

REPORT OF THE ASSEMBLY BUSINESS COMMITTEE MARCH 2022

Proposed deliverance:

The Commission of Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Agree that at the General Assembly to be held in Edinburgh from 21st May 2022, some commissioners may participate online rather than in person.
3. Instruct Presbyteries that when appointing commissioners to the 2022 General Assembly they shall identify those who will participate in person and those who will be online as recommended in Appendix 1 and shall advise the Principal Clerk by 1st April 2022.
4. Agree that corresponding members, delegates and youth representatives may participate online in the 2022 General Assembly by advising the Principal Clerk of their wish to do so by 15th April 2022, failing which they shall be assumed to be attending in person.
5. Instruct the Assembly Business Committee to bring forward a set of Standing Orders appropriate for use at the 2022 General Assembly in light of decisions made by this Commission.
6. Note that the Assembly Business Committee has prepared a Risk Assessment and that this will be kept under regular review up to the opening of, and during, the 2022 General Assembly.
7. Agree that the Assembly Business Committee, in consultation and with the concurrence of the Legal Questions Committee, may alter the arrangements agreed by this Commission for the 2022 General Assembly in line with any Covid-19 Regulations which are subsequently re-imposed, or reasonably anticipated to be imposed, by the Scottish Government.

Report

The General Assemblies of 2020 and 2021

1. In 2020 and 2021, given legal restrictions on gatherings imposed by the Scottish Government, the Assembly Business Committee and the Legal Questions Committee had no alternative but to find a way in which the General Assembly could still make necessary decisions. The General Assembly, therefore, met online in October 2020 and in May 2021.

The General Assembly of 2022

2.1 In the closing session of the 2021 General Assembly, an Act was passed calling the next General Assembly to meet in Edinburgh on the 21st May 2022.

2.2 The Assembly Business Committee has come to the view that some prospective commissioners may have health concerns about attending the Assembly in person.

2.3 The General Assemblies of 2020 and 2021 proved that it is possible to move our decision-making processes online when this is required by law. In the current situation we have to make a judgment call based not only the health concerns of some but also the effectiveness of the General Assembly in holding its Standing Committees to account in times of enormous change. There are also the features of the Assembly which are lost when there is only remote access. Feedback from commissioners at the recent online Assemblies has also shown the Committee that an online gathering does not enable networking, a wider sense of belonging, opportunities for celebration, or a platform for the Kirk's national profile which is created by an in person gathering of ministers, deacons, elders, youth representatives, and ecumenical and overseas partners. The Committee will continue to work on plans for the General Assembly which accord with civil law health and safety guidance and regulations.

2.4 A decision to allow some online participation while continuing to honour the decision of the General Assembly itself to meet in person is perhaps the best arrangement that can be made in 2022.

2.5 Accordingly, a sub-group was appointed to explore the possibility and practicality of some commissioners being permitted to participate in the Assembly online and much detailed work has been carried out.

2.6 After receiving the report of their sub group who had consulted with the Church's Health & Safety Manager, the Committee is proposing that, to enable wide participation from the whole membership of the Church and to

conform to Covid good-practice, the Commission of Assembly be asked to approve the proposals set out in the deliverance which accompanies this Report.

2.7 A Risk Assessment has been drafted under the guidance of the Health and Safety Manager and this will be continually reviewed in the light of changing circumstances. At the time of writing the Scottish Government has announced that all Covid-19 Regulations will be withdrawn on 21st March although there will still be guidance. On the publication of the Scottish Government Strategic Framework the First Minister said,

“These underline the shared ambition to get the future approach to managing COVID-19 right, and demonstrate a degree of consensus, even if we will not agree on every aspect of it....”

It is a statement of the obvious that we cannot remove all of the uncertainty about the future caused by this virus, but we do want to provide as much clarity as possible about our approach in the months ahead. In particular, we want to help people and organisations know what to do to manage COVID-19 effectively and sustainably, so that we have the best possible chance of returning to a much more normal way of life.”

Detailed proposals

3.1 The Assembly Hall has the capacity to accommodate 550 people if every second seat is left vacant. The figure of 550 does not count the seating in the Lord High Commissioner’s and Moderators Galleries to the north side of the Hall. At the time of writing we await confirmation that the mechanical ventilation system and other measures will provide appropriate airflow. To date there has been confirmation that intake and outtake fans are operational and we continue to seek professional advice. These proposals have the support of the Church’s Health and Safety Manager.

3.2 If each Presbytery filled all their commissions this would mean that 555 commissioners would be eligible to attend. In addition, there are members *ex officio*s, delegates, corresponding members, and youth representatives, as well as other occasional attendees such as Standing Committee members and supporters, Chaplains etc. This gives a possible total attendance of around 680. Although it is highly unlikely that this number would all attend at any one time, the Committee believes it would be prudent to work on the basis that there might at times be a full complement.

3.3 It is, therefore, being proposed that there needs to be a method whereby approximately one in four commissioners are identified as those who will participate online thus reducing maximum commissioner attendance in the Hall by 135.

3.4 The Committee suggests that for practical and procedural reasons each commissioner would be identified in advance (by 1st April) as attending in person or online. A table with proposed allocations for each Presbytery is attached as Appendix 1. The numbers given for in person attendance are not to be exceeded, linked to the numbers which can be accommodated in the Hall. The numbers given for online attendance are recommended allocations: Presbyteries in identifying their online commissioners are asked to bear in mind the decision of the Assembly of 2021 that attendance be in person, and to be respectful of and honour that intention so far as practicable.

3.5 It is proposed that delegates, corresponding members and youth representatives may choose (in advance) whether they wish to participate in person or online by informing the Principal Clerk by 15th April.

3.6 After the dates given for identification of whether a person will attend in person or online, it is proposed that it will not be possible for someone to vary their method of attendance unless that is a request for an in person attendee to move to online participation due to illness (including Covid-19), in which case they should apply to the Office of the General Assembly as soon as possible. Such a request, if granted, will then be irrevocable. The main reason for this is that the voting mechanism will differ depending upon how a person attends; various consequential adjustments will need to be made and it is obviously important that care be taken to maintain the robustness of the decision-making procedures of the Assembly. The Committee also notes that expense claims will be assessed sympathetically where a person’s mode of attendance is altered due to ill health.

3.7 The Committee suggest that to maximise seating for the commissioners, delegates, corresponding members and youth representatives there be no allocation of public seating this year – the General Assembly will be live streamed throughout.

Standing Orders

4. While we have a great deal of experience in regulating in person meetings and considerable recent insights on how to work completely online, if the Commission agrees to the Committee's proposals it will be important to ensure that the Standing Orders of the General Assembly are appropriate and do not disenfranchise either those meeting in person, or joining remotely. It is, therefore, proposed that the Commission of Assembly instruct the Assembly Business Committee to review the Standing Orders and arrange for amendments to be proposed by the Legal Questions Committee.

Risk Assessment

5. A thorough Risk Assessment has been prepared which sets out in detail how the meetings of the General Assembly will be as safe as possible for all participants. Some of these apply every year – for example, around technical preparations; some are specifically related to Covid-19. The Committee will continuously monitor public health guidance as this evolves in the coming months and will keep the Risk Assessment under regular review.

Cost

6. The Committee believes that savings made from not paying commissioner expenses to those joining remotely will cover the added technology costs of providing online participants with access to the Assembly. The aim is to remain within our allocated budget.

A New Covid Lockdown

7. The Assembly Business Committee is also aware that between the Commission of Assembly and the opening of the General Assembly unforeseen circumstances could arise which make an in person General Assembly impossible or unwise. If restrictive Covid Regulations are re-imposed by the Scottish Government (or are known to be imminent), then the Assembly Business Committee, in consultation and with the concurrence of the Legal Questions Committee, may necessarily need to make a decision to move the 2022 General Assembly entirely online.

In the name of the Committee

DONALD G B MCCORKINDALE, *Convener*
SUSAN J PYM, *Vice-Convener*
GEORGE J WHYTE, *Secretary*

APPENDIX 1

[Numbers of Commissioners by Presbytery for in person and online attendance]

Presbytery Number	Presbytery Name	Total Commissioners (Ministers, Elders and Deacons, including Former Moderators and Equalizing Elders)	In person (Recommended but not exceeding)	Online (Recommended)
1	Edinburgh and West Lothian	59	44	15
3	Lothian	19	14	5
4	Melrose and Peebles	10	8	2
5	Duns	4	3	1
6	Jedburgh	6	5	1
7	Annandale and Eskdale	6	5	1
8	Dumfries and Kirkcudbright	10	8	2
9	Wigtown and Stranraer	4	3	1
10	Ayr	16	12	4
11	Irvine and Kilmarnock	11	8	3
12	Ardrossan	9	7	2
14	Clyde	28	21	7
16	Glasgow	65	49	16
17	Forth Valley and Clydesdale	37	28	9
19	Argyll	14	11	3
22	Falkirk	16	12	4
23	Stirling	17	13	4
24	Fife	39	29	10
27	Dunkeld and Meikle	7	5	2
28	Perth	15	11	4
29	Dundee	15	11	4
30	Angus	14	11	3
31	Aberdeen and Shetland	17	13	4
32	Kincardine and Deeside	8	6	2
33	Gordon	12	9	3
34	Buchan	10	8	2
35	Moray	9	7	2
36	Abernethy	4	3	1
37	Inverness	13	10	3
38	Lochaber	4	3	1
39	Ross	8	6	2
40	Sutherland	6	5	1
41	Caithness	4	3	1
42	Lochcarron-Skye	4	3	1
43	Uist	2	1	1
44	Lewis	7	5	2
45	Orkney	6	5	1
47	England	10	8	2
48	International Charges	8	6	2
49	Jerusalem	2	1	1
Total		555	420	135