

General Assembly Basics

How Business Comes to the General Assembly

There are four types of business that are deliberated and voted on at a General Assembly.

1. **Reports:** Reports, usually with recommendations for action, come from two sources. One source is standing committees or other offices and entities of the General Assembly. The other source is Special Committees or task forces. Take note of the ratio of reports, recommendations, and resolutions from G.A. divisions to overtures and Commissioner Resolutions (CRs). The overwhelming amount of business before each G.A. comes from its own entities. A typical G.A. will have roughly 700 items of business before it. Roughly 600 of the items will come from these reports. Reports are required to meet the 120 day deadline.

2. **Overtures:** The lower governing bodies—presbyteries and synods—may send items for action to the General Assembly by means of the **overture**. Most overtures originate in local church sessions. The session sends the overture to presbytery. The presbytery must approve the overture before it goes to the G.A. There are three **deadlines** for overtures: those that seek a change to the constitution must meet the 120 day deadline; those that do not seek constitutional amendment but have financial implications must meet the 60 day deadline; all other overtures must meet the 45 day deadline. The required consultation must be accomplished by 30 days prior to opening of the G.A.

3. **Commissioner Resolutions (CRs):** These are action items submitted to OGA at General Assembly. They must be signed by two commissioners. The assembly's Bills and Overtures Committee either refers the CR to another G.A. committee or rejects it, based on the Standing Rules. The Stated Clerk announces the deadline for CRs in the first plenary session. The deadline may not be earlier than 24 hours after the Assembly convenes. The rules for CRs are on page 13 of the Standing Rules.

4. **Communications:** Communications may be directed to the G.A. from several specified sources. To be considered by the G.A., a communication must be sent to the Stated Clerk and be postmarked by the 45 day deadline. This form of business, like the CR, may not be known prior to the Assembly meeting.

Assignment of Business to G.A. Committees

The initial assignment of business to committee is done by a Business Referral Committee that meets about six weeks prior to G.A. The committee is comprised of members of the Office of the General Assembly and the Committee Leadership Teams. The Bills and Overtures committee of the G.A. takes over the responsibility once the Assembly begins.

How Do the Committees Work at General Assembly?

Robert's Rules, the rules by which we conduct business in the PC(USA), recognizes that whenever any large body, whether it is the Congress of the United States or the session of

a local church, must deal in-depth with a variety of subjects, it is helpful for members of that large body to divide themselves into smaller groups (committees). The smaller group is charged to examine thoroughly one area of the larger body's responsibilities and then bring recommendations for action back to that larger body. If the committees are well-chosen so that they deal thoroughly with the work assigned to them and the people on the committee are truly representative of the larger body, the committee process is an excellent means of efficiently accomplishing a large amount of business in a reasonable time frame.

The workings of a General Assembly are no exception. Commissioners and advisory delegates combined equal roughly 850 participants. They have only a week in which to consider hundreds of items of business and complete their task. It is hard to imagine how the Assembly's assignment could be accomplished without committee work!

Commissioner Assignments to Committee

Before each Assembly, it is the responsibility of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly (the Rev. Gradye Parsons) to propose for the upcoming Assembly the number of Assembly Committees, their names, the approximate number of commissioners to be assigned to each Committee, and to specify the areas of responsibility that will be assigned to each Committee (defining the scope of that committee's work).

Commissioners and advisory delegates are each assigned to a single Assembly Committee. Commissioners do not choose their committee; it is assigned to them by OGA. Youth Advisory Delegates (YADs) and Theological Seminary Advisory Delegates (TSADs) have "voice and vote" in committee, so they participate as fully as the regular commissioners in the committee work.

Observers' Opportunity to Participate in Committee Work

Most committees will meet and complete their work during Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. Most committees will schedule a few hours early in their meeting time for public hearings. We hope you'll plan to testify, but even if you do not plan to give testimony to a committee, we recommend that you observe the hearings of one of the committees.

Committees Report to the Whole Body and May Submit Both Majority and Minority Reports

Some committees break into subcommittees for initial discussions and formulation of recommendations. Other committees accomplish all their work as a full committee. The committee is the place for thorough discussion, debate, and modifications of items of business. The Assembly usually (but not always!) adopts the committee recommendations. If one or more commissioners on a committee disagree with the committee's recommendation, that commissioner or group of commissioners may choose to submit a minority report to the Assembly.

The Body as a Whole Makes the Final Decisions

Most committee work will be completed by Tuesday afternoon. The body as a whole (“plenary”) begins to meet on Wednesday afternoon. All the work done by all the committees is then brought before the full Assembly item by item to be voted on. There is so much work to be covered that floor debate in plenary sessions usually covers only the most controversial subjects. The bulk of the “give and take” for any subject usually occurs in the committee meetings and the committee work in every area is extremely important in guiding the assembly’s final actions.

The Commissioner Committees

The list of Committees for this year's Assembly will be posted on [PC-Biz](#) this spring. A description of how they work is in *The Manual of the General Assembly*. Moderators and vice-moderators are appointed by the General Assembly moderator for the previous assembly. Committee assistants are appointed by the Stated Clerk.

Special Committees and Task Forces scheduled to report to the 2010 General Assembly:

1. Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage
2. Special Committee on Correcting Translation Problems of the Heidelberg Catechism
3. Committee to Prepare a Comprehensive Study Focused on Israel Palestine
4. Climate for Change Task Force
5. Special Committee to Consider Amending the Confessional Documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to Include the Belhar Confession in *The Book of Confessions*
6. Youth Ministries Task Force
7. Task Force proposing a New Form of Government