

Report on the Decision to Change the Location and Format of the 225th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Committee on the Office of the General Assembly
January 2021

The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (“COGA”) voted 14–2 on Dec. 3, 2020, to change the location of the 225th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (“225th GA”) from Columbus, Ohio, to a hybrid model based in Louisville, Kentucky, and to make subsequent changes to the format including meeting dates, committee meeting structure and plenary structure. This report outlines the decision-making process undertaken by COGA and includes various format options and financial considerations.

After the conclusion of the 224th General Assembly (“224th GA”), COGA met on June 30, 2020, in open session to debrief and process the proceedings. The conversation reviewed the breadth of the decisions prior to and during the 224th GA, primarily the decision to move the 224th GA to an online format in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recommendation to refer most of the business not deemed “core and critical” to the continuing day-to-day function of the denomination to the 225th GA.

COGA spent the majority of its time processing the blatant macro and micro-aggressions committed against various groups but especially against Black women and girls. In addition to this work, Stated Clerk Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II cast a vision for a different orientation to the General Assembly meeting where its focus is not in parliamentary procedure, debate and up-and-down votes, but instead enlivened faithful and creative ministry in the name of Jesus Christ all around the globe. Working in partnership with the Stated Clerk, through the conversations and discernment on that day,

COGA resolved to undertake a wholistic review of General Assembly meetings, the processes, procedures, documents and constitutional provisions that undergird meetings, and the format COGA provides for this most important gathering in our denomination's life and ministry.

From that consequential meeting, COGA Moderator Stephanie Anthony and Vice Moderator Eliana Maxim created two working groups to undertake work on the main areas as part of the review: **GA Format** and **GA Processes**.

GA Format Working Group ("Format"):

Wilson Kennedy, convener
Julia Henderson, staff
Andy James
Lynn Hargrove
Sallie Watson
Blythe Denham Kieffer
Leon Lovell-Martin

GA Processes Working Group ("Process"):

Leanne Masters, convener
Jihyun Oh, staff
Robin Pugh
Sam Bonner
Luci Duckson-Bramble

Both groups met several times between stated monthly COGA meetings and considered a variety of issues raised in feedback communication, debrief sessions with mid council leaders, and the 224th GA survey sent to all GA participants. Coupled with these important conversations, J. Herbert Nelson cast an exciting vision for General Assembly meetings that, when implemented alongside the technical changes approved by COGA, would move us out of former structures that previously excluded and sidelined some and into new frameworks that create a transformational environment for the work to be done.

COGA is indebted to the hard work of OGA staff who completed the challenging tasks of developing meeting options and cost estimates for COGA to consider. These options are listed in the graph below followed by a report of the decision process. While COGA voted to consider the various options in Closed Session at the recommendation of staff due to

contractual obligations, these options can be shared now so that all Presbyterians might understand how COGA arrived at its final decision.

Costs	For Discussion by COGA			Optional	Not Recommended by Workgroups			Louisville Investment Costs
	Committees & Plenary 1.2 in Person; Columbus (ballroom)	Committees Gather Sequentially; Louisville	Committees & Plenary 1.2 in Person; Louisville (ballroom)	All Online	Traditional	Committees & Plenary 1.2 in Person; Columbus (conv center)	Committees online; Plenaries in Person; Columbus	
Lodging	\$445,094	\$333,659	\$413,488	\$31,942	\$859,140	\$445,094	\$368,596	
Travel	\$401,254	\$363,014	\$392,744	\$7,992	\$401,254	\$401,254	\$390,812	
Meals & Per Diem	\$184,988	\$99,851	\$181,793	\$19,713	\$315,547	\$184,988	\$188,139	
Production	\$58,075	\$38,500	\$58,075	\$38,500	\$230,270	\$150,945	\$165,745	\$336,199
Committee Expense	\$58,740	\$4,200	\$58,740	\$4,200	\$58,740	\$58,740		\$16,200
Other Facility Expense	\$128,200	\$14,570	\$169,200	\$14,570	\$223,340	\$223,340	\$223,340	
GA Technology/IT	\$28,500	\$32,157	\$28,500	\$32,157	\$57,000	\$28,500	\$42,750	\$30,000
Online meeting expenses	\$67,059		\$67,059			\$67,059	\$44,327	
Attendee Support	\$38,500	\$19,500	\$38,500	\$13,000	\$38,500	\$38,500	\$38,500	
Worship & Bible Study	\$15,684	\$37,000	\$15,684	\$28,500	\$15,684	\$15,684	\$15,684	
COLA	\$88,375	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$132,556	\$88,375	\$88,375	
Attrition*	\$246,395					\$246,395	\$361,785	
Cancellation**		\$520,760	\$520,760	\$520,760				
Total	\$1,760,863	\$1,468,211	\$1,949,543	\$716,334	\$2,332,031	\$1,948,873	\$1,928,053	\$382,399

*Attrition estimates are based on shorter stays for these scenarios, but do not take into account possible reduction in attendees in some categories.

**Cancellation fees reflect our maximum exposure based on contracted schedules for cancellation before the end of 2020.

12.2.20

COGA was presented a variety of options through which to determine a path forward that was consistent with the values and opportunities discerned after GA 224 and the Stated Clerk’s vision for a new way to do the work of the Church. All options were considered first by the Format work group, then in consultation with the Process work group, and finally by all members of COGA, including ex-officio corresponding members from the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board: Diane Givens Moffett and Shannan Vance-Ocampo.

Many factors were considered: creativity, innovation and the changing financial reality. When the Format group began its work, it spent over 18 hours discerning how these options might serve the new vision emerging through the collective work. The

Format group was asked by COGA leadership to bring a series of recommended options for COGA to consider. This group waded through each option listed above and asked OGA staff to prepare comparison options between Columbus, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky. From the outset, the Format group understood that a “big box” seven-day General Assembly based in and around a convention center was not consistent with the realities of the Church’s work and life in the current context. Process group members spent considerable time discerning the potential impact of this determination and prayed together that the denomination might move forward in faith and vulnerability as it strove to do Christ’s work with glad and generous hearts. In addition, the Process group recommended that COGA retain the ability to provide for a 100% online option if the COVID-19 pandemic persists into 2022 and renders any in-person gathering unsafe.

Next, options centered in ballrooms that would allow for initial plenaries and committee work to occur in person was considered. After significant discussion, it was determined that these options did not allow for innovation and experimentation to be at the forefront.

If we are to truly live into the vulnerability of innovation, then we must fully commit ourselves to trying to do our work in a completely different spirit. We were encouraged to see an option based in Louisville that would allow for staff to stay at their homes and would allow for all staff to resource the work of the General Assembly, not just those who travel to a General Assembly location.

An interesting option was offered by OGA staff: an option based at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, Kentucky. This option would allow for committees to meet in groups over two weeks and then provide for a virtual plenary. The Format group found this option

the most consistent with the stated values and the Stated Clerk's vision, but also strove for creative ways to complete the work of the General Assembly. This group was further convinced of the potential of this option after reading compelling reflections from the General Assembly Committee on Representation ("GACOR"), which spoke to equitable practices enacted in committee meetings at previous General Assemblies that are only possible through in-person committee meetings. After considering all the options, the Format group invited the Process group alongside their work to consider the options and whittle the recommended options down to the three options on the left side of the above spreadsheet. These were the options presented to COGA at its meeting on Dec. 3, 2020.

COGA listened to the voices of its elected members, OGA staff, PMA colleagues, and consultations from the GACOR and a previous consultation with the Advisory Committee on the Constitution. This was not a decision made in a vacuum — but rather one made with the care of the denomination in mind while challenging the denomination to embody new structures that may feel uncomfortable, but with the Spirit's help, one that will lead us all into a more full expression of the body of Christ.