

[OVT-023] On In-Person Assemblies

Source: Presbytery

Committee: Unassigned

Event: 227th General Assembly (2026)

Sponsor: Olympia Presbytery

Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Recommendation

The Presbytery of Olympia overtures the 227th General Assembly (2026) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) to commit to holding full in-person General Assemblies, including exhibit halls, beginning in 2028.

Rationale

Background:

When the Covid pandemic began in 2020, the Committee on General Assembly (COGA) quickly pivoted to provide an online assembly for both committees and the plenary which required reducing the bills and overtures submitted to only those required by the constitution. Subsequent assemblies have been a hybrid of online and in person experiences. The Committee on General Assembly (COGA) and all assembly staff should be commended for this organizational and technological achievement.

Going Forward:

While the essential work of the assembly has been accomplished with these technological tools, there have been drawbacks to the hybrid assemblies. Hybrid assemblies prevent us from interacting in a meaningful way for the furtherance of the ministry of the PCUSA.

In addition, the 226th General Assembly Report which consists of the responses of a survey sent to commissioners, notes that commissioners prefer in-person assemblies for both the committee work and the plenary work of the assembly.

Note the Summary of Survey responses to the 226th General Assembly:

In-Person Engagement: This theme appeared in an overwhelming number of responses to this question. Respondents largely cited the need for in-person spaces to meet and interact with others without the barrier of online platforms.” 1

These are a couple of commissioner quotes from the survey:

“In person assemblies, committees, and plenary. If we are a relational church, then we need to relate. In person.”

“It was hard to build community with people online especially when dealing with challenging topics.”

Even when survey questions referred to online participation, again the need for in-person connection was again prominent:

Online Participation: Overwhelmingly the comments support the notion that respondents prefer an in-person meeting space to foster community and effective discernment.” Commissioner comments included the following:

"There was little to no opportunity for folks to formulate amendments together, given restrictions on communication."²

In addition, commissioners would like to see the exhibit hall as part of the assembly experience.

Event Environment: A significant number of respondents mentioned that creating community should include a space conducive to in-person interaction. For example, respondents mentioned a desire to restore the Exhibit Hall as a space for community." Commissioner comments included the following:

"Add an extra day to plenary for organizations, meals, some sort of exhibit hall"

"Re-dreaming what an 'Exhibit Hall' could look like...how to bring people in community"

"Bring back the Exhibit hall, so that folks don't have to make extra effort to seek out constituency groups."

1 P.82 - A link to the Summary of Survey Responses was initially available on the COGA website but was removed when that website was archived. Subsequent requests for access to the file have been unsuccessful.

2 P.85 Summary of Survey Responses.

As important as the issue of hybrid vs. full in-person Assemblies is, it is curious that the survey of commissioners did not include a question addressing it.

However, it is also important to recognize that there are scores of comments by survey respondents calling for full in-person assemblies and none that we could find endorsing the current hybrid format.

Concern for Child Care

While child care needs may seem more challenging for a full in-person General Assembly, full participation in a hybrid assembly also requires addressing these needs, even for optimal participation in virtual meetings. Participants in virtual meetings must arrange their own child care. A common approach is to seek help from a spouse or grandparent. An in-person assembly offers the advantage of a shorter total assembly length, only a week of variation from normal family routines. The opportunity to include on-site family-friendly activities and to consider provision of child care services during official meeting times at an in-person assembly could further encourage the participation of parents of young children.

Concern for Assembly Cost

One of the biggest advantages of hybrid assemblies is their lower cost. However, we believe that there are many ways that costs could be significantly reduced for in-person assemblies. These are a few examples that could address the concern for the cost:

Prioritize cost over diversity of location. For example, if in-person assemblies were held at Louisville, we could eliminate the cost of travel and housing for all Presbyterian staff in the Louisville area. While the Presbyterian Center isn't large enough for the entire Assembly, it could be used as supplemental space.

Choose cities where the convention cost is lower. According to AI, the cheapest city to hold a convention is Indianapolis, which is less than a 2 hour drive from Louisville. The Assembly could be held only in locations near major airline hubs to reduce excessive cost.

Registration fees for the exhibit hall and observers and affinity groups could be increased.

Many of our presbyteries have surplus funds available to them due to the departure of congregations from the denomination. Also, some commissioners may welcome an opportunity to contribute to the larger church in this way.

We are all concerned about the burden of travel on the environment, and hybrid Assemblies would seem to reduce that burden. However, if any part of the Assembly is in person, that reduction is nullified.

Commissioner Testimonies:

Rev. Dr. Tammy Stampfli,

Minister Commissioner, Olympia Presbytery

As the minister commissioner from my Presbytery, I had little to no opportunity to engage with others. There was no opportunity for any kind of dialogue. We never broke into small groups and the chat was disabled. We were instructed per Robert's Rules to only address the moderator so we never addressed one another. We really did not get to know one another at all.

When we were in person, the places to gather were the opening party and some community meals. I found the opening party to be too loud and packed to really speak to anyone. The meals we had as a group were largely programmed with speakers and events, so talking to others was impossible. Of course, while we were on the floor, our attention was forward to the moderators and business moved rapidly, we did not even make small talk with our seat mates.

There was not the time or opportunity to build relationships. As commissioners, we heard from staff members and "expert" opinions regarding overtures, but not much from one another.

Rev. Ben Fitzgerald-Fye,

Minister Commissioner, Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery

As a commissioner, I attended both the virtual and hybrid GA meetings in 2024. As a stated clerk, I have serious reservations about the efficacy of online meetings (particularly committee meetings) and I think they present us with some issues of justice, equity, and inclusion. My direct observations are as follows:

Online committee work requires levels of expertise and comfort with technology that were not present in the committee I served on. Inability to use technology and to adapt to it when things get challenging create an environment of frustration, disconnection, and exclusion for those who rely on the moderators to have control of basic functions. Adding this frustration to the moderator creates an environment that places the needs of tech over the needs of democracy and representation.

Our committee's work took two to three times longer than it needed to due to technological dysfunction and a constant need to pause, restart, regroup, review, and reorganize in ways that tended to add to confusion rather than subtract.

Let me just say that I love General Assembly, I love being a Presbyterian, and I appreciate the work and the preparation by all those involved. I am so afraid we are becoming the dis-connectional church in order to save a few dollars and it hurts all of us... We are saving money in the worst possible ways and it will harm the cohesion, community, and interconnection of the PCUSA. General Assemblies must return to physical space to allow the kinds of discerning, interaction, debate, and community that make us the PCUSA. This matters.