

SEJ elects first bishop of session

By Jessica Brodie

LAKE JUNALUSKA, North Carolina—“We have an election.”

With those words from Bishop David Graves, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference welcomed its first episcopal election of the 2022 session, announcing Tom Berlin as the first-elected bishop.

Berlin, the nominee from the Virginia Conference, was elected on Ballot Four and received 213 of the 208 required votes, or 61.56 percent of the vote.

Berlin received a standing ovation from the room as he headed to the podium to speak on his election, thanking his wife, members of his church who made an eight-hour drive to support him, the other delegates for the ways they have formed his faith and helped in his sanctification, and the bishops who have enabled him to serve.

“You all have been such a great blessing to my life and to be elected as bishop is a singular great honor,” Berlin said. With a nod to the message from opening worship that morning, Berlin added, “We can do nothing without Christ and anything with Christ that Christ desires, and there is nothing good I’ve been a part of that I’ve done myself.

“It is oddly humbling to stand before you and accept this special assignment.”

Front-runners the Rev. Connie Shelton received 201 votes, the Rev. Ken Nelson 161, the Rev. Edith Gleaves 131 and Dr. Iosmar Alvarez 94, but none of these were enough for a second election on that ballot.

Ballots Five and Six also saw no election, as none of the nominees received the needed 210 votes for an election. Shelton, Nelson and Gleaves continued as the top three vote-getters on those ballots, with Alvarez the consistent fourth.

Ballot Seven was declared invalid. By Ballot Eight the slate had shrunk to eight names as candidates withdrew their names from consideration. Up for vote were Shelton, Nelson, Gleaves and Alvarez as well as Sharon Austin, Zachery Bowers, Sharon Bowers and Amy Coles.

The session broke for dinner and will announce results of Ballot Eight in the evening session.

Budget, name change and more

Beyond elections, Wednesday’s late-afternoon session also included approval of the budget put forth by SEJ’s Committee on Finance and Administration, presented by Frank Dunnwind. CFA recommended a \$1.5 million budget for the 2021-2024 quadrennium (a reduction of 15.44 percent over the last quadrennium), apportioned to the annual conferences in the SEJ. CFA also so recommended the election of David Domnisse as treasurer again for 2021-2024.

CFA said the budgeted amount for 2021-2024 is projected to be “sufficient for the ongoing operational costs of the jurisdiction and its committees.”

SEJ also officially approved a name-change for the Red Bird Missionary Conference, which will now be called The Central Appalachian Missionary Conference. The Rev. Karen Stigall presented the proposal to change the name, citing their 100-plus-year history of serving the people of Central Appalachia, making disciples, providing Christian education, and facilitating fellowship in that region.

The vote passed overwhelmingly, and then Bishop Leonard E. Fairley prayed over the decision, thanking God for using ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Also that afternoon, Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson presented nominations from the College of Bishops, and Stephanie Hand presented the oral report for the Committee on Program and Arrangements.

Prayers lifted

Among the highlights of the afternoon were the prayers lifted by various bishops before votes and the announcement of results.

Graves asked Bishop Will Willimon to lead the body in prayer before the results of Ballot Three were announced.

“Look preciously upon your church,” Willimon prayed to a chorus of amens. “Help us to endure your chastisement and baptize us afresh with the Holy Spirit so that, inspired, we might be the church you deserve. Make us bold to speak the truth to one another in love and to love the truth more than our cherished differences or our own placidity.”

And before the announcement of Ballot Four, Bishop J. Lawrence McCleskey offered a prayer, using words from Dr. Jack Harnish in his blessing.

“In a world torn and fragmented, help us to heal everything we touch, and help us to touch everything,” McCleskey said.

After a dinner break, SEJ will reconvene at 7:30 for Wednesday’s evening session.