



August 14, 2023

Commemoration of Jonathan Daniels, Martyr

To ++Michael, Julia, Rachel+, the Executive Office of the General Convention, the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements, the Special Committee on the Rules of Order on the House of Deputies, all members of the Executive Council, all bishops, priests, deacons, and all those faithful who call The Episcopal Church their faith community:

To all God's beloved community –

A few months ago, reflecting on the recent 80<sup>th</sup> General Convention (2022), The Consultation wrote to the Church about the “losses inflicted on the Body that is the Church in order to complete the convention’s essential legislative business in such a short time – a loss of time for building collaborative community, and the stress and pressure of what was functionally, for some, a multi-month convention.”

Here at the midway point in this short biennium between the General Conventions in Baltimore and Louisville, elected deputies recently received the House of Deputies July 2023 newsletter, with news that a five-person Special Committee on the Rules of Order is proposing major rules changes for the House of Deputies to enshrine temporary changes from 2022, including practices that deprived us of that collaborative community.

We urge all deputations (and bishops) to read these proposals and to attend the forum scheduled for September 8, 2023, at 3:00 p.m. ET, as they would have a major impact on the nature and functioning of the General Convention.

Our concerns about these proposals are threefold, and center on our long-term commitment to Becoming Beloved Community:

- 1) The cumulative effect of these proposals would undercut the spirit of relationality that is the heartbeat of governance at the General Convention and would negatively affect historically marginalized communities, in particular.
- 2) Overall, these proposals would reduce deputy voice, especially the voice of lay deputies.
- 3) Several of the proposals are not in good order.

### **Losing a Spirit of Relationality**

As Christians, we are relational and embodied people with a mission for reconciliation. If online gatherings were fully equivalent to being in person, everyone would still attend online church in their pajamas! But we know there is grace in being together in person. There are also measurable, beneficial, physical effects, as social neuroscience teaches us. At the General Convention, we feel the Spirit at work in the gathering, in the relationships formed, the responses of people in the room, the chance meetings later in the Convention hallway or the Exhibit Hall, in the peace offered in the Eucharist, and in the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ.

We have seen that often the best work of the General Convention has emerged from the work of committees deliberating together in heartfelt conversation. Especially in historically marginalized communities, folks with good reason to believe that their voices will not be heard in our Church have often found their collective voice in those gathered spaces.

We remember the legislative committee response in 2015 to the horrific murder of worshippers at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, just days before Convention started—leading to new funding for racial reconciliation and a resolution, led by the deputation from Mississippi, to remove Confederate battle flags from display in our churches.

We remember the special legislative committee in 2000, with members reflecting a wide range of experiences and views in a charged moment for our Church who found themselves able to put forward a resolution acknowledging the faithfulness and good conscience of same-sex couples in the Church—at the time, an important statement and way station on the way toward full inclusion of lesbian and gay couples in our marriage rites.

We remember when TransEpiscopal brought over half a dozen trans-identified people to testify for legislation before two different committees in 2009. In previous conventions, the one or two transgender witnesses seeking to testify had experienced dismissive attitudes and even scorn from legislative committees; this time, deputies and bishops approached the group after the hearings and sought out time for conversation. This was the year that a resolution on civil rights for transgender people actually passed the General Convention—an historic achievement.

Each of these examples from our shared history reminds us of our call to be people who stand with the marginalized and the under-resourced, especially in doing the work of the Church. In relationship is where we can magnify the voices of people who have been silenced by our systems.

### **Diminished Deputy Voice**

We support holding some committee hearings online; it is a wonderful way to include the voices of people who wish to testify but cannot travel to the Convention. Under existing House rules, there is no reason a committee could not hear online testimony on resolutions filed by a certain date as a helpful process for receiving feedback from around the Church.

However, the proposed requirement for committees to complete all their work before Convention is onerous and will diminish the voice of lay deputies in our Church governance. In 2022, we rarely saw full committee attendance for any given hearing. The scheduling issue for many deputies,

compounded by our Church's huge range of time zones, is fundamentally rooted in the busyness of people's lives outside of Convention. That is a dispersed problem that cannot be solved with a technological fix on the back end of the General Convention Office.

As we witnessed in the months prior to the 80th General Convention, most workers, students, and caregivers do not have flexible schedules to sit in Zoom meetings in the middle of multiple working days over many months. For the General Convention, deputies have already arranged to be there; the General Convention Office also provides childcare, and most dioceses reimburse deputies for expenses. It is a significant commitment, but the parameters are clear and arranged ahead of time. Under the proposed changes, this work will remain a significant commitment, but one that does not lend itself to work, school, caregiving, or vacation scheduling practices for most people who function in the world outside of the Church. From what we saw in 2022, this will mean that lay deputies, unless they are privileged to make their own schedules, will struggle to show up to participate meaningfully in committee deliberation.

These proposals would also remove power from legislative committees, for example, to submit legislation once the House convenes or to remove legislation from the consent calendar for debate. Up to now, deputies have had the clearest opportunity to participate in Convention through the work of legislative committees, both as members and witnesses; in such a large House, with most resolutions on the consent calendar, most deputies will never go to the microphone. With legislative committee power reduced and action on the vast, chilly House floor largely scripted already by Dispatch, why should lay deputies take the time to go to Louisville when, for the most part, they will not have a voice there?

At a time when the cries of the disenfranchised are ignored, migrants are told to go away, rights for women and transgender people are being removed by judicial fiat, and while members of our Church are raising voices in protest of voter suppression in our cities, how can we as people of faith and the Church assembled defend the elimination of the rights of our deputies and others in the in-person participation and debate of at least one hearing during the first two days of our convention in Louisville? Discouraging the broadest possible inclusion of the many voices in our Church ignores our aspiration to be Beloved Community.

### **Not in Good Order**

As we plunged into a drastically shortened "Covid Convention" in Baltimore in 2022, deputies went along with the implementation of out-of-order pre-convention rule changes in good faith, understanding that they would not be permanent. Although Covid is still with us and will be for a long time, we are not in an emergency now. We can think of no reason why House rules may be imposed before deputies have a chance to debate and vote on them, and we must not allow this practice to become normative.

Furthermore, these changes would also affect the House of Bishops since, in practice, deputies and bishops meet together in parallel committees to hear testimony and discuss legislation. For committees to finish their business ahead of Convention as proposed, bishops would also be asked to attend hours of committee hearings and discussion meetings online in advance of Convention. In that sense, these proposed changes are not only addressing the House of Deputies but the whole of the General Convention.

Ensuring fundamental fairness, adherence to agreed-upon processes, and broad inclusion are marks of the Beloved Community.

We find ourselves in a transition that is touching and engaging all of us, and has not spared some generations, races, gender identities, ethnicities, or orders. The Church is called to adapt, prioritizing greater inclusion in order to reflect the fullness and wholeness of God. We urge that we aim to balance our desire for efficiency with the admission that the inefficiencies of inclusive processes can create space for voices and issues we need to hear, including the voice of the Holy Spirit.

In the love and fellowship of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, for The Consultation:

Tivaun Cooper, Diocese of New York (Lay Deputy)  
Nell Gibson, Diocese of New York  
Harry Gunkel, Diocese of Texas  
Sarah Lawton, Diocese of California (Lay Deputy)  
Ellen Lindeen, Diocese of Chicago (Lay Deputy)  
Amy McCreath, Diocese of Massachusetts  
Joe McDaniel, Diocese of Central Gulf Coast  
Eric Metoyer, Diocese of California (Clergy Deputy)  
Ruth Meyers, Diocese of California (Clergy Deputy)  
Carolyn Mok, Diocese of Rochester (Lay Deputy)  
Cameron Partridge, Diocese of California (Alternate Clergy Deputy)  
Diane B. Pollard, Diocese of New York (Lay Deputy)  
Demi Prentiss, Diocese of Colorado  
Paul Ricketts, Diocese of Northern Indiana (Lay Deputy)  
Byron Rushing, Diocese of Massachusetts (Former Vice-President of the House of Deputies)  
Laura Russell, Diocese of Newark (Lay Deputy)  
Columba Salamony, Diocese of Rochester  
Tieran Sweeny-Bender, Diocese of Olympia (Lay Deputy)  
Warren Wong, Diocese of California (Lay Deputy)

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