



**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)  
PRESBYTERIAN MISSION AGENCY  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WITNESS POLICY**

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April 14, 2020

Committee on the General Assembly (COGA)  
Stated Clerk and Co-Moderators  
Office of the General Assembly  
100 Witherspoon St.  
Louisville, KY 40202

**RE: Virtual General Assembly Options**

Dear Friends on COGA:

We appreciate the need for you all to decide promptly about how to organize a General Assembly process for this year in the midst of a pandemic requiring social distance and also to think about longer term revisions to the GA process. We write to support your creative thinking so that the necessary changes may also strengthen the prophetic voice and social witness of PCUSA— a voice and vision that our nation and the world need now more than ever in our lifetime. The muffling of many other voices increases the need and opportunity for the PCUSA to make a Christian ethical witness that addresses the injustices and personal tragedies arising as the pandemic reinforces the inequality, divisiveness, and authoritarian tendencies in our society.

We have followed the public discussion insofar as possible and appreciate one of our members being able to listen in on the April 9 discussion of possible GA configurations. As the committee of the General Assembly assigned to consider the church's capacity for prophetic witness as well as particular timely concerns, we would ask that the following elements be considered in your on-going deliberations.

We are guided by our respect for the General Assembly as a place of blessing for the whole church, which "has responsibility and power to:

c. "nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ," including "warning and bearing witness against errors in doctrine or immorality in the church and in the world; providing such services of education and nurture as its presbyteries may require; providing encouragement, guidance, and resources to presbyteries in the areas of mission, prophetic witness, leadership development, worship, evangelism, and responsible administration; discerning and presenting with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, matters of truth and vision that may inspire, challenge, and educate both church and world" (Book of Order, G-3.05)

We understand that on an administrative basis related to budget, program, and personnel approvals, your staff has identified 37 items of business, at least 23 of which are proposed for an omnibus motion. We agree with meeting virtually within the currently scheduled June week, for which commissioners have planned concentrated service to the church, and we know staff must find efficiencies and cost-savings. Thus we do not offer special pleading for our reports, the reports of other agencies and committees, or presbytery overtures, but we encourage you to find a way to evaluate what is "essential" on a theologically informed and fair basis, as well as in light of legal and fiscal requirements.

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We agree with the Stated Clerk that new patterns for GA are being set and need to be set. The new patterns should reaffirm, however, and not diminish the Assembly as a unifying event deliberating on matters of substance. To eliminate consideration of social justice matters or to treat them perfunctorily would reduce the significance of the Assembly and effectively elevate the upper level of staff over elected volunteers on issues of Christian ethics and social justice.

The social witness of the denomination has always involved the careful preparation of reports for commissioners to read and discuss in smaller groups before plenary debate. The quality of this deliberation directly affects the quality of the decisions and the respect in which the Assembly may be held by the church. In the areas of public witness, the comprehensiveness of the GA's role is unique in our system. Few governing bodies other than the Assembly have the capacity, awareness of resources and history, and ecumenical relationships to address new challenges with the church's best thinking.

As no one wants a pro forma GA that only checks off boxes, we would lift up the experience of other denominations, such as the United Reformed Church in Britain, which has its committees work on material in advance of their GA proper. To put off the Assembly a year could atrophy the church's voice at a crucial time for our membership, and for our country's democracy. Thus we hope that digital technology and your already good pc-biz system can enhance the processes for "decently and in order" committee deliberation. Webinars and other vehicles can bring in the resourcing and testimony to consider most of the regular GA business.\*

The GA has a well-developed "advice & counsel" process for its dedicated standing committees, which can summarize the wisdom of past assemblies. GA Committee reports for plenary vote would need to be very clear and could perhaps improve consideration of the business items if COGA provides a standard format.

Our bottom-line theological concern is the important calling of the commissioners, representing their presbyteries in this populist moment when over-simplification and distortion appear to rule. We believe there may be many good ideas across our church to help us be a creative and prophetic community, expanding rather than limiting our voice through new forms of conversation and serious deliberation.

At the same time, in light of past historical practice, the GA could commission the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board or other representative bodies to act on its behalf on matters of social witness and advocacy, as when the PMAB's predecessors were considered councils of the assembly. We do not say this to undercut our prior points, but because we want to encourage the most creative thinking, both urgent and important. We do not envy your task to reconcile all these considerations and hope that our comments are a help to you.

Respectfully yours,

Rachael Eggebeen and Steven Webb, Co-Chairs,  
for the full Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy.

\* For example Jewish Voice for Peace recently held a "virtual rally" for 30,000 people:  
<https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/gaza-virtual-rally/>

CC: Joseph Morrow, Warren Lesane, Diane Moffett, Barry Creech, Sara Lisherness

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