



UNITED METHODISTS

OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA & GREATER NEW JERSEY

Dear United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania,

I am hearing reports from clergy and superintendents that there is renewal across EPA as we emerge from the pandemic. New members, adult baptisms, and rising worship attendance. Thanks be to God for your faithfulness and leadership.

Today I share with you three important matters:

1. EPA's Strategic Direction.
2. Hurricane Ida relief efforts are making a difference in the lives of homeowners and volunteers.
3. Fifty churches have notified the annual conference of their intent to sue the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.

EPA Strategic Direction

Rather than wondering what is next, EPA is seizing God-sized opportunities to commit to a powerful and transformative future, to recruit and develop transformational leaders, to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and to double the number of vital mission congregations for the transformation of the world.

More than 80 churches, almost 25% of our congregations, are engaged in Pathway experiences to grow their vitality and engage more deeply in ministry with their community. The affiliation with the United Methodists of Greater New Jersey continues to progress, and EPA is already having a greater impact in New Jersey through our camping and retreat ministry, excelling in Pathways, our training programs, particularly in the area of sexual ethics, and in the communications area through our staff's writing and creative design.

GNJ is also strengthening EPA in areas of a regional team approach, training in coaching and mentoring leadership, and growing vitality. It is a win/win for both conferences and especially for God's mission in our region. You may read more about Pathways by selecting the following link: [PATHWAYS to Congregational Fruitfulness & Health](#).

We are hearing that people are concerned about change and the pace of change. I agree. I have never seen an organization and group of people who have mobilized and moved so quickly to pursue the opportunities that are being presented. The leadership and I are aware of the challenges, and we deeply appreciate all those who are helping us to move forward and trying new things through their congregations. Unprecedented times call for unprecedented actions. We will continue to listen to your feedback and adjust so that we are working together to glorify God through our mission.

Hurricane Ida Relief

We have set a goal to repair 55 homes and we are making progress. Presently, we are working on 27 homes. People in Philadelphia and in Chester, Montgomery and Delaware counties are turning to EPA to bring them hope, healing and repairs. Recently, two congregations from the Susquehanna Conference in Central Pennsylvania came to volunteer with us. They were so impressed with our efforts and impact that they went home and raised \$25,000 for our continued Ida relief and rebuilding efforts. Praise God!

Lawsuits

Earlier this week, EPA was notified that fifty churches filed a “writ of summons” against us. This indicates that the churches are seeking more information from us as they consider filing a formal lawsuit. These are congregations that decided not to use the United Methodist Book of Discipline’s paragraph 2553, that was added in 2019 to provide congregations time from 2019 through 2023 to leave The United Methodist Church through a disaffiliation process for reasons concerning ministry with and by LGBTQ persons. The churches communicated in a meeting this past fall that the 2553 route, which requires payments mandated by the General Conference and payments to cover the cost of disaffiliation for EPA, is “onerous.”

Prior to paragraph 2553’s insertion in The Book of Discipline in 2019, to leave the denomination with its property, a congregation was required to pay for its entire property and any other costs associated with leaving the denomination, based on the United Methodist Church’s trust clause. Paragraph 2553 of The Book of Discipline, including EPA’s own terms, reduced the cost to disaffiliate by as much as 75% or more, based on the denomination’s long-standing trust clause. You may read about the trust clause here: [What is the United Methodist Trust Clause?](#)

Several lawsuits have been filed against other annual conferences. You may read about these lawsuits by selecting the following link: [Courts uphold church-state separation in declining church disaffiliation lawsuits](#).

Our hearts are broken. The congregations that may pursue legal action are our friends, colleagues, and fellow United Methodists. They are doing significant ministry across EPA. We remain committed to work with the fifty congregations. We have already pledged that we will honor theological differences among all congregations in making appointments and in working with every congregation. You may read more about our covenanting process here: [EPA Covenanting Process](#).

We are prepared to work with every congregation, including the fifty who are exploring legal measures. Every congregation is important to me, the cabinet, and EPA leadership—to all of us.

We will fully comply with church law and civil law, as we work with the fifty congregations. Our legal team is reviewing and monitoring this developing situation, and we will keep you apprised of any developments as we move forward.

I invite each of you to keep in prayer our strategic direction, our Ida relief and recovery efforts, and the fifty congregations. God is seeing us through each of these challenges, and I am grateful for your prayers and support, as we work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ and grow vital mission congregations.

Keep the faith!

Bishop John Schol

You are welcome to share this email with your congregation.