

Episcopal general convention focuses on racism, justice issues

by [Mary Frances Schjonberg](#) in the [August 10, 2022](#) issue



Gay Clark Jennings, whose term as president of the House of Deputies ended on July 11, and Presiding Bishop Michael Curry listen during the convention's budget presentation. (Photo by Scott Gunn)

The 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church—postponed a year because of COVID-19—conducted what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry had referred to during the planning process as “matters essential for the governance and good order of the church.”

Among those essential actions, the bishops and deputies approved the first reading of a constitutional change to clearly define the Book of Common Prayer and continued the church’s commitment to reckoning with its history of racism.

The convention adopted a balanced \$100.5 million church-wide budget, and much of the new spending in the budget was tied to resolutions related to addressing racism. Central among them was Resolution A125, for which the budget includes \$400,000 in start-up funds for a new Episcopal Coalition for Racial Equity and Justice.

The budget plan also includes spending \$225,000 on research to confront the Episcopal Church's historic ties to the federal system of Indigenous boarding schools, as outlined in Resolution A127. Resolution A086 allocates money toward the development of programs that respond to eco-justice concerns, address environmental racism, and work to alleviate environmental burdens on Indigenous communities.

The convention approved the first reading of a constitutional change to define the Book of Common Prayer. If the change passes a second reading at the next general convention in 2024, the Book of Common Prayer would be defined as "those liturgical forms and other texts authorized by the General Convention." In other words, liturgies that are not in the current prayer book—such as same-sex marriage rites and gender-expansive liturgies—could be elevated to "prayer book status."

For the first time in history, two women will lead the House of Deputies.

Oklahoma lay deputy Julia Ayala Harris was elected president on July 9. Ayala Harris is the first Latina and the youngest person elected to lead the house. Deputies elected Rachel Taber-Hamilton as vice president the following day. Taber-Hamilton, who is Shakan First Nation, is the first Indigenous and first ordained woman to serve as vice president.

Ayala Harris and Taber-Hamilton are the first people of color serving together as leaders of the House of Deputies.

The bishops and deputies also took a stand on several social justice issues.

The convention passed a resolution "affirming that all Episcopalians should be able to access abortion services and birth control with no restriction on movement, autonomy, type, or timing."

The convention also adopted resolutions to offer paid family leave and health insurance to lay and clergy church employees through the Denominational Health Plan. The convention spoke out against gun violence, passing resolutions on ghost

guns, urging advocacy for state legislation against gun violence, and commending investment in community violence intervention to prevent gun violence.

COVID-19 hovered over the gathering. About 1,200 people attended—typically as many as 10,000 people participate—and they had to provide proof of vaccination and conduct rapid tests in their hotel rooms each morning. All participants received five test kits the day they registered at the Baltimore Convention Center. They had to wear masks indoors and there was no exhibit hall, a space typically filled with displays from vendors and Episcopal-related ministries.

By the end of the convention, there were 32 reported COVID-19 infections, according to Rodney Coldren, who served as public health adviser to the House of Deputies.

“COVID-19 is doing exactly what it does: it multiplies,” he told the House of Deputies the morning of July 11.

He added that, using a conservative model, he would have expected 76 cases if protective measures such as masking and daily self-testing had not been taken.

“Know that what you have done really has protected your fellow deputies,” he said.
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