

PEP Argument Briefing Paper

Title: Reunion Task Force Premature
Applicable to: Resolution 4 (Task Force on Reunion)
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Background

The “realignment” of October 2008 has resulted, for the moment at least, in an Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh of reduced size and resources. Nevertheless, the diocese has reorganized, is functioning with acceptable efficiency, and is about to approve the selection of a provisional bishop. The diocese is neither facing a crisis nor anticipating one. Notwithstanding, the resolution proposes forming a task force to consider uniting (or reuniting) the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Argument

- The Explanation attached to the resolution speaks of economic and demographic changes that have taken place in Western Pennsylvania in the past century, as well as changes resulting from the recent “realignment.” Sponsors have not, however, suggested why their study is needed. One would expect that a study of a plan would follow the recognition of a problem and the proposal of the plan as a means of addressing the problem. This resolution is a solution in search of a problem. One can imagine benefits of reunion—increased administrative efficiency, for example—but equally easy to imagine are drawbacks—increased travel costs and times, for instance. No real case for this resolution has been made.
- A recent Episcopal News Service story quotes a spokesperson from the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania as saying that no resolution about a reunion study is to be brought before that diocese’s November convention and that the diocese will not be interested in merging with another diocese “anytime soon.” The sponsors of this resolution have either not tried to generate interest in the Northwestern Pennsylvania diocese or have been unsuccessful in doing so. Without such interest, the proposed task force will be wasting its time.
- Whatever the merits of reunion, now is an inopportune time to initiate a study of it. As a result of litigation or other developments, the diocese could become markedly larger or wealthier. For the first time in many years, it will be led by a bishop who has no agenda outside the diocese. The changed situation a year from now could invalidate the analysis of any report prepared too early.
- In particular, changes in the condition of the diocese can be expected to affect the attractiveness of reunion in both dioceses. Pittsburgh’s legal exposure could be viewed negatively by Northwestern Pennsylvania, a situation that would change with favorable resolution of litigation. Such a change might make reunion less attractive from Pittsburgh’s viewpoint, however.

- Whereas it is true that, due to the downturn in the economy and losses of church membership, a number of dioceses, as well as The Episcopal Church itself, face economic difficulties that may require weak dioceses to merge, the Diocese of Pittsburgh has no pressing need for reunion to “save” it. We do have many problems to confront, however. It would be foolhardy to attempt to take on a leadership role in diocesan consolidation simply to demonstrate our forward thinking.
- The newly reorganized Pittsburgh diocese is still finding its true mission and character. Diverting attention even to considering reunion may abort the important process of discerning who we are and what we are called to do.
- The resolution sends the wrong message. We have seen at least one conservative commentator suggesting that this resolution is a sign that our diocese is in deep trouble. Although one might be inclined to dismiss such analysis as uninformed or as propaganda, it can have damaging effects, stiffening the intransigence of the realigned group or discouraging realigned individuals or parishes from returning to The Episcopal Church. It may even be demoralizing to our own parishioners, many of whom have worked hard to make the Diocese of Pittsburgh a viable institution.
- This resolution might be appropriate at some later time. It is to be hoped that any similar resolution in the future would be more focused, include a funding estimate, and be accompanied by some indication of interest from the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Supporting Information

Mary Frances Schjonberg. “PITTSBURGH: Diocese may consider reuniting with neighbor.” September 25, 2009, Episcopal Life Online, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81803_115018_ENG_HTM.htm.

David W. Virtue. “PITTSBURGH: Faux Episcopal Diocese Seeks Merger with Diocese of Northwestern PA.” September 18, 2009, Virtue Online, <http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=11218>.

Resolution (from *Preconvention Journal 2009*, pages C-3–C-4, <http://www.episcopalpgh.org/wp-content/uploads/file/Documents/2009%20DioConv/2009DioConventionPacketV3.pdf>):

4. Title: *Task Force on Reunion*

Resolved: that this 144th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh of the Episcopal Church direct the Standing Committee (or Ecclesiastical Authority) of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh to form a broadly based task force, including at least three clergy and three lay persons, to study the possibility of the reunion of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Episcopal Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania under the provisions of Title I, canon 10, section 6 of the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, 2006 [see below], and to prepare a report on the results of that study and any recommendations to the 145th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, in the fall of 2010. The Task Force shall consider specifically the potential long-term impact of such reunion on the financial and administrative resources of the two dioceses, and shall invite the Bishop and Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania to participate in the study.

Explanation: The division of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, to create the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Episcopal Diocese of Erie, in the early 20th century took place in an era of growth in population and industry—and in church membership—in both the northern and southern quadrants of Western Pennsylvania. In the intervening century much has changed in both regions in terms of economics and demographics. In what was the Diocese of Erie (now the Episcopal Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania) there has been a significant decline of population. In the Diocese of Pittsburgh the Episcopal Church itself has experienced unprecedented change following the “realignment” and departure from the Episcopal Church of many clergy and congregations. This resolution, making no prior assumptions about any result, directs that one part of planning for the future of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh at this critical time should include a reconsideration of the early-20th century division of Western Pennsylvania into two dioceses and an exploration of the possible benefits of a reunion of the two dioceses at this time.

Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, Title I, Canon 10, Section 6 (2006):

Sec. 6 (a) When a Diocese, and another Diocese which has been formed either by division therefrom or by erection into a Diocese or a Missionary Diocese formed by division therefrom, shall desire to be reunited into one Diocese, the proposed reunion must be initiated by a mutual agreement between the Conventions of the two Dioceses, consented to by the Ecclesiastical Authority of each Diocese. If the said agreement is made and the consents given more than three months before the next meeting of the General Convention, the fact of the agreement and consents shall be certified by the Ecclesiastical Authority and the Secretary of the Convention of each Diocese to all the Bishops of the Church having jurisdiction and to the Standing Committees of all the Dioceses; and when the consents of a majority of such Bishops and of a majority of the Standing Committees to the proposed reunion shall have been received, the facts shall be similarly certified to the Secretary of the House of Deputies of the General Convention, and thereupon the reunion shall be considered complete. But if the agreement is made and the consents given within three months of the next meeting of the General Convention, the facts shall be certified instead to the Secretary of the House of Deputies, who shall lay them before the two Houses; and the reunion shall be deemed to be complete when it shall have been sanctioned by a majority vote in the House of Bishops, and in the House of Deputies voting by orders.

(b) The Bishop of the parent Diocese shall be the Bishop, and the Bishop of the junior Diocese shall be the Bishop Coadjutor, of the reunited Diocese; but if there be a vacancy in the Episcopate of either Diocese, the Bishop of the other Diocese shall be the Bishop, and the Bishop Coadjutor if there be one shall be the Bishop Coadjutor, of the reunited Diocese.

(c) When the reunion of the two Dioceses shall have been completed, the facts shall be certified to the Presiding Bishop and to the Secretary of the House of Deputies. Thereupon the Presiding Bishop shall notify the Secretary of the House of Bishops of any alteration in the status or style of the Bishop or Bishops concerned, and the Secretary of the House of Deputies shall strike the name of the junior Diocese from the roll of Dioceses in union with the General Convention.

Sponsors:

The Rev. Bruce Robison, D.Min., Rector, St. Andrew’s, Highland Park,
Fran Gargotta, St. Brendan’s, Franklin Park

The Rev. Daniel E. Hall, M.D., Episcopal Priest in Residence, the First Lutheran Church
of Pittsburgh

The Rev. Scott Quinn, Nativity, Crafton

The Rev. Stephen Smalley, Rector, St. Barnabas, Brackenridge
The Rev. Philip Wainwright, Rector, St. Peter's, Brentwood.