

**Episcopal Diocese of Virginia**  
**R-2a Task Force**  
**Task Force Report**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

During the 219<sup>th</sup> Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia (DVA), Resolution R2-a was submitted by the Committee on Race and Reconciliation (the “Committee”) for consideration by the assembled body. This resolution called for the appointment of a Task Force (the “Task Force”) to be charged with an examination of whether to change the name of the DVA’s annual meeting from “Council” to “Convention.” That Resolution was adopted. The language of the Resolution follows:

**R2-a: Appoint a Task Force to Address the Name of Annual Council**

*Adopted; text pending final review*

- A. Resolved, that this 219th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia asks our bishop to appoint a Task Force, and that he invite the bishops of the Diocese of Southern Virginia and the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia to appoint additional members, and to consult with other dioceses including, for example, the Dioceses of Nebraska and Mississippi in order to address whether changes in nomenclature for each of our annual legislative assemblies, currently referred to by the term “Council,” may be in order for the sake of consistency with the wider Church, which uses the term “Convention,” as well as consistency with our original nomenclature, which used the term “Convention,” and with the objective of racial reconciliation; and be it further
- B. Resolved, that this 219th Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia requests any such Task Force present its written report, including any recommended canonical and constitutional changes, for posting on the Diocese of Virginia website by October 1, 2014

Pursuant to that Resolution and in accordance with the Committee’s recommendation, in May of 2014 Bishop Shannon Johnston invited five persons to serve as official members of the requested Task Force. This ethnically diverse group is comprised of The Rev. Melanie Mullen (St Paul’s Church, Richmond); The Rev. Daniel Velez-Rivera (St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church, Leesburg); Mildred W. Robinson (St. Paul’s Memorial Church, Charlottesville); Maurice Spraggins (Trinity Church, Arlington); and Jonathan Wolcott (Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria). Further, because the Committee had already undertaken extensive research into the question of language usage, several members thereof remained abreast of Task Force work throughout the summer and fall and were generous in sharing insights and reactions. Ellyn Crawford and The Rev. J. David Niemeyer were particularly faithful in this regard. Moreover, the Task Force would not have been able to undertake this task with any hope of successfully discharging its responsibility without the extraordinary intellectual support of our gifted and

dedicated historians John Chilton and Julia Randle. Finally, Buck Blanchard of our Mayo House Diocesan staff was unfailingly supportive and responsive to questions as they arose.<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Shannon, in extending individual invitations to serve on the Task Force, stressed that members needed to be thoughtful, prayerful, even-handed, open to various points of view, and willing to engage in a process and in conversations that raised various sensitivities, particularly issues of race and reconciliation. It was in that spirit that we individually accepted Bishop Johnston's invitation to serve and it is in that spirit that we unanimously make the following recommendation: ***That Episcopalians in the Diocese of Virginia be called annually to assemble as a "Convention" rather than as a "Council."***

## **DELIBERATIVE PROCESS**

To complete our work, we engaged in a combination of meetings and conference calls:

1. First Meeting: 1:00 p.m. -- June 13, 2014 – Trinity Church, Fredericksburg (Ellyn Crawford – Convener). Agenda: Extensive briefing on the background of language usage.
2. Task Force Dinner: 6:30 p.m. – August 26, 2014 – Brock's Riverside Grill, Fredericksburg, VA. (Buck Blanchard – Convener). Agenda: Committee discussion of questions to be asked and, to the best of our ability answered (see **Approach Summary**) below.
3. Conference Call: 7:00 p.m. – September 9, 2014. (Wolcott- Convener). Discuss first set of responses from historians re language and [lack of] change in the Diocese of Virginia.
4. Conference Call: 7:00 p.m. – November 17, 2014. (Wolcott – Convener). Receive further reports from historians re language experiences in other Diocese.
5. Conference Call: 7:00 p.m. – December 9, 2014. (Wolcott – Convener). Formulated Task Force recommendation and discussion of report structure.
6. Conference Call: 4:00 p.m. – January 2, 2015 (Wolcott – Convener). Confirm recommendation. Review, finalize, and adopt report.

## **APPROACH SUMMARY**

Through the extraordinary efforts of our historians, the Task Force engaged in extensive research with respect to U.S. Dioceses<sup>2</sup> to determine, as best as could be discerned, the historical

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Johnston extended invitations to participate in the Task Force's deliberations to the Bishops of the Diocese of both Southern Virginia and Southwestern Virginia. Neither Diocese responded in a timely fashion to the invitation to participate. The Task Force report has been requested by the Diocese of Southern Virginia in spite of the inability to participate.

<sup>2</sup> Note: R-2a includes a charge to "consult with other dioceses, including, for example, [Nebraska and Mississippi] in order to address whether changes in nomenclature...may be necessary."

basis for the change from Convention to Council as well as changes back (and forth) to Convention among U.S. dioceses. We, of course, placed particular emphasis on factors explaining the initial change from Convention to Council in the Diocese of Virginia as well as the lack of change back to Convention at various historical points. We then examined this information from several perspectives including:

1. Consideration of the implications of the historical findings;
2. Consideration of the current social, racial and spiritual implications of both the historical findings and a recommendation for a change to Convention; and
3. Consideration of the reasons why a change might not be necessary and potential adverse consequences of the name change.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Task Force findings include the following:

1. Since the organization of the Episcopal Church the Diocesan annual meeting had been denominated a “Convention.” The change in name of the diocesan annual meeting from “Convention” to “Council” occurred in the throes of the Civil War. In 1862, the Protestant Episcopal Church (PEC) in each of the Confederate States of America (CSA) moved away from calling annual meetings conventions choosing, instead, to call such gatherings “councils.” Constitutions and bylaws were amended to reflect this shift.
  2. Virginia was the only CSA diocese to never revert to “Convention” as the name for its annual meeting after the Civil War, a nomenclature it has maintained ever since.
  3. Of the 29 dioceses that have used the name “Council” at any point for their annual meeting:
    - 9 have been from northern or western states (Colorado, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Indianapolis, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northern Indiana, Western New York, Wisconsin/Milwaukee, or slightly less than 1/3 of the total.
    - 4 have been border states (Kentucky, Lexington, West Missouri, West Virginia
    - 16 have been southern/Confederacy legacy states (Alabama, Arkansas, Atlanta, Dallas, East Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Northwest Texas, Southern Virginia, Southwestern Virginia, Texas, Virginia, West Texas) or 55.5%
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4. If Southern/Confederacy legacy and border states dioceses are combined, these 20 dioceses comprise 70% of the total number of dioceses who named their annual meeting “Council” at some point, indicating that such use of nomenclature was predominantly a Southern/Confederate legacy practice.
5. Seventeen (17) of the twenty-one (21) dioceses (Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Dallas, East Carolina, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Indianapolis, Kentucky, Lexington, Louisiana, Minnesota, South Carolina, West Missouri, Western New York, West Virginia, and Wisconsin/Milwaukee), or 76%, have adopted or readopted “Convention” annual meeting name to prevent confusion, either with a diocesan Executive Council, or confusion produced by being different from national church nomenclature.
  - For 4 dioceses (Florida, Indianapolis, Northern Indiana, and Northwest Texas) documentation located does not permit classifying reason for returning to nomenclature of “Convention.”
6. Of the eight remaining dioceses with annual meetings named “Council,” seven are Southern/legacy Confederate States dioceses (Atlanta, Mississippi, Southern Virginia, Southwestern Virginia, Texas, Virginia, West Texas). The only non-Southern/legacy Confederate States diocese still calling its diocese annual meeting a “Council” is Nebraska.

An excellent summary of this timeline can be found in the Winter, 2015 edition of the *Virginia Episcopalian: Julia Randle, Civil War and the Life of the Diocese: ‘Council’: Our Unique Diocesan Civil War Legacy* (at page 29).

## **DIRECT IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Virginia’s refusal to revert to usage of “Council” seems best explained by efforts to strike a compromise between opposing forces (those who were most supportive of the secessionist movement vs. those who wished to see the union reinstated both politically and ecclesiastically) in the Church in the immediate post-Civil War environment. The compromise that resulted in continued use of “Council” appeared intended to appease strongly CSA elements and foster reconciliation with the Protestant Episcopal Church broadly cast. There is relatively little evidence that an alternative (ie., non-pragmatic) explanation for continued adherence to “Council” traceable to that period exists.

Further, without regard to geography, reversion to usage of “Convention” from “Council” in the post-Civil War era have been widespread among dioceses that used “Council” at any time. Reasons for the re-embrace of this historical language dating from the Colonial period vary but include efforts to avoid confusion with national church nomenclature and, in at least one case, possible racial inclusion (Diocese of WVA)

It remains the case that legacy states keeping “Council” are predominantly Southern/former CSA states. As stated in the Randle article, “[o]nly eight dioceses call annual meeting “council” – seven of eight in original Confederate States territory.” It is also the case that “Virginia is the only diocese with a “council” consistently since 1862.”

## **CURRENT SOCIAL, RACIAL AND SPIRITUAL IMPLICATION**

On the basis of this history, and given the undeniable alignment between the then ongoing Civil War and the change to the use of “Council,” the Task Force was persuaded that the change to Council was made for and /related to CSA/PEC (and therefore pro-slavery) change at the outset of Civil War. Further, the Task Force is persuaded that continued adherence to use of that terminology in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War was intended to appease such legacy CSA/PEC elements. The legacy of the use of “Council” thus has historical divisive racial implications for the Diocese that should be addressed

Simply put, in 2015 – 150 years later -- the continued use of “Council” due to this legacy is hurtful/offensive to many members of this Diocese including African-Americans and all other ethnic groups.

Finally, in our continuing effort to be attentive to Bishop Johnston’s admonition -- to be thoughtful, prayerful, *even-handed, open to various points of view*, and willing to engage in a process and in conversations that raised various sensitivities, particularly issues of race and reconciliation – we sought to make the best case for continued adherence to the “Council” language. In short, we asked ourselves whether this terminology served to communicate something unique and important about coming together as “Council.” We concluded that “Convention” is likely to be more accurately descriptive of our work during that gathering than is “Council.” To the best of our understanding, “Councils” exist to resolve and establish material theological matters. “Conventions,” on the other hand, address and legislate matters relating to the life of the Diocese, not major theological matters. We submit that the “Convention” is much more apt as a descriptor.

We close by acknowledging that this name change may be seen by some as a small gesture but submit that small gestures are not unimportant to racial justice and inclusion. The Episcopal Church as a whole is replete with examples of small gestures with large meaning. With this change away from the use of “Council” to “Convention,” we believe that the Diocese of Virginia will through language take one more important step toward signaling full inclusion of every Episcopalian and away from language that signaled deep and bitter sectarian as well as secular divisions.

Submitted by:

The R2-a Task Force

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