masks.

Jennings said after 15 days she finally is feeling better, but falling ill with COVID-19 ” has sharpened my understanding of what COVID can do, even to someone who is vaccinated.”

“I’m still very cautious about gathering in person in Baltimore,” Jennings said. “But I believe if we all commit to abiding by the guidelines and caring for each other … we can do our essential governance work as efficiently and safely as possible.”

She also revealed some results of an online survey of deputies that showed more than 70% wanted to proceed with an in-person General Convention, while more than half expected changes to address safety concerns.



Members of the Diocese of Newark converse with each other during the 79th General Convention in 2018. Photo: Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service

The process for changing General Convention's time, duration and location is set by the church's Constitution and Canons and Rules of Order. Any changes first are proposed to the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements. That committee considers the proposal and makes a recommendation to the presiding bishop and president of the House of Deputies. If a change is recommended, the two presiding officers consider it and decide whether to make the change, after receiving advice and consent from Executive Council.

The 80th General Convention initially was scheduled to occur in July 2021 but because of the pandemic was postponed by one year, under the assumption that conditions would improve enough by July 2022 to make an in-person gathering feasible. Conditions, indeed, have improved since then, with vaccinations against the virus now widely available and proven successful in preventing most hospitalizations and deaths. Though case counts in the United States are greatly diminished from last winter's omicron variant surge, the numbers have been ticking up over the past month due to the latest, more contagious omicron subvariant.

The one-year postponement also has allowed committees to hold some meetings and hearings online for the first time. The online hearings, which are ongoing, had helped the church achieve its goal of reducing the triennial gathering from 10 to eight days.



Presiding Bishop Michael Curry opens the 79th General Convention's first TEConversation in July 2018. Photo: Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service

Some Executive Council members asked what prevented the church from moving General Convention's essential business online, similar to the online meetings of Executive Council that were necessary early in the pandemic.

"To be able to pull that off requires a lot of technical capacity. We don't have the time and space to pull that off and do it in an effective way," Curry said.

The Rev. Michael Barlowe, secretary of General Convention, added that his office might have been able to plan such an online gathering if given more time, but questions remain about whether it would be necessary to change the church's Constitution and Canons to allow an online or hybrid meeting.

Sally Johnson, chancellor to the president of the House of Deputies, also addressed those questions by saying it would be prudent for the church to allow enough time for discernment on a change as significant as allowing an online meeting of General Convention. "It needs to be looked at. It needs to be studied," she said, possibly to make changes in time for the church's future triennial gatherings.

Church leaders already were planning to require proof of vaccination and face masks for all attendees. If a modified in-person meeting takes place, additional precautions could include daily rapid testing, a prohibition on food on the convention floor, increased physical distancing and no singing. Such precautions will be guided by principles for contingency planning that were affirmed May 11 by a vote of the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements, which met online after Executive Council.

No precautions can eliminate all risk of infection, which could be as high as 10% of attendees, said Dr. Rodney Coldren, a public health expert hired to advise Jennings with $50,000 approved by Executive Council. “There will be cases. It is simply, essentially inevitable,” Coldren said during council’s May 11 meeting, but reducing the duration and number of people attending General Convention can significantly limit the growth of infections.

Jennings also shared notes from her May 4 and May 10 meetings with Coldren. The notes, which summarize Coldren’s recommendations, say a four-day General Convention “would be far preferable to a meeting of eight days,” though church leaders have not yet settled on precise dates or the new duration of a shorter 80th General Convention.

Coldren recently retired after 30 years with the U.S. Army, and he led the Army’s COVID-19 response in Europe and Africa. Daily testing, in particular, can help catch pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases before they spur wider outbreaks, he said, and singing, “in my experience, was responsible for more outbreaks in general than almost any activity.”

The Rev. Mally Lloyd, chair of Executive Council’s Finance Committee, alluded to the financial hit the church will face with a shorter, smaller General Convention.

“This is not going to be a money saver,” Lloyd said. “We are on the hook for our deposits, for our hotel rooms.” She didn’t specify how much money The Episcopal Church could lose by breaking some of those commitments but expected the details would be worked out be General Convention’s planners.

At its January meeting, Executive Council shifted $2.5 million from 2021 to the church’s 2022 budget to cover the gathering in Baltimore. Episcopal News Service is awaiting a response to an inquiry with Barlowe, Lloyd and Chief Financial Officer Kurt Barnes about the church’s potential financial liabilities of changes to the in-person gathering.

Lloyd told Episcopal News Service in an interview before the May 11 meeting that she initially was strongly in favor of postponing General Convention, partly because of the outbreak among her fellow members of Executive Council. On the other hand, “we really need to do the business of the church,” she said, “so could we do it smaller shorter, safer and accept that some people will get [COVID-19]?”

After Executive Council’s special meeting, Sherri Dietrich, board president of the church’s United Thank Offering, issued a statement saying the board decided May 9 that it would not send a delegation from UTO to attend the 80th General Convention, partly due to COVID-19 concerns but also because “it is not the best use of UTO’s budget to continue to be present at the event as we were pre-pandemic.”

The special meeting of Executive Council was called, under a rarely used provision in the church’s Canons, by six members of Executive Council, including the chairs of the governing body’s four standing committees. Those six members were Lloyd of Massachusetts,

Southwest Florida Bishop Dabney Smith, Julia Ayala Harris of Oklahoma, Jane Cisluysis of Northern Michigan, Russ Randle of Virginia and Rose Sconiers of Western New York.

Harris told ENS before the May 11 meeting that she had attended an gathering in Baltimore of the Deputies of Color last weekend, and most of the people she talked to were in favor of some form of in-person General Convention. “We really need to be together for a little bit – that was the general sense,” she said.

Like Jennings, Harris said her perspective has been shaped by her own experience getting sick with COVID-19 after the Executive Council meeting. She has mostly recovered but still feels some fatigue from the illness.

“For me, personally, it was a huge wakeup call,” she said, adding that she was fortunate to be able to recover at home. People who get sick at General Convention may have to quarantine in their hotel rooms. “I could not imaging being as sick as I was in a hotel alone without my family helping me.”

The presiding officers said their next step will be to form a small design team led by Bishop Sean Rowe and Deputy Bryan Krislock, their respective houses’ parliamentarians, to flesh out a plan for changes that will be presented to the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements. One consideration will be how to determine what pending legislation is critical enough that it can’t wait until 2024.

“Critical is in the eyes of the beholder,” Jennings said in response to a question from the Rev. Charles Graves of the Diocese of Texas, though the design team will work with legislative committee chairs to prioritize the resolutions assigned to them. Jennings later added that she expected the top priorities will include proposals to the 80th General Convention by the Presiding Officers’ Working Group on Truth-Telling, Reckoning and Healing. Bishops and deputies also are expected to vote to consent to the reunion, or merger, of the dioceses of Texas and North Texas.

> Rev. Charles Graves of #excoun asks how #gc80 will prioritize legislation to be handled. @gaycjen says Dispatch of Biz committees already looking for ways to poll legislative committees on this issue. #Episcopal
>
> — HoD News (@DeputyNews) May 11, 2022

Curry and Jennings did not specify a timeline for making final decisions but said church leaders would work quickly and efficiently, with General Convention less than two months away.

The joint standing committee further discussed the presiding officers’ preliminary proposal at its May 11 meeting. Maryland Bishop Eugene Sutton, a member of the joint standing committee, acknowledge his diocese’s disappointment at a scaled down General Convention

as well as the potential financial lost with about $25,000 committed to local vendors. Even so, “it is the responsible way to go,” he said.

“Obviously this is hard, and this is going to be very hard for Baltimore. It’s going to be hard for the Diocese of Maryland. But we understand,” Sutton said. “We’ve all had to experience this in the last two years; we all wanted to get together, and we just can’t.”

– David Paulsen is an editor and reporter for Episcopal News Service. He can be reached at dpaulsen@episcopalchurch.org.