

Third Round of Bilateral Dialogues: A Communiqué for Public Release

The Third Round of Bilateral Dialogues between the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) held its Winter 2023 meeting in Austin, Texas both in-person and on-line. All sessions began with morning and evening prayer, with celebration of the Eucharist on Thursday.

Those present in-person/online representing the Episcopal Church: The Rev. Canon Elise Johnstone (co-chair), the Rt. Rev. Bishop Eugene Sutton, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Wolyniak, Dr. Michael Booker. Staff: the Rev. Margaret Rose and Mr. Richard Mammana

Those present in-person/online representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Ruling Elder Dr. Anne Bond (co-chair), the Rev. Dr. Neal D. Presa (co-vice chair), the Rev. Terri Ofori, the Rev. Brian Entz, the Rev. Dr. Christian Boyd, the Rev. Dr. Robert Foltz-Morrison. Staff (attending the international ecumenical pilgrimage in South Sudan): Ruling Elder Dr. Dianna Wright

Although inclement weather caused electrical disruptions in the city and curtailed planned meetings at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the Dialogue was deeply blessed and benefited from invited participants to offer their perspectives and insights on the draft “Episcopal-Presbyterian Agreement on Local Sharing of Ministries” that was commended for study and feedback by the 80th General Convention (2022) of the Episcopal Church and the 225th General Assembly (2022) of the PC(USA). Invited guests included the Very Rev. Dr. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge (President/Dean and Professor of New Testament at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest), the Rev. Sarah Gaventa (Dean of Students at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary), the Rev. Matt Gaventa (Senior Pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Austin), the Rev. Sallie Watson (General Presbyter of the Mission Presbytery), and the Rev. David Simmons (Rector of St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin). The Rev. Dr. José Irizarry (President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary) joined the Dialogue for dinner fellowship.

Each of the invited participants shared how they engage in ecumenical formation and ministry collaboration in their particular contexts of ministry, and how the draft Agreement, if approved by the respective denominational entities, will further affirm the local cooperation that is already underway in many places between Episcopal and Presbyterian ministries. Conversation ensued about the liturgical aspects of the draft Agreement and the use of authoritative liturgical resources. There was common affirmation that the key to implementation of the Agreement will be careful and consistent communication between the diocesan bishop, regional presbytery, and local congregation. The Dialogue recognized that leading to the 81st General Convention (2024) and the 226th General Assembly (2024), there will need to be vivid and clear communication both within the legislative structures of the respective denominational polities and the public at-large of church membership as to what the Agreement seeks to do and what it is not. The Dialogue established a sub-team and preliminary plans for development of digital and video media communication tools

that will feature brief testimonials, endorsements, and succinct answers to frequently asked questions about the draft Agreement.

Dialogue member Dr. Michael Booker presented extensive U.S. demographic research conducted by Dr. Ryan Burge (Professor of Political Science at Eastern Illinois University) on level of religiosity among Americans in the last 20 years accounting for age, generational cohorts, socioeconomic condition, and gender. Some key findings of this research: while our respective denominations are aging and smaller than they once were, those who remain are faithful whereas those who don't identify as belonging to any church community don't see a necessity to do so; less of the so-called Generation Z (those born at the turn of the century) are religious but those who are are fervent in their faith commitment; nondenominational churches experienced a rise in membership but the rate of increase came from nondenominational members transferring to other nondenominational churches.

The Dialogue further reviewed the draft Agreement and formed a sub-team to draft edits that will be discussed at an online meeting of the Dialogue on March 29. A final in-person meeting will be held in the Fall 2023, at which point the Dialogue will finalize the Agreement, together with a final report and a proposal for a Fourth Round of Dialogues, that will be submitted to the respective denominational bodies for forwarding to the 81st General Convention (2024) and the 226th General Assembly (2024).