

Unprecedented?

United Methodism's 2020 in Historical Perspective

The year 2020 was a difficult one for United Methodism at all levels. The denomination's quadrennial General Conference was postponed, the Susquehanna Annual Conference held its annual conference entirely on-line, and most local congregations had no in-person Easter or Christmas services. But was 2020 "unprecedented?" This article examines similar **unexpected disruptions** to our ecclesiastical routines that have occurred in past centuries – and then presents a timeline documenting for future generations the protocols under which the Susquehanna Conference operated in 2020.

Eighteenth Century

In 1793, an outbreak of yellow fever that remains one of the most severe epidemics in U.S. history swept through Philadelphia and killed some 5,000 of its 50,000 inhabitants. Information on how United Methodism dealt with the situation is scarce. Our Evangelical and United Brethren predecessor denominations had yet to formally organize, and the Methodist Episcopal Church which had just come into existence in 1784 had not yet begun to keep copious records.

But we do have the diary of Francis Asbury, and his entries for that year give us a picture of both the situation in general and the church's reaction.¹ He learned of the epidemic upon arriving in New York City for an August 25th annual conference and headed for a September 5th annual conference in Philadelphia. The appropriate entries in his journal read as follows.²

Thursday, August 22. Came to New York. The weather is extremely warm. Great afflictions prevail here – fluxes, fevers, influenzas. It is very sickly also in Philadelphia.

Sunday, August 25. The weather being warm and dry, I caught an influenza which held me four days. The effects of this weather were sensibly felt by every member of the conference, some of whom were so indisposed that they could not attend... We have awful accounts from Philadelphia.

The illness was so bad in Philadelphia that a letter was sent to Asbury urging him to move the conference to Burlington NJ. But Asbury was now behind schedule and did not receive the communication in time. He was a day late arriving

¹ Much of the background information for this section, and the notion to use Asbury's journal as the primary source material, comes from "Give Glory to God before He Causes Darkness: Methodists and Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, 1793-1798" by Anna Louise Bates in the April 2020 volume of *Methodist History*. In addition to relating the facts surrounding the epidemic, she discusses the theological and racial aspects of the situation with regard to Methodism.

² *JLFA*:1,769. All references to Asbury's journal are taken from *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Elmer T. Clark editor-in-chief, published by Abingdon Press in 1958, and will be designated as shown with the volume number, and the page number.

in Philadelphia and encountered droves of people fleeing the city in which the conference was being held.³ The appropriate entries read as follows.⁴

Wednesday, September 4. I reached Trenton and received a letter from brother M'Claskey requesting me to come to Burlington, and that it was doubtful whether it were prudent to go to Philadelphia on account of the contagion that then prevailed in that city; I did not reach Burlington as soon as expected, and the preachers went on to Philadelphia.

Friday, September 6. We rode to the city. Ah! how the ways mourn! How low-spirited are the people whilst making their escape! I found it awful indeed. I judge the people die from 50 to 100 in a day; some of our friends are dying, others flying.

Sunday, September 8. The people of this city are alarmed; and well may they be... The streets are now depopulated, and the city wears a gloomy aspect. All night long my ears and heart were wounded with the cry of fire! O! How awful! And what made it still more serious, two young men were killed by the fall of a wall; one of them was a valuable member of our society. Poor Philadelphia!... I feel the want of pure air. We appointed Tuesday to be observed as a day of humiliation.

Tuesday, September 10. I preached on I Kings viii, 37-40 and had a large and very serious, weeping congregation. The preachers had left the city on Monday; I continued in order to have the minutes of the conference printed.

As Asbury traveled throughout the Delmarva Peninsula on his way to an October 29th annual conference in Baltimore, he found people reluctant to be near him when they heard he had come from Philadelphia, and at one point he had to get a certificate from a health officer before he was allowed to proceed. The appropriate entries read as follows.⁵

Friday, September 27. We came to Easton; here the people pretended to be afraid of my communicating the infection of the yellow fever, although I had been out of Philadelphia from the 9th to the 26th instant.

Friday, October 4. I rode to Cokesbury. I had left Philadelphia, and knew not that a pass was necessary until I came to the ferry. Mr. Barney, who was a health officer, behaved like a gentleman, and gave me a true and honorable certificate.

Thursday, October 10. Came to Baltimore; passed the guard against the plague in Philadelphia... O! the plague of sin! Would to God we were more guarded against its baleful influence.

While 1793 marked Pennsylvania's most serious yellow fever epidemic, and led to many protocols aimed at prevented future such occurrences, it was not the last to affect Methodism. Yellow fever continued to strike Philadelphia each

³ Those fleeing the city were mostly those who had the best means to do so, including many government officials and Methodists who should have been at the conference. It is reported that those with the means to flee included President George Washington, who was then living in Philadelphia, and the newly married Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, who was the incoming presiding elder for Philadelphia but chose to take his bride out to the safety of the Maryland countryside. Rev. John M'Claskey, who had urged Asbury to move the conference out of Philadelphia, was the outgoing presiding elder for Philadelphia.

⁴ *JLFA*:1,770.

⁵ *JLFA*:1,771-772.

fall for the next few years. In 1797 the Philadelphia annual conference was scheduled to begin in that city on October 3, but Asbury's journal for that year records the following.⁶

Tuesday, October 3. By reason of the fever in Philadelphia our conference is moved to Duck Creek [Smyrna], in the state of Delaware.

That necessary 1797 relocation prompted Asbury to rethink his scheduling of annual conferences, and beginning in 1798 the Philadelphia and Baltimore annual conferences were moved from October to the spring, when the fever was less virulent.

Nineteenth Century

At the opening of the October 3, 2020, virtual annual meeting of the Susquehanna Conference, Bishop Jeremiah Park read the following statement.

History Repeats Itself?

The first several annual conferences of the United Brethren Church, one of United Methodism's predecessor denominations, were held for three days each fall. The 1804 conference was scheduled to begin October 3, 1804, at the home of David Snyder near Newville, Cumberland County PA.

Unfortunately there was an epidemic spreading across the land. In his diary for September 1804, Christian Newcomer states that he cannot keep up with the calls in Maryland to attend the sick and preach at their funerals, and he records that "the prevailing disease had spread through a great section of the country and the physicians are so busily engaged that it is difficult to procure them."

On October 1, 1804, Newcomer began his journey to the annual conference and noted, "I find the prevailing fever rages here as extensively as with us in Maryland." On October 3, 1804, the day the conference was to convene, only five persons were present – Newcomer and Bishop Martin Boehm, and three other pastors. Even Bishop William Otterbein had chosen to remain in Baltimore because of the epidemic – and this was the first conference in the denomination's history that he had failed to attend.

After an opening prayer and recognition of the fact that no more persons would attend, the annual conference was adjourned that same afternoon – the only business being setting the date for next annual conference.

The complete official minutes for the conference of 1804, the shortest in the history of the denomination, read as follows:

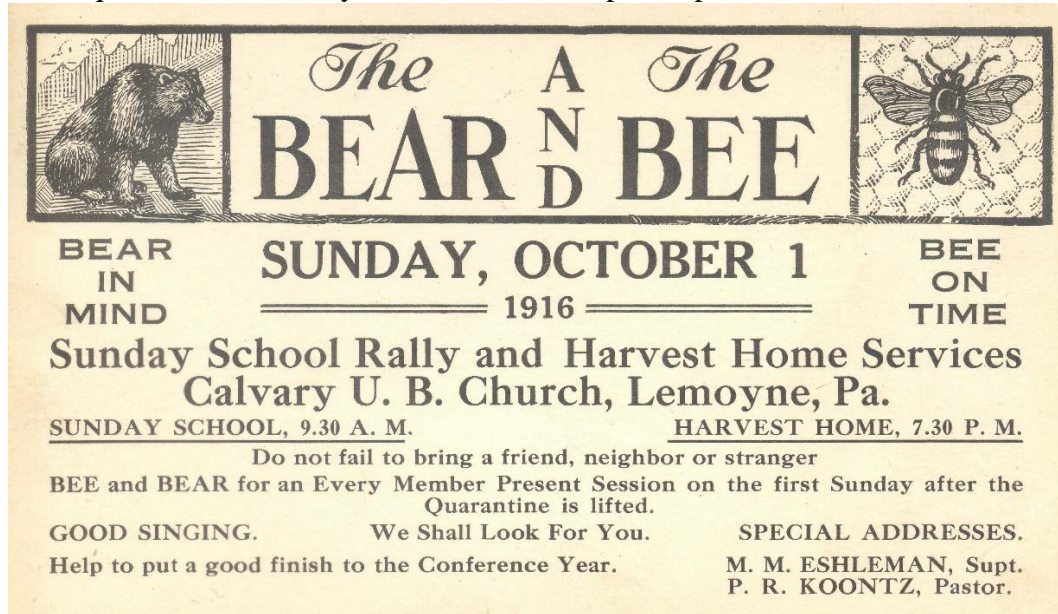
"October 3, 1804. Today the conference convened at David Snyder's. Few were present on account of prevailing sickness and death. The following were in attendance: Christian Newcomer, Martin Boehm, Frederick Schaffer, David Snyder, and Matthias Bortsfeld. We counseled together and resolved that the next conference shall be held in Middletown, Md., on Wednesday before Whitsunday, 1805."

Such was the situation exactly 216 years ago to the very day of our 2020 virtual annual conference, in the days before the computer.

⁶ *JLFA*:II,135.

Twentieth Century

While the obvious comparison of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 is to the great post-WWI influenza epidemic, consider this 1916 postcard from the conference archives that was issued by Calvary Church in Lemoyne. Notice the line describing the date as “the first Sunday after the Quarantine is lifted.” This was a quarantine in Pennsylvania for the 1916 polio epidemic.



While polio had been known, and described by various names, for centuries, the 1916 epidemic was the first to reach major proportions. On Saturday, June 17, 1916, an official announcement of the existence of an epidemic polio infection was made in Brooklyn, New York. That year, there were over 27,000 cases and more than 6,000 deaths due to polio in the United States, with over 2,000 deaths in New York City alone. The names and addresses of individuals with confirmed polio cases were published daily in the press, their houses were identified with placards, and their families were quarantined. The 1916 epidemic caused widespread panic and thousands fled the city to nearby mountain resorts; movie theaters were closed, meetings were canceled, public gatherings were almost nonexistent, and children were warned not to drink from water fountains, and told to avoid amusement parks, swimming pools, and beaches.⁷

Little did anyone suspect that the 1916 polio quarantines would be completely overshadowed by the so-called “Spanish flu” epidemic that would strike two years later. That epidemic led to the mandated closing of businesses and gathering places – and unlike the mandated closings of 2020, it appears that Pennsylvania places of worship were not exempt.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_polio, accessed 1/14/2021

On October 2, 1918, Pennsylvania Health Commissioner Dr. B. Franklin Boyer issued a statement dismissing the flu as “nothing more than a recurrence of the old-fashioned grippe” and advised people to adopt the usual preventative measures – like getting plenty of fresh air and avoiding crowds. But the very next day he ordered the closing of places of public amusement and entertainment, churches and Sunday Schools, and saloons. While other businesses were not ordered to close, the threat was taken seriously and one Shippensburg store advertised as follows: *We need your help. Kindly come as early as you can, make your purchases as quickly as possible and leave the store immediately. We must not overcrowd and therefore will limit the number of customers in the store.*⁸

Unfortunately, the 1918 annual sessions of the Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren Church were scheduled to begin a few days later in Hanover, York County PA. Fortunately, the journal reports that Conference Superintendent Rev. A.B. Statton was able to make the following adjustments.⁹

October 5th, four days ago, word came to me from Pastor S.B. Daugherty, Hanover Pa., that the Board of Health had ordered the churches of that locality closed on account of an epidemic of influenza and had forbidden the assembling of the Conference in our church there. All preparations for our entertainment had been completed, and our good people of Hanover were expectantly awaiting our coming. They are grievously disappointed at this unforeseen and unavoidable situation.

After consulting with Bishop Bell and the pastors S.G. Ziegler and G.I. Rider, I visited the local health officer in Hagerstown [MD], and with his advice Secretary Beattie and myself sent notices to all members of the Conference, ministerial and lay, announcing the meeting of this body at St. Paul’s Church, Hagerstown, at 9:30 A.M., October 9, 1918. The notice, at the suggestion of the Health Officer, announced our meeting as a two-day session. While the Conference governs its own time of adjournment, this limit was deemed advisable owing to conditions, and it was felt that the necessary business of the session could possibly be completed in that time.

Our other predecessor conferences had been meeting in the spring, and their 1919 journals can only begin to tell of the impact of the epidemic within central Pennsylvania. In the Methodist Altoona District alone, the following report was given.¹⁰

Our churches were closed for from one to three months... Several of the pastors had more than fifty funerals... Efficient supplies David J. From and Charles Griffin were called by the great Bishop of souls... Mrs. Di Stefano, wife of our Italian pastor in Altoona, was smitten by the prevailing pandemic and in less than a week had passed to her reward...

⁸ “The Spanish Flu in Cumberland County, 1918” by Christopher T. Liartis. *Cumberland County History*, Summer 1996, pages 17-22.

⁹ *Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Conference, Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 1918, page 22.

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1919, page 62.

In December, Mrs. Trautman, wife of Brother H.M. Trautman, supplying Cassville, suddenly left her home and children here for the eternal home...

In the former Wyoming Conference, the following lines from the report of the Wyoming Seminary, in Luzerne County PA, reflect the conditions across that conference – the enthusiasm over the end of the war dampened by the appearance of the pandemic.¹¹

One week before the day scheduled to open our doors last fall, the Government opened educational institutions all over the country which it had commandeered for military purposes. Into these institutions the youth of military age from 18 to 31 hastened, so that they might benefit by the Government's generous offer of an education... We had scarcely got the well-oiled machinery of the school in good running condition, when that frightful disease, the Spanish Influenza, broke out in our Valley and immediately took on alarming proportions.

In the fullest sympathy with the State Board of Health in its efforts to prevent the spread of the epidemic, we voluntarily dismissed school and for four weeks the doors of the Seminary remained closed.

The United Evangelical Church was dealt a double blow by the pandemic, for the denomination-wide General Conference had been scheduled to begin at Trinity Church in York PA on October 3, 1918 – the very day that the Pennsylvania Health Commissioner announced the mandatory closings. The following foreword to the minutes of that General Conference summarize what ensued.¹²

The Seventh General Conference of the United Evangelical Church will be known as the shortest General Conference in our history. On the afternoon of the second day [Friday, October 4], as the business was getting into full swing, the state authorities placed a notice on the church stating that we were quarantined, and would have to close immediately.

A committee¹³, consisting of Hon. C.A. Shaffer, Rev. Dr. J.F. Dunlap, and Rev. J.W. Thompson, was appointed to confer with the city and state authorities. The committee reported that the best that could be done was for General Conference to get into executive session immediately, and continue [all night] in session until Saturday morning [October 5] without adjournment. Intermission for lunch [Friday, October 4] was permitted, provided we did not leave the building. The pastor rallied the ladies of the city congregations and provided an excellent luncheon at seven and again at midnight.

A committee was appointed to forecast a program of work that must be done. Every member of conference was bent on his best in the next few hours. These proceedings

¹¹ *Wyoming Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1919, page 92.*

¹² *Proceedings of the General Conference of the United Evangelical Church, 1919, page 3.*

¹³ It may be assumed these were considered the three persons at the General Conference most likely to negotiate a favorable response from the city and state officials. Lay delegate to multiple General Conferences, Hon. Charles A. Shaffer of Berwick PA was a prominent member of the Pennsylvania legislature. Rev. Dr. John Francis Dunlap, was the current superintendent of the York District and would be elected a bishop in 1923. Rev. Jacob W. Thompson, a past and future district superintendent, was the host pastor at York Trinity.

give the result. Apologies are unnecessary. Our heavenly Father will take care of results. In Him we trust.

“Spanish influenza” is the epidemic that is sweeping over the country carrying suffering, death, and panic in its trail.

Upon receipt of the report of the above committee, General Conference went into a season of solemn prayer for our stricken country.

The 1919 annual session of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church was opened by Bishop Matthew T. Maze, originally from Nebraska and the Platte River Conference and newly elected to the episcopacy at the abbreviated 1918 General Conference, with these words.¹⁴

A plague of death swept our entire country bringing the “Shadow of Death” into thousands of homes, and almost every congregation felt these losses. Our General Conference convened, and because of the state-wide quarantine was compelled to finish its work under great pressure and adjourn hurriedly.

Nearly all of our churches were closed for a time, and pastors and people labored under great disadvantage. In many instances our ministers and their families nursed the sick and brought consolation to the sorrowing and dying.

Perhaps the sentiment that best summarizes the attitudes of all of our predecessor denominations are the following words of the Rev. J.F. Dunlap, superintendent of the York District and one of the three who negotiated the all-night session of the 1918 General Conference.¹⁵

Although war, epidemic, disease and death closed churches, incapacitated workers, multiplied difficulties and wrought sorrows, yet we rejoice in the good accomplished.

But the 1918 flu epidemic did not mark the end of the twentieth century’s experience with closures and quarantines. Polio struck again in the early 1950’s, and the closures, quarantines and search for a vaccine that occurred in 1952 are eerily similar to the events of 2020. In the United States, the 1952 epidemic was the worst polio outbreak in the nation’s history, and is credited with heightening parents’ fears of the disease and focusing public awareness on the need for a vaccine. Of the 57,628 cases reported that year 3,145 died and 21,269 were left with mild to disabling paralysis.¹⁶

Many older adults well remember 1952 – when movie theaters and swimming pools were closed, church services were discontinued, and parents restricted where and with whom their children could play. But because there was no Internet, e-mail, or instant nation-wide news reporting, the pandemic seemed less traumatic than the one of 2020. In addition, the lack of live-streaming services and electronic giving of weekly offerings made the church’s response quite different from that of 2020. Consider, for example, the following 1952 letter

¹⁴ *Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church*, 1919, page 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, page 43.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_polio, accessed 1/14/2021

preserved in the conference archives from Rev. Alfred J. Thomas to his EUB congregation in Lock Haven.

FIRST EVANGELICAL UNITED BROTHERS CHURCH
WEST MAIN ST., LOCK HAVEN, PENNA.

September 17, 1952

Our hearts have been deeply touched by the anxiety that the epidemic has brought into our community. We realize we are bound more closely together by our common problems. I ask each one to pray for those who have been afflicted and for the members of those families. This affliction should draw each one of us into a closer fellowship with our Heavenly Father, reminding us that we are flesh, and heir to all the infirmities of our humanity. We are only sure of now, never of tomorrow.

When the ban is lifted by the Board of Health, we should return to our church for its services of worship, where we publicly declare our belief in Almighty God and His goodness to us. Let us look forward hopefully that we may observe the LORD'S SUPPER in the World Wide celebration on October 5th. Also, let us pray for God's guidance and blessing in our RALLY DAY service which has been reset for November 2nd.

The Stewards have called my attention to the fact that our bills keep on coming whether we have worship services or not. They urge you to keep your envelopes up to date and if you would like to do so, would you bring them to the Treasurer's home at 406 E. Bald Eagle St., or at his A & P store on Bellefonte Ave., where he will have a special box ready for your church contributions; or you may bring them to the parsonage. This will help us keep up to date on our weekly bills as they come due. Please also plan for generous giving on Rally Day!

Now may God bless and keep you in His love and peace!

Your pastor,

Alfred J. Thomas

Twenty-first Century – 2020

While the year 2020 may not be “unprecedented” in terms of United Methodism’s response – at the congregational, conference or denominational level – to a serious pandemic, it will certainly be closely examined both by those seeking to document exactly what transpired and by those hoping to apply in the future any lessons that have been learned. The following timeline gives the significant 2020 events relevant to the Susquehanna Conference’s approach to the pandemic.

February 26. Ash Wednesday.

March 6. The first two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in PA.

March 13. Governor Wolf closed all PA schools for “at least two weeks.” Bishop Park released an e-letter¹⁷ that included the following statements.

The current Coronavirus situation is very grave... The President just declared a national emergency. Accordingly, state and local governments will take actions that can be drastic in measure and disruptive to life as usual. Things will continue to change day by day and even hour to hour... Please be assured that the Cabinet and I will continue to closely monitor the evolving situation...

News was just released this afternoon that the Executive Committee of the Council of Bishops requested that the 2020 General Conference be postponed. It is too early to know what this will mean for our Annual Conference and the Jurisdictional Conference scheduled to be held at the end of May and in the middle of July respectively...

We also urge our churches to cancel all non-essential ministry activities, particularly those that engage with the most vulnerable populations: children, youth, adults over 60, and those with compromised immune systems.

March 17. Bishop Park released a special announcement asking all churches to suspend worship for two weeks. Unlike the Governor, the bishop cannot order his constituency to obey his restrictions, but almost all conference churches appear to have honored the Bishop’s request – assuming that a temporary reprieve at this point would bring things under control and allow Holy Week and Easter services to proceed as usual. The letter included the following statements.

As your bishop, along with the leadership of the Annual Conference, I implore our Susquehanna Conference churches to suspend all gatherings for worship and other activities for at least the next two weeks. This is a hard decision, especially because we are in the midst of Lent, one of the most sacred seasons of the year.

Accompanying the above announcement was a full letter giving more details and rationale. Throughout the entire year, the Governor made it clear that religious services were exempt from the restrictions placed on other businesses and organizations, but this letter made clear Bishop Park’s belief that religion is not an excuse to be irresponsible and that the church should step forward and set an example for others. The key paragraph in that letter reads as follows.

In a press conference on March 16, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf announced a series of required and recommended steps to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the state, including the closure of dining-in services at restaurants and bars, restricting visitors from correctional facilities and nursing homes, and the closure of child-care centers, public schools, and other state licensed or provided services. He urges non-essential businesses and service providers to take steps to minimize person-to-person contact. This shutdown is to last for at least the next two weeks. It is time now for the people of Christ in the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church to do our part to help minimize the spread of this disease.

March 18. The first confirmed COVID-19 death in PA.

¹⁷ All the letters/announcements of Bishop Jeremiah Park quoted in this article are on file by date in the “2020 Pandemic File” shelved at the conference archives in location UMC-CONF-h2020.

March 19. Governor Wolf closed all “non-life sustaining businesses, operations and services” effective March 21.

March 23. Bishop Park released an e-letter which included the following statements about the scheduled Annual Conference.

We know that many of you have questions regarding the Annual Conference, scheduled for May 28-30... We are monitoring our local, state, and federal government decisions to ensure that we comply... As the situation unfolds, we will decide whether the conference will meet at the end of May or another time.

Therefore, we have decided to delay registration for the 2020 Sessions of Annual Conference.

March 24. Recognizing that the pandemic is a global problem, and that God’s people around the world have the confidence that God hears and answers prayer, Bishop Park released an e-letter that included the following statements.

In solidarity with Pope Francis’ call to all Christians in all church bodies, Bishop Ivan Abrahams, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, invites all churches in the Wesleyan tradition to join the churches of the world in prayer tomorrow, March 25, at noon.

I ask you all to participate in this shared prayer at noon on Wednesday for God’s intervention and healing. And in unity with the body of Christ, we will pray the Lord’s Prayer, as we are so requested.

You may choose to pray simultaneously with many other Christians of the world at noon Rome time, which is 7 a.m. Eastern Time, at noon Eastern Time, or anytime that is convenient. The exact time is less critical than ardently praying with other Christians of the world with the faith that God hears and answers our prayers.

March 27. Governor Wolf’s stay-at-home orders were extended into counties within the Susquehanna Conference – viz., Lackawanna, Luzerne, Pike, Wayne and York. These orders would be extended on April 1 to include the entire state. Also on this date, Bishop Park sent an e-letter with the announcement that most people believed would never be made – that the church closures were to extend past Holy Week and Easter! In part, that letter stated as follows.

As your bishop, I implore the Susquehanna Conference churches to continue to suspend all gatherings for worship and other non-essential activities until further notice. As the COVID-19 situation escalates, we must follow the best preventative practices and use utmost caution. We are closely monitoring the directives of Governor Wolf, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The communication closed with ideas and suggested resources for celebrating Easter remotely, yet connectedly.

April 9. Governor Wolf ordered all schools closed for the rest of the academic year, with learning to be held remotely using on-line tools.

April 12. Easter.

April 17. Governor Wolf unveiled his red-yellow-green plan for gradually reopening counties. Originally all counties were placed in the most restrictive red status.

April 28. Bishop Park released an e-letter to all lay and clergy members of the Annual Conference announcing a new date, a new location, and a restricted one-day agenda. Little did people realize at the time, however, that even this meeting would not be able to take place as scheduled. That communication included the following statements.

In consultation with the Cabinet and the Sessions Committee, I have approved the rescheduling of the 2020 Session of Annual Conference to Saturday, October 3, at the Williamsport Community Arts Center, 220 W. Fourth Street, Williamsport PA 17701. We waited until now to officially make this decision because we had a contract with Hershey Lodge and faced penalties if we cancelled prematurely. With the State government's prohibition of a large gathering extended beyond the month of May, Hershey Lodge and our Conference have mutually agreed that the May dates for Annual Conference will not work this year.

- We will conduct only the business that is absolutely essential.
- We will hold all submitted resolutions until the 2021 annual conference.
- We are working on rescheduling the clergy session.
- We will find ways to recognize appropriately our retirees and those clergy, spouses and lay members who have died since we last gathered.


May 8. The first 24 PA counties to move to yellow status included several from the Susquehanna Conference – viz., Bradford, Centre, Clearfield, Clinton, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga and Union.

May 22. The bulk of the counties in the Susquehanna Conference moved to yellow status. Yellow status meant that worship was able to resume, and on May 24 congregations that had not met in person since March 15 were now permitted to assemble – so long as they followed the protocols. Those restrictions were followed more closely by some congregations than by others – as houses of worship were not required to follow all the mandates given to secular groups, but Bishop Park strongly encouraged congregations to do so. Yellow status removed the stay-at-home order but meant the following for congregations who followed all the protocols.

- No gatherings of more than 25. Some congregations hoping to accommodate more, broke the congregation into two groups for a morning and evening service. Other congregations had a sign-up sheet, and those who could not be accommodated in person continued attending remotely.
- Masks required for all attendees; hand sanitizer available in the lobby.
- Socially distant seating, with pews roped off so that no family units were within 6 feet of each other.
- All hymnals and Bibles removed from the pews; no bulletins or other handouts.
- No congregational singing.
- Names recorded for all attendees, preferably including the seating arrangements.

Many larger congregations with the appropriate technical capabilities simply continued to provide on-line services until their counties entered the green status and the permitted gathering size was increased – but the other protocols remained in place. By the following week, all the counties of the Susquehanna Conference were out of the red status and operating under either the yellow or green protocols.

May 27. This is the e-letter from Bishop Park that perhaps more than any other brought home the fact that the United Methodist Church was truly in uncharted waters. Never before had a General or Jurisdictional Conference been cancelled for the year in which it was to be held. There were financial matters that had to be addressed, retiring bishops that had to be replaced – not to mention the possibility of the denominational split and the protocol for separation and restructuring that was on the agenda. The framers of the Book of Discipline had not imagined such a scenario. This letter, including Bishop Park’s personal comments on his own situation, is herewith reproduced in its entirety.



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May 27, 2020

My Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

It has now been announced that the postponed session of the 2020 General Conference will be held August 29 to September 7, 2021 and the Jurisdictional Conferences will be held November 10 to 12, 2021. I am writing to you so that you may have the most up to date information regarding Episcopal assignments and coverage as they relate to this unprecedented situation.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church outlines the process for the retirements and assignments of Bishops. Specifically, ¶406 speaks to the process of Bishop’s assignments. “The jurisdictional committee on episcopacy, after consultation with the College of Bishops, shall recommend the assignment of the bishops to their respective residences for final action by the jurisdictional conference...” That paragraph also indicates that “the date of assignment for all bishops is September 1 following the jurisdictional conference.”

The Discipline does not address the possibility that General and Jurisdictional Conferences could be postponed. Clearly, we are in an uncharted time in the history of The United Methodist Church.

With the postponement of the General and Jurisdictional Conferences, the Council of Bishops, the five Colleges of Bishops, and the Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy have been in prayer, discernment, and dialogue. Having never been in this situation before, we want to be faithful to the leading of God's Spirit as well as the spirit of the Discipline.

As the Jurisdictional Conference assigns Bishops to Areas and the College of Bishops is responsible for the episcopal coverage of the annual conferences in the Jurisdiction, Bishop Peggy Johnson, President of the Northeastern Jurisdiction College of Bishops, announced the plan for episcopal supervision for the Northeastern Jurisdiction until the 2021 postponed session of Jurisdictional Conference.

As you may know, I had requested for an early retirement effective September 1, 2020. I would like you to know that, under the current circumstances and in sync with the Jurisdictional Conference in 2021, my retirement is postponed.

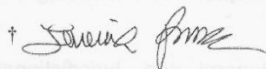
COVID-19 has brought many significant changes in all aspects of our lives. Sometime ago, when the Cabinet had a time of devotion, we had a moment of pondering this question: "What has this virus taken away from me?" Among other things, I thought of "plans" I had. As you would imagine, Lisa and I had many immediate and long-term "plans" for our life in retirement. Now, many are gone at least for some time. I am reminded of a passage in scripture: "Many are the plans in one's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." (Proverbs 19:1)

Together God has placed us in this time and place for longer than any of us imagined. I know that, as we join our hands and hearts with each other, we will continue to be disciples of Christ to bring healing and hope to the hurting world with the love of Jesus.

I have come this far by the grace of God. I have my total trust that this grace will lead me on. As we look forward to God leading us into God's preferred future for an extended time, I covet your prayers.

Please know that my dear thoughts and prayers are with God's people of the Susquehanna Conference, that together we will continue to be faithful to be the church alive in mission for such a time as this.

With You in Christ's Ministry,



Jeremiah Park

May 29. The first 18 counties to enter the green phase included several from the Susquehanna Conference – viz., Bradford, Centre, Clearfield, Montour, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan and Tioga.

June 30. Bishop Park released an e-letter announcing the following changes for the 2020 Annual Conference.

- Clergy executive session will be held on-line Tuesday, September 22, at 9 a.m.
- Annual Conference will be held on-line Saturday, October 3, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with live-streaming available for visitors
- Retirement recognition and memorial services will be held Saturday, October 31, with very limited attendance at a church to be determined and with the possibility of the event being moved to on-line only.

- Ordination service will be held Saturday, November 7, from 10 a.m. to noon, with very limited attendance at a church to be determined, with live-streaming available for visitors.

July 1. Governor Wolf ordered the wearing of face masks in all public places.

July 15. A rise in cases caused Governor Wolf to re-institute some restrictions. Restaurants were limited to 25% capacity, alcohol could be consumed on-premises only when purchased with a meal, working from home must be done when possible, indoor gatherings were limited to 25 people.

August 6. Governor Wolf “recommended” that all interscholastic and recreational sports be suspended until January 1, 2021.

September 8. Bishop Park released what people assumed might well be the final e-letter for a pandemic that appeared to have leveled off. He congratulated the congregations for making it through the summer, but reminded them that indoor gatherings were still limited to 25 socially-distanced and masked people – although houses of worship were considered exempt from numerical limits. He warned that there might be a fall surge in virus when the cooler weather arrived.

Included in the letter was advice on planning for Advent and Christmas services – recommending extra services, especially during Christmas Eve day and evening, in order to avoid overcrowding.

September 14. A U.S. District Judge ruled that some of the Governor’s extended restrictions – including stay-at-home orders, size limits on gatherings, and the closure of non-essential businesses – were unconstitutional.

September 21. Restaurants were allowed to increase to 50% capacity.

September 22. The 2020 clergy session of the annual conference was held entirely on line. While the session conducted all the necessary business, participants noted two practices that likely would not have occurred had the session been held in person as usual – practices that may have been more the result of frustration over having to meet virtually than of serious intentions. First, not all of the candidates for admission into the various categories of the ministerial process were approved by the usual unanimous vote. Second, there were a significant number of invalid votes submitted (but not counted) by persons whose voting ID’s did not entitle them to vote on certain issues.

October 3. The 2020 annual session of the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church was held entirely on-line. Practice sessions had equipped all the participants to handle the technical aspects of the meeting, and all the necessary business was accomplished.

October 31. The proposed in-person gathering to honor retirees and deceased members did not occur as proposed in the June 30 letter. Instead, a short

Service of Celebration of Life was prepared, taped, and added to the conference website. It was hoped that a combined celebration of retirement would be possible for those retiring in 2020 and 2021.

November 7. An Ordination Service did take place at Camp Hill UMC, but only the ordinands, their immediate families, and a few conference representatives could attend. The service was taped and placed on the conference website.

November 13. Bishop Park released an e-letter stating that “the last mile of the race is the toughest” and encouraging congregations to continue following all protocols. The letter included the following paragraph.

As a church, we have to practice more rigorous safety protocols than the government directs for such a time as this. As we watch the infection rate break records almost daily – which may grow worse as the flu season continues – we must keep indoor gatherings to a maximum of 25 people, if at all possible. And we must be prepared to face the possibility that even stronger, short-term measures may be needed, if the virus continues to spread among our friends and families.

November 17. Unfortunately, the fall surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths materialized as predicted by health officials. Health Secretary Rachel Levine announced (1) that anyone traveling to Pennsylvania must get a COVID-19 test within 72 hours of arrival or quarantine for 14 days and (2) beginning November 20 masks must be worn in every indoor facility and anytime people are indoors with persons from outside their household.

November 23. Health Secretary Levine issued a stay-at-home “advisory.” People were advised not to gather for family celebrations of Thanksgiving

November 26. Thanksgiving.

November 29. First Sunday of Advent.

November 30. On the day after the first Sunday in Advent, just as congregations were gearing up to celebrate the Christmas season, Bishop Park released an e-letter that many considered a “bombshell” – an announcement, cosigned by all the members of the administrative cabinet, that included the following statement.

This is a very grave situation that requires a sacrificial response. For your safety and that of your friends, family, and neighbors, I, as bishop, along with the full Cabinet urge you not to conduct indoor in-person worship or gatherings for the rest of the year.

But in United Methodism, this was a plea and not a mandate, and each congregation was ultimately responsible to make its own decision – and some indeed did continue with their planned services. The rationale used by one pastor to follow the bishop’s directive was reportedly given in that congregation’s newsletter similar to the following: “The last verse in the book of Judges ominously and critically states, *In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.* We are blessed to have a wise and capable leader. Let’s be faithful followers.”

December 10. A continued rise in COVID-19 cases caused Governor Wolf to re-introduce strict mandates, effective until January 4, 2021.

- indoor dining is prohibited; outdoor dining is limited to 50% capacity
- indoor gatherings are limited to 10 people; outdoor gatherings to 50 people
- indoor activities at gyms and fitness centers are prohibited
- youth sports and extra-curricular in-person activities are prohibited
- businesses are limited to 50% capacity
- all entertainment venues (theaters, museums, concerts, bowling alleys, museums, casinos, arcades, etc.) are to close

December 18. As congregations continued to struggle with the concept of no Christmas Eve services, Bishop Park released another e-letter urging the people of the Susquehanna Conference to remember that “God knows our pain and our struggle” and to “continue to live the Christmas Story in all we do in the best way we can.” Specifically, the letter extended the bishop’s strongly urged closings from “for the rest of the year” to “until further notice” as noted in the following statement.

As this grave situation continues without any noticeable sign of abatement at present time, I am obligated to plead with you not to hold in-person gatherings in our churches until further notice.

Although houses of worship had been exempt from the Governor’s mandate that effectively banned all indoor gatherings until January 4, 2021, Bishop Park discerned that continued cancellation of programs and services, including those scheduled for Christmas Eve and beyond, was the prudent course of action – and it appears the majority of the Conference’s congregations accepted the decision of their episcopal leader.

December 25. Christmas. This was the first year that most Central Pennsylvania United Methodists were prevented from gathering to celebrate both Easter and Christmas – the two most joyous days on the Christian calendar. Thanks be to God that the risen Savior lives within the heart and not within a building.

December 29. Bishop Park’s final e-letters of 2020 announced that the 2021 Clergy Session for Annual Conference would be held virtually on June 16, 2021, and included the following statement regarding the actual Annual Conference.

The Susquehanna Conference 2021 Annual Conference has been rescheduled for June 18-19, 2021. The annual conference will be held virtually. We will worship and conduct only essential business.

Out of an abundance of caution, the Sessions Committee and I believe this is best for the clergy and lay members of Annual Conference... The October 3 virtual Annual Conference we had this year proved that we are able to hold an Annual Conference virtually with minimal disruption and negative issues...

We are planning to hold the ordination service, the memorial service, and the retirement service in-person. The hope is that we can hold these services in the very early fall.

Epilogue

The year 2020 is over, but this timeline is not complete. As the pandemic and the episcopal e-letters continue into 2021, a continuing timeline serves to document ripple effects of the **unexpected disruptions** caused in the year 2020 by the COVID-19 virus. The ultimate effects of the pandemic on ministry, church closings, and even the use of technology in worship will likely not be known for another quadrennium. Presumably, this timeline will aid in the writing of a future article assessing the long-range effects of the pandemic on United Methodism within the Susquehanna Conference. In the meantime, we present this timeline in its present form to provide future United Methodists with useful insight into dealing with any such **unexpected disruptions** that lie beyond the horizon.