Title: Cancelling 2021 the General Assembly and resulting temporary changes in business procedures

Origin: Moderator Team

Background Information:

The report of the General Assembly Futuring Task Force, presented to the General Assembly in Indianapolis in 2017, called for continuing the practice of meeting every two years. Following that recommendation, the Time and Place Committee of the General Board recommended moving forward with plans to hold General Assemblies in Louisville in 2021 and in Memphis 2023. The General Assembly in 2019 adopted the Time and Place Committee recommendations. In order to secure dates and favorable rates, these contracts are generally made two to four years before the event. Event contracts are in place with the Louisville convention center and hotels for the 2021 General Assembly, and with the Memphis convention center and hotels for 2023.

The health risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have raised concerns and uncertainties surrounding travel and large gatherings. Travel bans into the U.S. and from the U.S. have been put in place internationally. Stay-at-home orders and social distancing protocols have been put in place in large swaths of the United States and Canada. A vaccine is not available as of summer 2020 and the number of new cases began to climb where there had been few before. The ability of asymptomatic individuals to infect others is a matter of concern that makes this outbreak particularly hard to control. While masks are required in many locations and businesses, they have not been universally adopted.

In light of the unprecedented current novel coronavirus pandemic and the uncertainties introduced into planning in-person events, the moderator team of the General Assembly recommends to the General Board that the July 31-August 4, 2021 General Assembly be cancelled.

A lot could change between now and the summer of 2021, and it is possible that large gatherings would be feasible. However:

- Canceling hotel and convention center contracts with more than 12 months’ notice carries a smaller financial loss than canceling within a year of the event date.
Moving forward with planning the event means significant staff resources and additional financial obligations, and greater financial loss if the event is ultimately cancelled.

Input from leaders across the church indicated the high likelihood that attendance would be low even if an event was held, leading to further financial loss as well as disenfranchisement for those who are not able to travel.

The authority to take this action can be found in the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Paragraph 55 states, “Between meetings of the General Assembly, the General Board may take interim action with established policy of the General Assembly on behalf of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), subject in all matters to a review of its action by the subsequent General Assembly.”

The Design allows for officers and General Board members to stay in place until their successors are elected at the next “regular” meeting of the General Assembly (Design p. 48d, 57). The moderator, moderator-elect, first vice-moderator, second vice-moderator and general minister and president are the elected officers of the General Assembly.

Since there would be no 2021 General Assembly, the Assembly would not elect new officers nor a 2025 class of the General Board. The current officers and General Assembly elected General Board members will serve until their successors are elected in 2023.

In the current environment made tenuous by the issues around the pandemic, allowing the current officers and board members to continue their service lends stability.

In paragraph 80, the Design specifies that in each biennium, the Administrative Committee nominates five persons for election by the General Assembly for the term of four years on the General Nominating Committee.

The Design does not provide for the General Nominating Committee members continuing their service until their successors are elected. The 2025 class of the General Nominating Committee would be elected by the General Board as interim action at their Spring 2021 board meeting on behalf of the General Assembly. The action will be ratified by the General Assembly in 2023.

What are the financial implications of this decision?
The financial implications of this decision are significant, as contracts with the convention center and hotels will need to be cancelled. The Office of the General Minister and President executes these contracts on behalf of the whole church, with the expectation that church members will attend and use the contracted hotel rooms, and that ministry partners will host events which will meet the contracted obligations for food and beverage purchases. Contracts for the 2021 assembly were based on a conservative estimate of attendees, taking into account declining numbers over the past several assemblies.

Cancellation fees at the Louisville convention center and hotels are over $500,000. The Office of the General Minister and President is responsible for these financial losses.

**Who was part of the conversation that led to this recommendation?**

The Moderator Team, the General Minister and President, and the OGMP staff have been meeting weekly for most of the past two months to gather information and discuss options. The College of Regional Ministers, the General Ministry Cabinet, and the Chair of the Kentucky Local Arrangements Committee were also consulted. While a variety of opinions were expressed, the overwhelming consensus was that *not* meeting in person was a wise and prudent course of action.

**What other options were considered?**

Several other options were considered, including various versions of the following:

A fully virtual General Assembly business meeting could be held. According to Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb’s Executive Order 20-23, non-profits can hold business meetings virtually due to the pandemic. However:

- A virtual meeting is unprecedented in our denomination at the general level, and there are no current procedures in place and no past practices to fall back on.

- To comply with the Design and EO 20-23, The General Assembly would need to be held at the same time as previously scheduled and would conduct business as usual with reports, resolutions and elections of officers, general board and general nominating committee as usual, including installation of new officers (Design p. 41, 42 & EO 20-23). This would require virtual meetings held over the course of multiple days. Such an undertaking would require unbudgeted expenses for technology, as well as training for staff and all participants.

The General Board would need to meet in person or remotely to process all General Assembly business prior to General Assembly (Design p. 44).
This would be cumbersome to do remotely under current rules and practices and would take significant staff resources.

A hybrid event with a smaller onsite event and options for virtual participation could be held. However:

- Conducting business with some voters onsite and some using a virtual platform presents similar challenges to those listed above, and privileges those who are able to travel to attend.

- A smaller in-person event faces the same challenges of travel uncertainties and low attendance and could lead to additional financial loss.

**Recommended Action:**

- Cancel the 2021 General Assembly, and

- elect the class of 2025 of the General Nominating Committee at the Spring 2021 meeting of the General Board.