

Final Executive Council meeting before 80th General Convention reviews a church in flux

BY EGAN MILLARD | Episcopal News Service | Posted Apr 20, 2022

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry speaks to Executive Council on April 20, 2022, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo: Egan Millard/Episcopal News Service.

[Episcopal News Service – San Juan, Puerto Rico] The Executive Council of The Episcopal Church kicked off its April 20-23 meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, its last meeting under its current makeup. The body’s mandate is to implement the policies of General Convention, which convenes July 7-14 in Baltimore, Maryland, where new members will be elected.

The meeting opened with an address from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, who discussed the results of the recent national poll commissioned by his office and what they mean for the future of the church. The results of the poll, conducted by Ipsos, were released in March and indicate wide discrepancies between how Christians view themselves and how they are viewed by non-Christians. Curry, referencing the safety signs throughout the London Underground, urged council members to “mind the gap.”



“I think our British cousins are right about this,” Curry remarked. “It’s not just an intellectual exercise. [It means,] pay attention to it. And then navigate so that you transcend the gap and get on the train.”

In this case, the gap is illustrated by the characteristics that Christians associate with themselves – “giving,” “compassionate,” “loving” and “respectful” – versus the traits that non-Christians associate with Christians: “hypocritical,” “judgmental,” “self-righteous” and “arrogant.”

“This could be a moment of despair,” Curry said, “or actually, as President [of the House of Deputies, the Rev. Gay Clark] Jennings may have intimated, a moment of hope. Because in this problem is embedded a possibility. In what looks like something to throw up our hands may actually be something to open our hands.”

Curry shared his hope that The Episcopal Church “minds the gap and gets on the train.”

“That church has a message for this or any age,” he said. “And that church has a future, whether its statistics rise or fall. I’m not worried about The Episcopal Church because it has been around a long time. This movement of Jesus that we call church has been an underground Harriet Tubman movement in its first centuries. It has been part of the Roman Empire in its later centuries. It has been up, it’s been down, it’s been established, it’s been disestablished, but like the Mississippi River, like Old Man River, it will just keep rolling along.”

Jennings gave her final address to council as president of the House of Deputies; her successor will be elected at the 80th General Convention in July. Noting that this is the 49th Executive Council meeting she has attended, Jennings reflected on her time as president, serving three terms starting in 2012.

“I give thanks that I have served the House during a pivotal time of generational transition in our church’s leadership. For the past 10 years, I’ve been fortunate, very fortunate to know, to appoint, to support and work alongside many leaders whose lives, experiences and perspectives The Episcopal Church has too often disregarded: young people, laywomen, genderqueer people, people of color, and so many others.”

Passing the torch, Jennings thanked “the new generation of leaders who are rising up to lead our church ... I’m inspired by the love that so many of these younger people have for our church and their creative thinking about how to change our governance structures while holding fast to our identity.”

In his regular report, Kurt Barnes, the church’s treasurer and chief financial officer, painted an overall positive picture of church finances. For fiscal year 2021, overall income was in line with expectations, with diocesan assessments slightly higher than expected because several dioceses increased their commitments to 15% and there were fewer requests for waivers. A pandemic-related \$3 million Paycheck Protection Plan loan from the federal government in 2020 has been forgiven, turning those funds from a liability to an asset.

With overall spending in line with expectations, there was a surplus of \$4.8 million for fiscal year 2021, and of \$16.3 million for the 2019-2021 triennium. Of that surplus, \$2.5 million was reserved for 2022 General Convention costs, since it did not happen as scheduled in 2021. A further \$2.3 million of the surplus was rolled over to the 2022 budget, and \$5 million for 2023-24. The remaining \$6.5 million will be allocated to the church’s trust funds and short-term reserves.

The church’s net return on investments for fiscal year 2021 was above target at 9.7%. However, the value of the church’s portfolio dropped about 10% in the first two months of 2022, part of a downturn in global markets precipitated by Russia’s invasion of

Ukraine. Barnes noted that long-term returns have remained positive through multiple economic crises, with 8.6% net annual returns over the last 30 years.

In the coming days, council will hear about the work that the Committee on Mission Within The Episcopal Church and the Ad Hoc Committee on Indigenous Boarding Schools have been doing on assessing and responding to the church's historical involvement with boarding schools that separated Native American children from their families and culture. Council will also hear a presentation on colonialism and racism in Puerto Rico and in The Episcopal Church.

“I hope that this conversation about the church’s complicity in colonialism will inform our continuing work to dismantle systemic racism and repent of the church’s role in Indigenous boarding schools,” Jennings said.

“I also look forward to being able to think with you about the way in which colonialism shapes relationships among leaders of the Anglican Communion as the Lambeth Conference approaches,” she added, referring to the decennial meeting of bishops from across the Anglican Communion that will take place July 26 to Aug. 8 in Canterbury, England. “I continue to think about – and maybe you do too – how we might best invest the resources we have to spend in the African community in light of both the legacy of colonialism and our clear commitment to opposing homophobia and transphobia.”

A review of council’s work since 2018 will close out the meeting as council members prepare for General Convention, though Jennings noted that much of the legislative committee work has already been done remotely.

“Thank you for that work,” Jennings said to the members of council who have also served on those committees. “This experiment – and it is an experiment – is one way to find out how our governance structures can be adapted and scaled to the reality of today’s church.”

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Photo caption: Presiding Bishop Michael Curry speaks to Executive Council on April 20, 2022, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo: Egan Millard/Episcopal News Service.