

Resolution NY-A

2022 Diocese of Western New York Annual Convention

Frequently Asked Questions

When Resolution NY-A was submitted to the Diocese of Western New York's resolutions committee, Bishop Rowe wrote a letter to the committee that said, "To be clear, I am not in favor of this ... resolution. I believe that together we are making significant progress on behalf of our congregations and the communities we serve. We are offering new and essential support to congregations by deploying staff and resources to the local level. We are developing regional collaborations and partnerships. And we are working together to move closer to Beloved Community. ... But as I have said from the beginning, and again at last year's convention, it is the right of the diocesan convention to determine whether I should remain your provisional bishop and whether the diocesan partnership should continue."

In that spirit, these FAQs have been prepared by Bishop Sean and his staff to inform the upcoming vote of the Diocese of Western New York's convention on Resolution NY-A.

When is the future of the diocesan partnership supposed to be up for a vote?

Last October, the Standing Committees of both dioceses voted to extend the partnership's timeline for evaluation by two years, which would mean a vote on whether to continue the partnership in 2026. The letter from Standing Committee Presidents Jim Isaac and Stacey Fussell is [available on the website](#).

What will happen if this resolution passes?

Bishop Sean would complete his time as bishop provisional of Western New York no later than June 30, 2023, and the Standing Committee would need to rely on other episcopal leadership to help the diocese through a transition and search for a new bishop. Although Resolution NY-A sets December 31, 2023, as the latest date Bishop Sean could depart, he believes that the diocese's search for a new bishop would be better supported by the Standing Committee and the episcopal leadership it would choose for the interim period.

What will happen if this resolution fails?

The partnership would continue on its current timeline. During 2023, we would develop an evaluation process that, during 2024 and 2025, would provide data to inform a vote at the 2026 convention about whether to continue the partnership.

Can the Diocese of Western New York afford its own bishop and staff?

Yes. Both dioceses could afford their own bishops and a small diocesan staff. But by sharing a bishop and operating staff, both dioceses lower their operating budgets and free up money to fund their program and strategy budgets, which support mission strategy, local congregations, regional partnerships, and other program initiatives, like antiracism work.

For example, in 2018, Western New York's operating budget staff and benefits budget line was \$629,907. In 2023, it is projected to be \$474,762, because the diocese now shares the cost of a bishop and other operations staff. Those operating savings are now available to support mission strategy, regional partnerships, and other programs.

Likewise, in 2018, Northwestern Pennsylvania's operating budget staff and benefits line was \$516,955. In 2023, it is projected to be \$434,719. The resulting savings are invested in mission strategy, regional partnerships, and other programs.

Is it true that the diocesan staff has shrunk under the partnership?

No. The partnership dioceses now employ more staff than the two dioceses did individually before the partnership. It is the case that fewer staff work in either diocesan office, because our mission strategy includes deploying diocesan staff to work directly in congregations in clergy transition and during clergy sabbaticals. The congregations that have benefitted from these arrangements include:

St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo
St. James, Batavia
St. Paul's, Harris Hill
St. Matthias, East Aurora
St. Paul's, Stafford
St. Mark's, LeRoy and others in the
Genesee Deanery

St. Stephen's, Fairview
Trinity, New Castle
St. John's, Sharon
St. Mark's, Erie
Resurrection, Hermitage

Are congregations benefitting from the partnership over the long-term?

The partnership is helping congregations respond to the current realities of our region by supporting regional collaborations and partnerships among congregations. Today, forty-six congregations are either working together in partnership or regional collaborations supported by diocesan staff or are working with diocesan staff to assess opportunities to do so. Not all congregations discerning collaboration are prepared to discuss their plans yet, but active regional collaborations include:

Genesee Deanery
Jamestown Region
Northeast Region of NWPA and Salamanca, New York
Erie Episcopal
Cooperative Oil Region Episcopal
Hermitage, New Castle, and Grove City

In addition, the partnership is actively supporting St. Philip's, Buffalo in its work to renew and expand its collaboration with neighborhood partners.

Is it true that congregations in Western New York are paying higher assessments under the partnership?

No. The percentage rate of the diocesan assessment in the Diocese of Western New York, known as "full share," is set by Western New York's diocesan convention, not by the bishop or the diocesan partnership. The current form of the assessment was adopted by convention in 2012 and fully implemented in 2017. Each congregation's full share is 13% of its "normal operating income" on the parochial report form. If a congregation's assessment

has increased in the last several years, that is only because it has reported more income; it is not because the partnership is seeking to take more money from congregations.

Did the partnership hold the meetings that were promised after the last convention?

Yes. From November 2021 to March 2022, Bishop Sean and the partnership staff held seven evening regional meetings and four daytime conversations about how the diocesan partnership could best plan for future mission and ministry and respond to congregational needs and concerns. Based on the input from these meetings, Bishop Sean and diocesan leaders have redeployed staff and reallocated budgets. The schedule included:

Regional meetings

- November 30, 2021 at Christ Church, Lockport
- December 1, 2021 at St. James, Batavia
- December 6, 2021 at St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo
- December 7, 2021 at St. Stephen's, Olean
- February 10, 2022 at St. Stephen's, Fairview
- March 8, 2022 at Our Savior, Dubois (postponed from January due to Omicron surge)
- March 9, 2022 at St. John's, Franklin (postponed from January due to Omicron surge)

Daytime conversations

- December 1, 2021 at St. Paul's, Lewiston
- December 1, 2021 at St. Paul's, Holley
- December 7, 2021 at St. David's, West Seneca
- December 7, 2021 at St. Mary's, Salamanca

Is it true that Bishop Sean spends most of his time in Pennsylvania?

No. Except during COVID lockdowns, the bishop's time is split evenly between Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania. However, bishops in today's church often work differently from the way their predecessors did in earlier times, and Bishop Sean is no exception. Little of his time is spent in either diocesan office. Bishop Sean's ministry involves meeting with clergy and congregational leaders, with elected officials, and with community partners. He is often involved in troubleshooting difficult situations and leading conversations about the future in places where much is uncertain. Those meetings are not appropriate for public communication, but they are essential work for a bishop who is charged with helping our congregations contend with the realities of ministry in a new age.

If the partnership is such a good idea, why are churches continuing to struggle with declining membership and problems hiring clergy?

The Diocese of Western New York, like other dioceses across the Episcopal Church, has long faced decreases in membership and attendance. From 2011-2020, the Diocese of Western New York lost 32% of its membership, more than nearly any other domestic diocese in the Episcopal Church and more than any other domestic diocese in Province II. This long pattern of decline, which began well before the diocesan partnership was

conceived, will not stabilize or reverse overnight. The partnership's strategy of cost-sharing staff positions with congregations in transition is an effort to mitigate these trends.

In addition, The Episcopal Church has entered a significant clergy shortage. As of September, for example, there were 104 full-time clergy jobs posted and available, but only 26 clergy who are looking for parish jobs. Of those, about half are not able to move out of the region where they now live. As a result, it is very difficult to recruit new parish clergy right now. What's more, our region of the country puts us at a disadvantage with the limited pool of clergy that exists. We know that our modest cost of living and abundant natural resources make this region a great place to live. But our salaries are lower than many other places in the country, and the difference can negatively affect the way a clergyperson's pension is calculated.