



A GA like no other

by Leslie Scanlon, *Outlook* national reporter

There is no question, the 2020 General Assembly will be unlike any the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has seen before.

It's being held during a stunning season in American life — the aching time when more than 100,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, when protesters fill the streets night after night to protest racial injustice and the police killing of George Floyd, when churches are trying to live into the new realities of worshipping online, when the world seems to tilt in a new direction almost every hour and who knows what will come next? Fittingly, the new theme of this assembly is "From Lament to Hope" — the implications of which seem to expand day by day.

Virtual GA. This will be the **first time a PC(USA) assembly has met virtually** — all online, a technological challenge both for organizers and commissioners, something that many Presbyterians a generation ago probably never could have imagined. The assembly had been scheduled to meet in Baltimore June 20-27, but the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) decided formally in April that, because of the need for social distancing, that couldn't happen.

New business? This assembly will be much shorter than usual (with plenary sessions streamed online on June 19, 26 and 27) and the agenda will be abbreviated. COGA's recommendation is to include only business considered "**critical and core**," and to refer everything else to the General Assembly two years from now (although commissioners could try to alter that when the

docket comes up for a vote June 19, if they feel there's particular business — such as action on social justice — that just can't wait).

There's a lot on the list to be referred to the General Assembly in 2022 — including PC(USA) policy on climate change, gun violence, financial sustainability, racial injustice, international concerns and much more — and there's been pushback from some Presbyterian groups to add more business to the docket this year, although time will be tight.

Here's another possibility. Once the assembly convenes, a commissioner could move to suspend the rules to introduce new business. Such a motion would need a two-thirds vote to prevail — but if enough commissioners feel the PC(USA) needs to speak or act, to offer the assembly's public witness on the COVID-19 pandemic or George Floyd's killing or the systemic inequities driving the protests in the streets, that could happen.

Leadership. Much of the "critical and core" business on which the assembly will be asked to vote is not particularly controversial. It includes, for example, confirmation of the election of leaders of PC(USA) agencies and changes in standing rules.

The assembly also will make decisions about leadership, including deciding **whether to elect J. Herbert Nelson for a second four-year term** as the denomination's stated clerk — the public face and chief ecclesiastical officer of the PC(USA) — and choosing among **three teams of candidates who are standing to serve as co-moderators** of this assembly.

Friday, June 19th

7:00 pm	Plenary 1 Standing Rules Docket and Business Co-Moderator Report
9:00 pm	Moderator Election

All times are EDT.

Friday, June 26th

11:00 am	Opening Worship
12:00 pm	Recess
1:00 pm	Plenary 2 Consent Agenda Critical Business Budget Orientation
3:00 pm	Recess
4:00 pm	Plenary 3 Critical Business
6:00 pm	Recess

Saturday, June 27th

11:00 am	Plenary 4 Stated Clerk Election Critical Business
1:00 pm	Recess
2:00 pm	Plenary 5 Critical Business
3:30 pm	Recess
4:30 pm	Plenary 6 Remaining Business Meditation and Music
6:30 pm	Adjourn

Money. The commissioners also will vote on budgets — budgets that reflect the financial pain of the PC(USA) and the struggles of small churches to survive. A COVID-19 Financial Team is projecting **income declines across the denomination** of about 25% in 2020 and 2021, and the budgets this assembly will be asked to approve have been scaled back from earlier proposals to reflect that.

The proposed General Assembly per capita rate is \$8.95 per member in both 2021 and 2022 — the same as it has been in 2019 and 2020. “An increase to the apportionment rate for 2021 is not politically, or economically, feasible,” a report from the COVID-19 Financial Team states.

Worship and action. The assembly also will include a worship service on June 26 in which Nelson will speak theologically about lament, injustice and hope. Presbyterians are invited to participate online in a series of events — including the **Poor People’s Campaign Assembly & Moral March on Washington** (being held digitally at 10 a.m. EDT June 20); a Youth Rising event featuring young entrepreneurs of color from Baltimore (at 3 p.m. EDT June 23); and Bible study led by James Elisha Taneti and Mary Florence Taneti, focusing on Lamentations 5:20-21 (in two identical 45-minute sessions, at 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. EDT June 24). The offering being taken during opening worship will go to support Youth Rising.

One benefit of a virtual General Assembly: Anyone with internet access can watch online, free

of charge and without registering, either on the **GA224 website** or the **Spirit of GA** Facebook page. All business items coming to the assembly can be found at **pc-biz.org**.

The exact order of business during the June 26 and 27 plenaries is still to be determined, but here’s the **outline of the docket** (see above, all times are EDT).

New ways. Among the unknowns are how well all this will work and what glitches – technological or otherwise – might emerge, such as how commissioners discern together if they’ve never met in person and can’t spend those extra minutes gathered in small groups to get to know one another, talk through a complicated proposal or to pray together.

Some are mourning the lack of in-person connection and also that visceral sense an assembly provides of being part of a broader connective church.

This may, however, be the start of a new practice for the PC(USA) — one that’s certainly less expensive and perhaps more flexible. “We are talking about a major transformation in assemblies going forward,” Nelson has said. And also: “I don’t think we’re ever going to be the same church again.”

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