

While we work to share information we also want to emphasize the importance of deepening relationships between the members, clergy, and leadership bodies of our dioceses as we move through this process and potentially into reunification. Our Committee members have witnessed several cross-diocesan experiences and in addition to each experience revealing what one committee member describes as, “We actually like each other!”, we are also seeing how much potential we have moving forward together.

What would we call the new Diocese if we reunify?

The dioceses of Eastern & Western Michigan voted recently to juncture, took a water-related approach to this question and will soon become the “Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes.” Along this journey we’ve had similar inclinations and have learned that the Susquehanna River runs through both of our Dioceses. It is our understanding that the Susquehannock people were known as the “people of the muddy river.” We’re a baptismal people striving through challenging, muddy times to be the Episcopal Church here and now. Maybe this will be a fit?

Our Committee has had fun throughout this process considering possible names and we will be inviting input from around both dioceses soon. Stay tuned for opportunities to offer your ideas and thoughts!

Share your comments and questions with us via the website at <https://reunificationdiobethdiocpa.org/feedback/>



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The
EPISCOPAL CHURCH in
CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA



The Episcopal
Diocese of Bethlehem

Frequently Asked Questions and Concerns Around Possible Reunification from the Reunification Discernment Committee

A significant part of our Committee’s work involves listening to the questions and concerns around possible reunification that come to us from around the dioceses and responding when we can. This FAQ speaks to the most common questions we receive with the information that we have now.

As we continue to develop possible models for a reunified diocese and receive further input on them, we will be able to add more detail. Please keep sharing your questions and concerns with us! Our Committee will continue to update this document as our work progresses.

Be sure to visit the reunification discernment website at <https://reunificationdiobethdiocpa.org/> for the latest information and updates. The 2023 Convention Reunification Discernment Committee Report to Convention and Convention Presentation are also available.

Diocesan Size, Bishops, and Staffing

Wouldn’t reunification create a diocese that is too big?

A reunified Diocese would be about 21,000 mi.², roughly the size of West Virginia. To put that into context, West Virginia is geographically, the 41st largest state in the union. There are currently twenty-six dioceses in The Episcopal Church (TEC) that encompass an entire state and they include some of the largest states like Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Oklahoma and Minnesota. Even Maine is about a third larger than a reunified diocese would be. Geographic size is not a primary factor in determining the health and vibrancy of a diocese.

When asking this question, Minnesota is a good diocese for us to look at more closely. They have about the same number of congregations as would a reunified diocese here, although Minnesota is almost four times larger. They have one diocesan bishop, Bishop Craig Loya, who will be joining us at our joint Clergy Retreat

in May. Bishop Loya will talk with us about the ways in which they have recently adapted their structures and understandings to better serve the mission and ministries of that vibrant diocese while inviting us to reflect on our experiences here. Know that Minnesota is a reunified diocese with the two dioceses of that state having come back together as one in 1943.

We're concerned that we won't see the Bishop if we reunify. How would visitations work in a diocese of that size?

Part of the work of the Reunification Discernment Team is to model out possible visitation patterns to see what would work in order to ensure that parishes are visited by and connected to their bishop. We are also considering ways in which diocesan staff will be dispersed through the new dioceses likely serving in diocesan "hubs" to ensure that diocesan support is regularly available for parishes in times of particular need such as transition or crisis, and to offer pastoral and collegial support to our clergy.

Bishops Scanlan and Nichols are in conversations with bishops throughout TEC who serve larger dioceses to learn from them. Other dioceses are trying models that include longer regional visits, where a bishop is present for a time in one area and visitations and gatherings happen there throughout that period, not all on a Sunday morning. While our bishops and Committee learn about best practices, know it is also the hope that should a decision be made to reunify, for the first two to three years there would be more than one bishop (a Diocesan with either an Assistant or Assisting Bishop) present. Any transition into a new model would be gradually implemented, leaving time for us and our structures to adjust to fit the needs of our congregations and clergy. To start, our bishops have designed a two year and a three year visitation cycle.

What about our Bishops Scanlan and Nichols? We can only have one Bishop, right?

Bishops Scanlan and Nichols have been very clear from the very beginning of this process that they did not want the decision about reunification to be centered around them or their futures. Their commitment is for a vibrant and stable presence of the Episcopal Church here for years to come. We also acknowledge the transition this will be for both dioceses, their people, and our current bishops.

Built into any model there must be the ability to transition with our current bishops and to be able to adapt, as fits the needs of the new diocese and our bishops' gifts and callings as this unfolds. To clarify, a diocese may only have one Diocesan Bishop but it is possible to have an Assistant or Assisting Bishop serving with them.

As we explore options, the model rising to the top is that if reunification is approved in October 2024, one of our current bishops would become Diocesan Bishop at the point

congregations and clergy have the ability to Zoom.

As I listen to members of the reunification discernment team and my bishop, it sounds like this is a done deal.

We can assure you that this is a process of ongoing discernment and discovery, because it is for us too. None of us came into this certain of an outcome and have remained open to options throughout. The need for additional discernment is why this Committee requested an additional year for this process at our diocesan conventions in 2023.

Our bishops have now spent nearly three years discussing and discerning reunification. Our Committee leaders have been walking closely together for sixteen months, gathering data, listening to stories, wrestling with possibilities, and having conversations with others around TEC. The Committee has learned a great deal about the cultures of each diocese as well as the multi-cultural realities within each diocese. We have also come to value the similarities and complementary natures of our ministries. It is true that this is not a simple decision. It might, however, become a clear one which is how thoughtful, prayerful discernment works.

You may hear excitement from us around the possibility of reunification because we are beginning to see how the pieces could come together to form a stronger way forward for us all. We see extraordinary ministry taking place in our congregations. We see diverse strengths among us. We could make a greater impact as single, larger, entity rather than two smaller ones and we are busy exploring if our financial resources could be better stewarded as one.

The Diocese of Central Pennsylvania offers the Stevenson School for Ministry, Anti-gun violence efforts, as well as Creation Care ministries that are vibrant. The Diocese of Bethlehem has newly planted Latinx ministries and a seventeen-year partnership in Kajo Keji, South Sudan. Each Diocese has racial justice and reconciliation ministries, but our approaches are different and our committees are already learning from one another.

We don't feel like we know enough yet about this possibility to know if we support it.

Please keep asking your questions because we are all learning too. Our Committee is aware that one of the greatest challenges right now is the information gap that exists among congregants and members of the Committee. We launched a reunification website in November and now have a more developed communications plan in place in an effort to share information broadly and consistently.

Please visit <https://reunificationdiobethdiocpa.org/> regularly to see the latest!

We need to do better and think bigger than “stable for now.” We need to hope, plan and pray for a strong presence for generations yet to come.

Will parish assessments/fair giving increase or decrease if we reunify?

We know that almost every parish stretches to meet the costs of supporting diocesan structures, ministries, and staff and that both dioceses have done work recently to come to an understanding and level of assessment that fits them, for now. We are committed to increasing resources available to our parishes, not reducing them. If reunification were looking as if it would cost more than staying separate rather than less, we would have already concluded that reunification is a bad idea.

Our dioceses have two different assessment models. Bethlehem has a 12% assessment with 3% optional “Acceptance.” Central Pennsylvania assesses 10% on the first \$200,000 of operating income and 2% additional on income above this amount. This Committee is working on ways in which we could reunify with the goal of a unified budget and a single assessment model to implement in 2026.

One of the things we’ve learned is that if we simply combined our diocesan budgets as they currently stand, with current income and expenses staying equal, we would have a fine starting point for a new diocese. We also know that there will be attrition and retirements among staff and that if we reunify, we would be running one diocesan system rather than two, a cost savings. Over the course of the transition period and as these various models for staffing and other structures evolve, we will be able to add more detail to this plan. What we are beginning to see with more clarity is that as one diocese, with combined resources we are far less fragile than as two and the potential for longer term viability and vibrancy increase with reunification.

Reunification Discernment Process

Why did we separate in the first place and why are we looking at Reunification now?

In the early 1900s when we decided to separate, transportation was a major issue. It was daunting and time consuming to travel distances by railroad and buggy. Smaller geographic areas made sense then. The Church was also growing in numbers and expanding its mission as the population of our areas was increasing. The shifting realities of church demographics, advances in technology and travel today make it much easier to connect with each other. Even a reunified diocese would have very few locations that would be more than two hours away from a bishop’s home base. The pandemic was a huge challenge for us as church but through it we did learn some of the benefits of being able to meet virtually and connect from distances with ease. For example, a bishop can be present for an urgent vestry matter much more quickly, providing even more support than previously possible, as almost all

of our actually becoming the new diocese. Depending on their ongoing discernments, the other could be appointed Assistant Bishop. We want to honor Bishop Scanlan’s commitment to retire in Fall 2027 and also need to recognize it’s possible that one of our bishops could be called elsewhere as this process continues.

The reunified diocese would host its first search and election process on a timeline to be determined by the Diocesan Bishop and Standing Committee of the new diocese. This model aligns with both Bishop Scanlan’s and Bishop Nichols’ hopes for this discernment and potential reunification process and the sense they each have of their own ministry and calling.

If we move to a new central diocesan office, won’t that mean that staff members will have to relocate or leave their jobs?

The bishops are committed to supporting their existing staff members and making sure that the transition is as smooth as possible for everyone involved. It’s also important to note that these staff configurations will evolve regardless of whether or not we become one diocese and that’s always been true. Staff members retire or leave or we recognize the need to adapt our staff for any number of reasons related to the mission and ministry of the diocese. Moving forward there will be change, even shifts of positions or responsibilities regardless of the decision to reunify. Even if we remain separate dioceses, staffing will not remain as is over a longer haul.

A reunified Diocese will likely have more than one office location with something like “hubs” in the different regions utilizing space in church buildings or other locations. There would perhaps be one main office for administrative needs, but “the diocese” would exist throughout the diocese.

In a reunified diocese, some staff would be dispersed - learnings from our Canon Missioner (Bethlehem) and Regional Canon to the Ordinary (Central PA) experiences show great excitement about the possibility of staff being embedded in the various regions of the diocese. Other staff would be more centralized - those administrative roles that serve the diocese as a whole. Our staff and leadership bodies already meet both in-person and virtually so we know that capacity is there.

The central office has already evolved beyond what it used to be. By acknowledging that reality and further adapting to the current needs and ways of operating, we can save on costs. The Diocese of Bethlehem already shares its Diocesan Office with the leadership team of New Bethany, a local outreach ministry that began as an offshoot of the Diocese of Bethlehem and is now is a separate 501 (C) (3) non-profit entity. A transition plan would include exploring the repurposing of Diocesan House in Harrisburg. We imagine that through transition, existing offices will be reimaged for future viability.

Actual models for staffing are being worked out, again remaining committed to current

staff while also recognizing that there will be attrition as we move forward. It will ultimately be the next diocesan bishop who determines the staffing needs of a future Diocese. As a Committee, we will make recommendations related to moving through transition well and creating a strong foundation for a faithful, vibrant future of the Episcopal Church in our part of Pennsylvania.

Diocesan Structure, Cathedrals, and Congregations

Don't we have two cathedrals and two pro-cathedrals? What happens with those?

Our Committee is currently seeking feedback from our Cathedral Deans and communities as well as staff and leadership bodies. One model being considered (resembling the plan adopted by the three Episcopal dioceses reunifying this year in Wisconsin) involves keeping both cathedrals functioning as such. We have also recently learned that Pro-Cathedrals are designated by the bishop, and so we could maintain the two we have and the future Diocesan Bishop would engage decisions around maintaining or shifting away from those designations.

There will be a lot for us to learn in the early phases of being one diocese, should reunification be approved. Rather than introducing too much change in the early stages of the life of the new diocese, we could leave room for those learnings to feed into the future evolution of the cathedral structures.

How would reunification affect my congregation? We are a small rural, but vibrant community.

Both of our dioceses (and many dioceses around TEC) are composed of a majority of small churches.

The hope is that by restructuring diocesan resources, more resources will make their way to the local community either in the form of staff support, assessment relief, or expanded granting. Both the Shaped by Faith initiative (Central Pennsylvania) and the new Convocation / Assembly model and Mission Resource Committee (Diocese of Bethlehem) are bringing needed partnership resources into our communities.

The Canon Missioner model (adapted for a reunified diocese) could also afford greater pastoral and leadership support to clergy and congregations as an extension of the ministry of the Bishop. The day-to-day functioning of each congregation would likely not change dramatically whether we reunify or not... Folks may travel a little further to gatherings like Diocesan Convention, but we will also meet new colleagues and have better networks of support for each of our particular kinds of congregations and ministries. Should we reunify, the possibilities of learning from one another and discovering a vital future open up more broadly.

What about Constitutions and Canons? Are they similar or do our dioceses do things very differently? Wouldn't it take years to bring this all together?

A subgroup of the Discernment committee has been studying the Constitutions and Canons of both of our dioceses. They are now working with other leaders from both Dioceses, including chancellors and other legal experts. Their initial findings are that our Canons are quite similar. They are identifying places in which our Canons differ, clarifying why they do, and will be seeking feedback from our bishops and leadership bodies in terms of what is working well and what is not in our current canons. This Team is also exploring best practices from throughout TEC to possibly adapt and incorporate here. They will ultimately be drafting the Constitution and Canons for a new diocese to assist in the discernment and decisions around reunification.

Diocesan Finances and Parish Giving

I never heard that our diocese was struggling. I thought we were financially solid.

It is true that both Diocese are financially stable, for now. And yet, trends and a complex set of realities are motivating leaders in the Episcopal Church and other churches to explore partnerships that will strengthen their long-term viability. Those trends and realities are here too demanding our attention.

To continue as is, would mean that looking forward, there are significant reasons for concern. Both of our dioceses are running leaner than might be best so that we can keep assessments, budgets, endowment draws, and spending from other funds as low as possible. It is in the best interest of both dioceses to make adaptations now, while we're still strong in order to avoid having to make such complex decisions when we're not.

It is not new news, but it is hard news to accept that assessments and financial giving which compose a high percentage of our revenue is trending downward, as is membership and regular Sunday attendance in both dioceses. We do see growth in the outreach and justice ministries of each diocese and in some parishes and partnerships that exist. We also see strength and vibrancy in many of our smaller parishes and we see passion, vision, hope in lots of places around both dioceses. Reunification could allow us to build upon our current strengths and also leverage and better steward resources for the future.

There is overlap and redundancy between our core structures, as well as limitations in our ministries because of aging and diminishing size. We envision a smaller, but vibrant presence of the Episcopal Church in the future and a larger, more agile and dynamic entity (the diocese) that unites us, providing new opportunities for the future.