

Possible Formats for GA 226

Date range: June 29 through July 6, 2024 / Salt Lake City, UT /

Background

Why is COGA continuing to pursue GA structures that differ from GA 223 (2018) and previous GAs?

As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues moving through the first few decades of the 21st century, like all church leaders, the members of COGA and the staff of OGA have been increasingly aware of the need for change. In terms of practices and meetings of the General Assembly, the areas of concern that rise to the top include fiscal responsibility, earth stewardship, the reality of declining membership, technological advances, a fresh passion for long standing values such as equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and reclaiming the meaning of the Church.

The reality of the now two-year pandemic accelerated, necessitated, and inspired unprecedented change across the church. The all-virtual GA 224 (2020) was the result of the evident reality: high numbers of deaths, rapid spread of disease, overloaded hospitals. The move to a radically different format in just a short period of time was made all the more necessary when the convention center in Baltimore was turned into a field hospital.

The design and format of GA 225 (2022) reflects the church's ongoing response and commitment to the health and safety of all. Decisions and plans were made over the last two year as the virus continued to exist often in unpredictable ways. But it is essential to name that GA 225 also reflects COGA's ongoing effort to faithfully plan assembly meetings that more nearly reflect the values and convictions mentioned above and enable the General Assembly to serve our 21st century church.

The General Assembly is more not simply a business meeting. It is also more than the meeting of one agency of the national church. Assemblies are gatherings of the whole church. Therefore, we believe that all parts shall be equally involved all voices shall be heard, and equal participation is not an aspiration but where the Holy Spirit is leading us and what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do and to be.

Looking to the wisdom of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the sustaining grace of Jesus Christ, these are the models being considered for GA 226 (2024) in Salt Lake City.

Please note: None of the following models is anything but a model at this point. These are presented to offer some concrete ideas to help envision the possibilities of a new GA format -- a touching off point for conversations about the future.

Plan Alpha - Committees in-person, plenaries online

Format details

In-person: All committees meet in-person at the same time, June 29 - July 2, 2024, in SLC to carry out their work.

- Other participants such as Overture Advocates and Resource People may be participating via online connection.
- June 29 would be opening worship, plenary 1 and plenary 2 for the moderator election.
- June 30 could open with joint worship and then committees meet after lunch, giving them more time to meet Sunday, so many will conclude early Tuesday.
- Budgeting includes single hotel rooms due to potential ongoing health concerns.
- This model could still allow for special dinner and breakfast gatherings and will include several group meals. In-person worship happens. An assembly-wide participation in a local action for justice may be possible.

Online: After a short travel break, subsequent plenary gatherings and worship happen online over 5 days.

What values are prioritized with this structure?

- Relationship building, which happens first in person and is more effective when done in smaller groups like committees
- Upholds a faithful theology and practice of stewardship
- Use of current and available technology
- Community. Opening worship and plenaries 1 and 2 are in-person and together
- Opportunity for larger denominational witness

What are the drawbacks with this structure?

- Traditional exhibit hall would be cost prohibitive for the short time period
- Online plenaries require commissioners with computer skills and reliable internet connectivity

Approximate cost for this structure

- \$2,505,634

Plan Omega - committees online, plenaries in-person

Format details

Online: Two initial plenaries to open business and elect moderators happen online first, as well as opening worship. Then committees meet and carry out their work online.

- Plenary 1, opening worship and plenary 2 would be held online around April 30. Then committees begin their work. There are several possibilities for how this could be structured:
 - Shorter, weekly committee meetings starting May 1, OR
 - Three, day-long meetings in the month before going to SLC, OR
 - A schedule that is somewhere in-between the previous two options

In-person: Plenary gathering in hotel ballroom over June 29 - July 3, 2024. Budgeting includes single hotel rooms due to potential ongoing health concerns. This could still allow for special dinner and breakfast gatherings and will include several group meals. In-person worship could happen. An assembly-wide participation in a local action for justice may be possible.

What values are prioritized with this structure?

- Committee work happens over a longer duration, which may allow more time for research and reflection in the decision-making process
- Upholds a faithful theology and practice of stewardship
- Use of current and available technology
- Community. Plenaries and some worship happens in-person and together
- Opportunity for larger denominational witness

What are the drawbacks with this structure?

- Building relationships between committee members and others is more challenging in an online environment
- Traditional exhibit hall would be cost prohibitive for the short time period
- Online committee work requires commissioners with computer skills and reliable internet connectivity
- Due to timing needs for leader selection and training, commissioners would need to be elected by Summer 2023, only one year after GA225
- Reports from agencies would be due much earlier than for previous assemblies. The 30-day deadline before GA would be pushed back to mid-March. Other deadlines may also come earlier than usual.

Approximate cost for this structure

- \$2,818,442

Traditional Assembly - everything in-person

Format details

In-person: In-person committee work and plenary gatherings during June 29 - July 6, 2024. Budgeting would need to include single hotel rooms due to potential ongoing health concerns.

What values are prioritized with this structure?

- There is comfort in the familiar
- Accessibility challenges are well-known with this structure, so it may be possible to better accommodate for them with a more familiar structure

What are the drawbacks with this structure?

- This is by far the most expensive model, so it may be a stewardship concern
- This model was created when the PC(USA) was more than twice the size it is now
- This model is the most vulnerable in the face of catastrophic events like the COVID pandemic
- This model has fewer opportunities for the broader participation of PC(USA) members and supporters who can't travel to the event location

Approximate cost for this structure

- \$3,653,166

Online Assembly - everything online

Format details

- **Online:** The timing and structure of events for this is more flexible. There are several possibilities for how scheduling could work.
 - Plenaries and committee work happen over a long duration, such as twice a month for several months, or once a week for several weeks, OR
 - The meeting schedule resembles traditional assemblies and requires more than a week of intensive online time, OR
 - A schedule that is somewhere in-between the previous two options

What values are prioritized with this structure?

- Stewardship of financial and natural resources. This plan is the least expensive and has the smallest carbon footprint.
- Inclusivity and accessibility. This plan makes General Assembly more equally accessible to members across the US.

What are the drawbacks with this structure?

- No possibility for in-person gathering as one body for worship, building relationships, decision-making or local action for justice
- Online committee work requires commissioners with computer skills and reliable internet connectivity

Approximate cost for this structure

- \$1,251,926 (includes cancellation fees)

Additional considerations for GA 226

1. There may be significant cost savings available in adapting the form of the exhibit hall from that at previous assemblies. This would be savings not only by COGA, but also by the other agencies and groups who invest significant amounts in having a presence at the hall, creating and shipping signage and items and staffing booths. If the traditional exhibit hall setup is desired for GA 226, it would mean the additional cost of a 1-year contract staff position designated to exhibit hall work. This amount is currently unbudgeted.
2. Some potential commissioners have expressed a desire for the option to participate 100% remotely. Is there a possibility for creating this option for commissioners to GA 226?

Further possibilities

Future assemblies

- Commissioners are elected for a 2-year term. Another possible format for assemblies beyond GA 226 could involve election and work online over a more sustained period of time. For example, the United Church of Canada started their annual business meeting in February and concluded their work in August.
- One of the largest General Assembly costs, both monetary and environmental, is travel. This is an expenditure for any model that includes a large gathering all in one place. This is also a place of growing concern and recognition over the environmental impact of significant travel, especially air travel. In the future, the church may want to explore models that eliminate or minimize the negative impacts of travel while still finding opportunities to join Presbyterians together in community in some fashion.