

Navajoland seeks to become missionary diocese in resolution proposed to Episcopal general convention

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Volunteers at Good Shepherd Mission in Fort Defiance, Arizona, fill boxes of food for delivery to Navajo Nation residents as part of a feeding ministry of the Episcopal Church in Navajoland in November 2021. (Photo by Leon Sampson)

Navajo Episcopalians are asking the Episcopal Church to elevate their area mission, known as Navajoland, to the status of a missionary diocese—a step that, if approved in June by the 81st general convention, would enable Navajoland to elect its own bishop while continuing to receive financial support from the wider church.

The change is proposed by a resolution which was endorsed and submitted by a special convocation held in January by the Episcopal Church in Navajoland. Their work followed a previous resolution, approved in 2022 by the 80th general convention, entrusting Navajoland “to establish its own rules and procedures for a process of discernment for the calling of a bishop that reflects the values, teachings, and traditions of the Diné.”

In Navajoland, “we have a church that is growing,” Cornelia Eaton, the area mission’s canon to the ordinary, said in an interview. Eaton is one of five ordained Navajo clergy now actively serving Navajo Nation communities, and in recent years, they and other church members have expanded Navajoland’s ministries that serve local residents and bolster the mission’s financial sustainability, from starting a [beekeeping operation](#) to the opening of the [Hozho Wellness Center](#).

As an area mission, however, Navajoland’s bishop is appointed by the House of Bishops. At the January convocation, “there was a lot of energy around people wanting to become a missionary diocese. . . . A lot of the elders spoke up in support,” Eaton said. “It gives us the autonomy to select or have an election for a bishop.”

The Navajo people have their own ways of raising up leadership, Eaton added, “a Navajo traditional cultural way of doing that.”

The Episcopal Church’s ministry on the 27,000-square-mile Navajo reservation [dates back more than a century](#) to medical missions established in Fort Defiance, Arizona; Farmington, New Mexico; and Bluff, Utah. In 1978, the Episcopal Church carved out sections of the dioceses of Rio Grande, Arizona, and Utah to create the Navajoland Area Mission.

Rachel Taber-Hamilton, who is Shackan First Nation and serves as a priest in the Diocese of Olympia and the House of Deputies vice president, said the church is striking the right balance by supporting Navajoland without dictating where that support will lead.

“It really feels like we’re moving away from a patriarchal model to one that’s genuinely empowering,” she said.

Under Title I, Canon 11 of [the Episcopal Church Canons](#), area missions and missionary dioceses both “constitute jurisdictions for which this church as a whole

assumes a special responsibility.”

In an area mission, the House of Bishops assigns one of its own to “exercise jurisdiction as a missionary bishop” on matters of governance, ministry and worship. Barry Beisner, formerly bishop of Northern California, has served Navajoland in that capacity since May 2023, succeeding Bishop David Bailey.

Unlike an area mission, a missionary diocese is empowered to adopt its own constitution and canons, in compliance with the Episcopal Church Constitution and Canons, while also holding an annual diocesan convention and electing a bishop, standing committee, and clergy and lay deputations to the general convention.

In the [explanatory text accompanying Navajoland’s request](#) to become a missionary diocese, it notes that the area mission “was already operating very much like a missionary diocese.” Navajoland leaders, though, raised concerns about maintaining financial assistance in the churchwide budget.

“Parishioners give what they can to their churches but their monetary contributions are not sufficient to sustain a budget that must pay salaries and provide benefits for staff, pay utilities and maintenance for buildings and much more,” Eaton wrote in [narrative budget document attached to the resolution](#). “The Episcopal Church has provided grants to [Navajoland] but even those grants have not been enough to cover all budget items.”

Navajoland chose to move forward with its push to become a missionary diocese, Eaton wrote, with the hope that it will continue to receive financial backing from the Episcopal Church.

The [proposed 2025-27 churchwide budget plan](#) includes \$800,000 over three years for a bishop serving Navajoland and an additional three-year block grant of nearly \$1.5 million to support Navajoland’s congregations and ministries.

Separately, the 81st general convention [will consider three resolutions](#) aiming to address inequities in the church’s denominational health plans, some of which were discovered when Navajoland employees testified that they had effectively opted out of the plans because of the cost.

The executive council approved \$150,000 in emergency relief to cover Navajoland’s health insurance premiums for 2024. The proposals to the 81st general convention aim to ensure that coverage will continue. —Episcopal News Service