

General Convention committees to welcome public to first-ever online legislative hearings

BY DAVID PAULSEN

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[Episcopal News Service] The pandemic prompted dramatic changes in how The Episcopal Church will conduct its 80th General Convention – starting with its schedule. After a one-year delay, bishops and deputies will meet in person July 7-14 in Baltimore, Maryland, but there's no need to wait until July in Baltimore to offer input on resolutions. Committees are holding [some of their hearings online for the first time](#), beginning Feb. 17.

Some committees already have met on Zoom to organize themselves and to begin reviewing any resolutions already submitted. Episcopalians and other interested members of the public can sign up to observe those online meetings, and registration is now open to testify at online hearings, through a [process set up by the General Convention Office](#).

“I believe the good work we are seeing now, and the extra hours our deputies and bishops are spending before we gather in Baltimore, will greatly enhance our ability to discuss issues important to the church's mission and ministry,” the Rev. Michael Barlowe, the General Convention secretary, told Episcopal News Service by email.

Holding hearings months in advance of General Convention is possible this year because the pandemic's forced postponement of 80th General Convention from 2021 to 2022 meant reports and proposed resolutions [were ready for review much earlier in the process than normal](#). “It is also an example of our church's ability to adapt to the needs of the Gospel – something The Episcopal Church has been doing since 1785,” Barlowe said.

More than 120 bishops and 483 deputies [have been assigned to legislative committees](#) for the 80th General Convention. Committees officially began meeting last Nov. 1, and the designated period for [online hearings will be Feb. 17 to May 21](#). The first day of hearings

will take up resolutions in three committees: Agencies & Boards, Racial Justice & Reconciliation and Christian Formation & Discipleship.

Each proposed resolution is assigned to parallel committees made up of members of the House of Deputies and House of Bishops and tasked with one of [two dozen focus areas](#). The deputies' and bishops' committees typically meet as one committee to review their assigned resolutions. If the committee recommends a resolution, it advances for consideration separately by the full House of Deputies and House of Bishops, both of which must approve for a resolution to be ratified.

“In general, it’s a really good thing that we are trying this experiment to get things started early,” Louisa McKellaston, a deputy from the Diocese of Chicago, told ENS by phone. She chairs the House of Deputies Governance & Structure Committee, which held its first meeting on Zoom on Jan. 5 with its corresponding bishop committee. “We’ve been in this pandemic for almost two years. Folks are pretty much familiar with how things work electronically.”

The Agencies & Boards committee met Jan. 18 for introductions and to review the one resolution submitted so far for their consideration: [D003](#), which advocates creation of a fund to help under-resourced churches pay their clergy pension contributions.

“There was a lot of energy generated around that at this meeting,” Jane Cisluycis of the Diocese of Northern Michigan told ENS by email. She chairs the deputies' committee on Agencies & Boards, which will receive public testimony Feb. 17. “We look forward to welcoming deputies, bishops and others who wish to speak to this resolution.”

The new legislative committee process was outlined by House of Deputies Parliamentarian Bryan Krislock in a November [article on the House of Deputies website](#). “The goal of this process is to balance the need for public input with the need to frontload the legislative calendar,” Krislock wrote.

While interim bodies propose many of the resolutions, dioceses, bishops, deputies and other individuals also can propose resolution, up to three each. They are encouraged to submit resolutions by Feb. 28 for consideration during the pre-convention period of legislative activity.

Testimony during legislative hearings is not limited to bishops, deputies or even Episcopalians, but rather is open to the public. All that is required is advance registration; a computer, tablet or a smart phone; and an internet connection. Though no prior knowledge of is required, those wishing to testify may benefit from learning the General Convention basics.

What is General Convention?

General Convention is both the church's primary governing body and its largest churchwide gathering. It typically meets in a different city every three years and is a hub for legislative activity, networking and fellowship. As a [bicameral governing body](#), it splits its authority between the House of Bishops and House of Deputies.

Among its responsibilities is approval of a churchwide budget, as well as hundreds of additional resolutions covering everything from liturgical revisions to the church's positions on public policy issues, from food insecurity to paid family leave to comprehensive immigration reform. General Convention typically considers between 500 and 600 resolutions.

At the 80th General Convention, the House of Deputies also will elect a new president and vice president, roles that are limited to three consecutive terms. The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings is finishing her third term as president, and this is the final term for outgoing Vice President Byron Rushing. Each is serving one additional year because the in-person gathering in Baltimore was postponed.

Because organizers anticipate online committee hearings will reduce the number of in-person hearings needed, church leaders were able to shorten the 80th General Convention [from 10 to eight days, July 7-14](#), helping the church achieve its goal of [reducing the triennial gathering's duration](#).

Get up to speed with info in the Blue Book reports

Numerous reports make up what is known as the Blue Book, which summarizes the work of standing commissions, task forces and other interim bodies. The reports often are submitted to General Convention with suggested resolutions. In 2018, the reports

were released publicly in February, following the typical timeframe that allows a few months for committee review before General Convention in July.

Because the interim bodies completed their work as scheduled despite the postponement of the 80th General Convention, the General Convention Office was able to [post their Blue Book reports online starting in April 2021](#), giving committees and the public more than a year to review them.

A hard copy of the Blue Book is printed in three volumes, but it [also can be accessed here](#) as a PDF or as individual reports.

Track resolutions and committees with the Virtual Binder

Resolutions once were printed and included in physical binders for bishops and deputies to consult during their deliberations at General Convention. Now all that information, including calendars of committee activity, is offered in an [online format known as the Virtual Binder](#) that is maintained by the General Convention Office.

For people interested in viewing or testifying at committee hearings, the Virtual Binder provides the [full list of the 143 resolutions](#) submitted so far and the dates and times of upcoming meetings. [Make note of the hearing info](#) before signing up to attend.

Advance registration required for online meetings

No one will be allowed to join a committee meeting or hearing without [filling out an online registration form](#), specifying the committee name, date and time. Registration must be received at least two business days before the meeting.

McKellaston, the Chicago deputy, said that although she regrets that her committee's members won't be able to get to know each other in person until July, she welcomed the online meetings as an unprecedented opportunity for more people to observe and get involved in the legislative process.

"I'm enjoying being able to meet during times that hopefully more folks are available," she said. "We hope to hear from a broader audience."

The Governance & Structure committee will meet together on Feb. 9 to create subcommittees to review their nine proposed resolutions. McKellaston said they also plan to determine then which resolutions will go to the hearing scheduled on Feb. 23.

One of the resolutions, [A097](#), proposes conducting a thorough evaluation of this new online legislative process, “with the intent of creating a model for evaluation of future adaptive change experiments, recognizing that The Episcopal Church must continue to change and evolve in order to respond to God’s mission in all of its contexts.”

“Basically, [we are] looking at this as a wonderful experiment,” McKellaston said, “what works and what doesn’t and how to move forward.”

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