

The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings
Province V Synod Address
Spring 2022

Hello! I am so sorry not to be with you in person in South Bend. By now, you have probably heard the news that I have COVID. And if you didn't know, you can probably hear it in my voice. But even though I am sorry not to be able to make the trip, I am very glad to be able to join you via Zoom. Thank you for inviting me to share your preparations for General Convention.

The 80th General Convention will be an unusual gathering, to put it mildly. By the time we gather in Baltimore in early July, it will have been four years since we were together, and in that time, many of us have endured times of unimaginable loss, isolation, sickness, and grief. We are longing to be together again, and at the same time, many of us are still cautious, aware that the pandemic is not yet over, and aware that we are not quite the same people we were when the gavel came down on the 79th General Convention in Austin.

This year, the rhythm of General Convention work is also different. Legislative committees began meeting last year, and work began in earnest several months ago. 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 and the lives of its leaders.

In the House of Deputies, we're learning a lot from this experiment. We're learning that the online tools available for church leaders to collaborate across time zones and geography need to be more intuitive and comprehensive; we're learning that people's lives, especially at this stage of the pandemic, don't necessarily adapt to hours of legislative committee meetings and hearings in addition to all of their daily responsibilities; we're learning that some committees, with modest workloads, are managing online work well, while others are straining under the load. And we are noticing that working together as we continue to experience pandemic-related grief and trauma is especially hard.

On the other hand, we are also seeing new relationships form via Zoom, new committee officers taking leadership and gaining experience and confidence in their roles, and new opportunities emerging for careful consideration and longer-term thinking about key initiatives and resolutions. We're seeing the advantages of having months, not hours, to consider the potential benefits and unintended consequences of proposals on every aspect of our common life. And we are hopeful that having a General Convention that is eight days instead of nine or ten will ease the strain on people who must take time away from family and work responsibilities to attend.

As I said, it is an experiment, and I commend to you [Resolution A097](#), submitted by the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church, which asks General Convention to direct Executive Council to evaluate this experiment thoroughly and professionally.

Although we have begun the legislative work of General Convention in advance, there is still a great deal to do to prepare for our time in Baltimore. As you know if you read the letter I sent to deputies and alternate deputies yesterday, much of those preparations relate to holding General Convention in the time of COVID.

My office is fielding many questions from deputies about how we will protect ourselves and our hosts against COVID-19 at General Convention; how we will handle travel delays caused by the possible need to quarantine; what kind of access to testing and medical support we will have while we are on site; and how we will handle a possible large-scale outbreak.

My staff and advisors and I are committed to making sure that we have appropriate COVID-19 protocols are in place in the House of Deputies, and we are working hard to respond to changing conditions. If you have questions about how we will handle COVID-19 issues or need support in making decisions about your own plans, please email my office at contact@houseofdeputies.org--that's contact@houseofdeputies.org--and we will do whatever we can to help. I also hope that I will continue to hear from deputies and alternate deputies about what you are thinking about COVID and General Convention. It is helpful for me to be able to share with the Presiding Bishop and with the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements what deputies are thinking and feeling about the pandemic and how it should affect our plans.

We all want to go about our lives normally, and many people are able to accept the risk of contracting COVID-19. It is surely the case that vaccines, boosters, and antiviral treatments have saved many lives, and I am very grateful that we have a vaccine requirement in place for General Convention.

But in the House of Deputies, we hear regularly from fully vaccinated people whose lives have been seriously compromised by long COVID; from people who live with and care for immunosuppressed people and children too young to be vaccinated; and from people whose age and health puts them at particular risk for serious infection, even after they are vaccinated and boosted. As we seek to follow Jesus in caring for the most vulnerable among us, I am committed to a House of Deputies that considers the needs and experiences of those who are most at-risk and values the voices of those who are not yet able to put COVID-19 behind them.

As we prepare for our time together in Baltimore, I am thinking about several key issues and events that I hope you will also think about and come prepared to discuss if you are a deputy or a bishop. Those items include:

- The elections of a new president and vice president of the House of Deputies. The canons specify that no person shall serve more than three consecutive terms as president or vice president, and since Vice President Byron Rushing and I are both now serving our third terms in office, there will be no incumbent running for reelection in either office. The next president of the House of Deputies will be elected, subject to the adoption of a special order of business by the House of

Deputies, in the afternoon legislative session on July 11, and the vice president will be elected on the afternoon of July 13. Deputies, you can look for candidate profiles and news about online candidate forums in upcoming issues of the House of Deputies newsletter.

- There are several major initiatives that have come out of efforts in recent years to dismantle systemic racism and gender-based discrimination, harassment and abuse. In particular, I urge you to study the proposal of the Presiding Officers' Working Group on Truth-Telling, Reckoning and Healing to create an Episcopal Coalition for Racial Equity and Justice, and the Blue Book report of the Task Force to Develop Churchwide Family Leave Policies. These proposals, along with many others, seek to move our church closer to being an equitable and just place for everyone, and I am grateful for the leaders who have worked so tirelessly to develop them even during the pandemic.
- Another key issue that General Convention will consider are resolutions resulting from the work of Executive Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Indigenous Boarding Schools as well as the Presiding Officers' Working Group on Truth-Telling, Reckoning and Healing. I hope that many of you have found opportunities to listen to the stories and perspectives of Indigenous Episcopalians whose family members spent time in the residential boarding schools that sought to deprive them of their cultures, languages, and families. If you have not yet had the opportunity, I commend to you the videos of this year's Winter Talk meeting, held via Zoom. You can find the videos on the Indigenous Ministries website of The Episcopal Church.
- A few minutes ago, I mentioned one resolution proposed by the House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church. I appointed this committee in 2018 to be an energetic think tank and incubator for adaptive thinking, innovative ideas, and fresh approaches to the church's leadership, organizational thinking, and common life, and I appointed only GenX and Millennial members. Province V's own Louisa McKellaston, three-time deputy from the Diocese of Chicago, is the vice-chair of this amazing group of leaders, and her work has been invaluable to helping all of us understand how our church can more fully participate in God's mission in these ever-changing times.

You can read all about the first part of the State of the Church committee's innovative work in their Blue Book report, but since that was submitted, they have been focusing on rethinking the way we understand and measure membership in the Episcopal Church.

Changes in denominational loyalty, broader cultural ideas about institutional membership, and changing worship practices mean that terms like "communicant in good standing" may no longer measure the full scope of congregational participation and ministry. They are proposing the creation of a Task Force to Re-envision Membership, and I hope you give it serious

consideration, especially as we continue grappling with what the post-pandemic church will be.

- Of course the budget is always a central issue at General Convention. But this year, in addition to passing a transitional budget for the years 2023 and 2024, General Convention will consider a proposal from the Task Force on the Budget Process that would change the way we develop the triennial budget and seek to increase its simplicity and transparency.

Most of all, I hope that at General Convention, you will look around to notice and listen to the young leaders who are emerging all around us to lead our church. As I look toward the end of my time as president of the House of Deputies, I give thanks that I have served the House during a pivotal time of generational transition in our church's leadership. For the past ten years, I have been fortunate to know, to appoint, to support, and to 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.

I can tell you two things from my work with these new leaders. The first is that the church is in good hands. People like me—people who have served faithfully for decades—can step aside knowing that the church we love will be well-tended, well-stewarded, and well-loved by those who come after us.

The second is that the new generation of leaders who are rising up to lead our church will change it, and that is all to the good. I am inspired by the love that so many of these young people have for our church, and their creative thinking about how to change our governance structures while holding fast to our identity as a church where authority is shared among laypeople, clergy and bishops.

We are no longer as large a church as we once were, we are no longer bound by needing to work only in face-to-face meetings and only in formal committee structures, and we are no longer well-served by many of the 20th century institutional structures that we still inhabit even when they hinder us and perpetuate the systemic racism we are committed to ending. Here in Province V, many of you have been embracing these new possibilities, finding new ways to work together through your networks, and you have much to share with the rest of the church as it confronts the demographic and cultural change that we have long been experiencing in the Midwest.

This change will not come easily—as you have probably heard me say before, my mother used to say that no one likes change except a wet baby. But change will come, and I am eager to see these young leaders make it happen.

Thank you for your ministry of governance and for your commitment to our church, especially in these difficult times. I am grateful to have been in ministry with you in Province V for so long, and I look forward to being with you in Baltimore.