

United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania

December 31, 2020

For the month of December 2020, there is not much to mention regarding Pennsylvania state government. For the General Assembly, this month is a time of pause between the close of the recently concluded legislative session and the beginning of a new two-year session in January. Beyond matters pertaining to the pandemic, Pennsylvania's Executive Branch has been fairly quiet.

The most far-reaching action of the month is that Gov. Tom Wolf implemented increased pandemic mitigation measures, beginning December 12, in response to a spike in coronavirus cases. Wolf said the restrictions were intended to put Pennsylvania "on pause" until January 4, 2021.

The restrictions included a ban on indoor dining and closure of indoor gym facilities. Youth sports were paused, retail capacity curtailed and gathering sizes further reduced.

Pennsylvania's twelve casinos were closed—for the second time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gaming Control Board also closed 40 video gaming terminal rooms located in truck stops. However, internet games, sports betting and fantasy contests were not affected by the order—since they do not involve physical human contact.

Once January 4 arrives and the December restrictions end, the standard mitigation orders that were in place before December 12 will remain. This includes wearing masks, gathering limits and restaurant self-certification for indoor dining.

Challenges to the process and outcome of Pennsylvania's 2020 General Election have failed in the courts. On December 14, the 59th Electoral College of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania convened near the state Capitol to cast the votes of the state's 20 presidential electors for Democrat Joe Biden. Democrat Kamala Harris was likewise elected as Vice President. The Biden / Harris ticket carried Pennsylvania by over 80,000 popular votes. The electors' ballots will be forwarded to a joint session of Congress, where they are to be read into the record by Vice President Mike Pence on January 6.

On December 8, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding addressed the Pennsylvania Hemp Summit. Redding observed that the hemp industry is maturing, with cultivation sites located in most of the state's counties and a supply chain of 60 processors. He compared the industry's present situation with its beginning in 2017 as a research program. "It was a novelty, a crop you mentioned with a wink," said Redding. "But the hemp industry has matured quickly into an exciting and promising agricultural commodity."

The state is supporting hemp development, outreach and education. Pennsylvania began to reintroduce hemp growing under a 2016 state law that provided for cultivation in controlled studies. The law created a state Hemp Research Board and allowed universities and agencies to grow hemp for research purposes.

A 2018 federal law legalized hemp, eighty years after the federal government declared the crop illegal as part of a cannabis crackdown. Hemp must have levels of THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana, below 0.3 percent.

As for me, my tenure as interim executive director of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches will conclude on December 31. I think my work has been productive in moving the Council into a phase of renewal. The new executive director of the PA Council of Churches will be the Rev. Dr. Larry Pickens—also a United Methodist. I have positive feelings about the selection of Dr. Pickens to this position.

Furthermore, I have decided to retire from ministry and the position of coordinator of United Methodist Advocacy in Pennsylvania. This will also become effective on December 31. Consequently, this will be my last monthly report on political and public policy activity at the state-level in Pennsylvania.

For those interested in the future mission of United Methodist Advocacy in PA, and possibly working with this ministry, I would recommend contacting the office of the Bishop in your Conference.

Dai Morgan