

Open-Meeting Policy

Item(s): There are no Open-Meeting Policy items before the Assembly at this point, although the issue itself demands constant attention so that transparency is not forfeited.

GA Committee Assignment: 03 General Assembly Procedures (if business arises)

Background: The problem of entities trying to hide their deliberations, drafts, and actions continues to be a sad reality in the PCUSA, despite an excellent [Open-Meeting Policy](#). Working groups of all sizes and authority simply find it expedient to do their work wrongfully shielded from the scrutiny—and often the knowledge, input, and oversight—of the church as a whole, whose business the group is ostensibly accomplishing. Such practices lead to harmful decisions, self-serving actions, and abuse of power.

The church as a whole is much better served by the protection and full implementation of the spirit and letter of the existing Open-Meeting Policy. By being able to attend meetings, obtain and read drafts, and receive full reporting of meetings one cannot attend, church members gain many benefits, such as:

- Having some input in and knowledge of how the work of the church is conducted.
- Exercising the opportunity to comment on the work in progress.
- Directing attention to problems or mistakes that could arise if the current course continues.
- Providing valuable input on decisions made, giving working entities the benefit of diverse expertise and viewpoints not represented in the group.
- Receiving adequate notice of and information about business that will come from working groups to such entities as the General Assembly.
- Gaining an understanding of how business items come together, the controversies that might be involved in the action, and the reasons for the content of the final proposal.
- Having the assurance that all work being done in the name of the church is being accomplished in the open, without back-room deals, special interests, or hidden agendas being kept from view.
- Knowing what has gone on in the working group, so that speculations do not take the place of actual direct knowledge.

Even the entities that are required to be open to scrutiny benefit from scrupulous application of the Open-Meeting Policy. The benefits to those church entities that freely keep their meetings and work open to inspection include:

- *An opportunity for the church at large to see the group's great value and hard work.* Closed meetings lead to obscurity, lack of support, isolation, and eventual opposition. Any group doing excellent work ought to want to shout it from the rooftops, not hide it behind locked doors!

An Advisory on Business to the 219th General Assembly (2010)

From the Joint Renewal GA Team

- *A lack of speculation about bad intentions or unscrupulous methods.* If the work is done in the sunshine, no one can bring negative accusations based on dark speculation. Everyone can witness the truth of the matter.
- *A chance for valuable diversity in input.* Any group has limited knowledge, background, and wisdom. Open meetings spur the interest of other gifted and knowledgeable Presbyterians outside the decision-making group. Such people can follow the work in open meetings and offer their insight through commentaries, testimony, or conversations.
- *Publicity about the group's work.* An open meeting attended by church members and covered by the press generates publicity. The growing church interest can help get the message out and accomplish the task.
- *Cooperation rather than opposition.* If various stakeholders in a decision have access to the process of group decision-making, they can be included in the deliberations. This brings a better decision and can well lead to broad acceptance of a report that might be stopped cold if delivered to a largely surprised and ill-informed church.

Problems that might arise: While the present Open-Meeting Policy ought to ensure free access to group deliberations and actions, entities abuse the policy, ignore parts of it, and still do such actions as withholding drafts of proposed reports or actions. Further, commissioners seem perplexingly prone to giving up people's right to observe the work and decisions of their church bodies, falling victim to pleas to shield groups (such as the Theological Task Force, recently) from scrutiny or accountability. Those entities wanting to hide their work sometimes predict draconian results from keeping their meetings open to press coverage, ignoring the reality that the best antidote for poor press coverage is ample press coverage.

Pertinent Resources: Open-Meeting Policy: <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/policies.htm>

Action by GA that will help the Church:

General Assembly commissioners must be alert to processes and decisions that would weaken or negate the present Open-Meeting Policy, voting at all times to retain strong and broadly applied sunshine rules.