

# STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE TRUSTEES AND THE DIOCESES OF WESTERN NEW YORK AND NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

*Concerning Listening Meetings Held Over the Past  
Four Months, and the Discernment Process Now in its  
Eighth Month*

More than 500 people attended one of eight listening sessions held this past winter to discuss the provisional bishop concept and the proposed enhanced collaboration between the Dioceses of Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania. The varied locations and times of the listening sessions afforded clergy and laity from both dioceses opportunity to ask questions, provide input, and interact face-to-face with the members of their respective Standing Committees. This was an important step in the discernment process which is now in its eighth month.

The Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Western  
New York

4/24/2018

Western New York (WNY) Standing Committee members were present at each of six WNY listening sessions held between late January and early March, taking notes, documenting comments and questions of attendees, and interacting with the attendees. The Standing Committee is thankful for the generosity of the host deaneries, and especially the host parishes, in facilitating the WNY listening sessions. Jim Isaac, president of the Standing Committee, moderated the six WNY sessions. Bishop Sean Rowe of Northwestern Pennsylvania spoke at each WNY session about his experience as provisional bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, PA, while simultaneously serving as bishop of the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania (NWPA).

Goals for the WNY listening sessions were that they would be open, transparent, numerous, and informative. The Standing Committee wanted to ensure that no one could later say, “I never was given a chance to ask my questions or voice my opinions.” We are confident that by God’s grace such goals were met by the listening sessions.

Bishop Rowe shared his enthusiasm during the listening sessions for the provisional bishop proposal under consideration by the Diocese of WNY, and his vision of how prayerful and adaptive collaboration between the two dioceses could enhance and support the mission of sharing and proclaiming the gospel throughout the “Rust Belt” region. Bishop Rowe made clear during the sessions that his interest and support for the provisional bishop proposal is prompted not merely because doing it may enhance institutional survival. Far more notably, in his mind this is all about facilitating in new and meaningful ways the spreading of the saving grace of the Gospel.

### *We Are Now Eight Months into the Process*

In August 2017, Bishop Franklin informed the WNY Standing Committee of his intention to retire as bishop on April 3, 2019. Traditionally, announcement of the bishop's retirement plans prompts Standing Committee to organize a search and profile committee to begin the search for a new bishop. In this instance, however, Standing Committee was asked by Bishop Franklin to consider along with the Standing Committee of Northwestern Pennsylvania the possibility of opening discussion of calling Bishop Rowe as a provisional bishop (see definition of a provisional bishop provided herewith). Bishop Rowe has been serving as provisional bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, PA, during the past four years, but that service is scheduled to end in a matter of weeks.

After consulting with Bishops Franklin and Rowe, the Standing Committees of both dioceses voted to initiate conversation between the dioceses about the possibilities and mutual shared benefits of having Bishop Rowe serve WNY as a provisional bishop, for perhaps a five-year term, while also remaining bishop in Northwestern Pennsylvania; there would be one shared bishop for the two Dioceses starting in April of 2019. The initial discussions had traction, so the discernment "Process Timeline" was established (see Process Timeline provided herewith). A significant component of the process timeline was to offer a number of listening and discussion opportunities for clergy and laity to allow them plentiful opportunity for inquiry and input during the provisional bishop discernment process. In all, the following discernment, listening and discussion opportunities and events have been experienced:

- Joint Diocese Clergy Overnight-Chautauqua Institute: 9/15 & 16, 2017
- Compression Planning Session-Erie PA: 10/8 & 10/9, 2017
- WNY Preconvention Workshops: October 2017
- WNY Diocesan Convention: 10/27 & 28, 2017
- Northwestern PA Diocesan Convention: 11/10 & 11, 2017
- Bishop Rowe & WNY Leadership Meetings: 12/11, 12/12, 12/18, 12/19, 2017
- Bishop Rowe & WNY Deanery Listening Meetings: 1/31, 2/1, 2/7, 2/8, 2/28, 3/1, 2018
- Joint Standing Committee Luncheon: Dunkirk NY 3/10/2018
- Bishop Franklin & NWPA Listening Meetings: 3/19 & 3/20, 2018

The Standing Committee found the WNY listening sessions of late January through early March to be enlightening and affirmative. It is apparent to the Standing Committee from the listening sessions that a substantial majority of those who attended are supportive of the provisional bishop proposal, as well as of further and enhanced collaboration between the Dioceses of WNY and NWPA.

It was also evident that the attendees of the listening sessions understand and appreciate that challenges do lie ahead, no matter whether a bishop provisional is called or a diocesan bishop with tenure until age 72 is called. While there were some concerns about a provisional bishop expressed by a minority of speakers/questioners at the listening sessions, the Standing Committee believes that the overall desire of this diocese is that strong consideration continue to be given to the ongoing process of exploring the engagement of a provisional bishop who would take office upon Bishop Franklin's retirement next April.

Now that the listening sessions have concluded, what comes next?

According to the [timeline established last fall](#), the discernment phase continues until the standing committees of both dioceses meet separately in May. In the Diocese of WNY, our standing committee members will vote on whether to nominate Sean Rowe as bishop provisional of the diocese, while in NWPA, the standing committee there will vote on whether to grant permission for Bishop Rowe to seek election as bishop provisional in WNY while continuing to serve the Diocese of NWPA.

If elected, Bishop Rowe would assume office in WNY as bishop provisional upon Bishop Franklin's retirement next April. The duration of Bishop Rowe's term would have to be finalized, but all discussions to date have considered a five-year term as most appropriate.

If both standing committees vote in the affirmative in May, WNY's clergy and lay delegates will vote on Bishop Rowe's nomination at a joint diocesan convention in October. If, on the other hand, either standing committee votes no in May, the Standing Committee of the Diocese of WNY will then promptly commence a traditional search for the diocese's next bishop.

Analysis of legal, canonical and financial issues pertinent to the provisional bishop proposal is ongoing, and there will be further discernment through prayer and discussion. Consultation of these matters has occurred with the chancellors of both dioceses. Counsel has been received from church wide resources. We are confident there is no canonical impediment to this proposal. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has been kept fully informed of our process to date, and he will be informed of the results of the votes of the two standing

committees. There are no legal issues with either New York or Pennsylvania state law impeding the sharing of a bishop between the two dioceses.

We are pleased to provide this report to you and look forward with great anticipation to how God will further inspire and empower this diocese, by abundant grace, into the future. We acknowledge the important mission this diocese has in WNY, pray that by the grace of God the vital and vibrant ministries of this diocese may continue to be empowered and enhanced, and trust that our diocese has not only the will but a way to live into the promise and potential for the life-changing future God is imagining for us.

The Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Western  
New York  
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