

General Synod Scenarios for Classis Advice and Feedback

The General Synod president and vice president are seeking advice from the classes concerning how to move forward with plans for General Synod 2021 given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In consultation with the Commission on Church Order, the following four possible scenarios are offered for classis advice. Each scenario lists considerations including benefits, drawbacks, and other factors to take into account.

Scenario A: Plan to hold General Synod in person at Central College in June 2021 as scheduled, with additional COVID-19 protocols and social distancing measures in place.

Considerations:

- This scenario fulfills the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* requirements for an annual General Synod gathering.
- It is unknown what the safety level of air travel and large in person gatherings will be by summer 2021. It is likely that some or even many delegates and staff will not feel comfortable traveling or gathering in June 2021, even with social distancing measures in place. Some classes may not feel comfortable risking the health of their delegates at all. The average age of General Synod delegates is older, putting many General Synod delegates in higher risk categories for COVID-19.
- It is unknown what travel will be permitted or advisable. Within the United States, travel restrictions vary from state to state, and some delegates may experience difficulty traveling to the meeting place if they can do so at all. The U.S./Canadian border is currently closed to nonessential travel (through January 21, 2021, as of the writing of this document, though indications are that this closure will likely be extended), meaning it may be difficult or impossible for our Canadian delegates to reach the meeting place - or, if they can get into the U.S., they may not be able to get back into Canada without a quarantine period. Additionally, the current president of the General Synod lives in Canada, and therefore may be unable to travel to the United States from Canada and back.
- It's likely that a greater number of delegates would choose to drive from longer distances to avoid air travel in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, and carpooling on long drives would be less likely for the same reason. This would significantly increase travel costs borne by the General Synod. In addition, our travel agent has informed us that airlines are running fewer flights, and decreased availability could significantly increase flight costs, especially for flights booked on short notice.
- It's unlikely that everyone in the general public in both the U.S. and Canada will have the opportunity to receive a COVID-19 vaccine by June 2021.
- Masking, social distancing, and health screening requirements would be necessary to ensure the safety of those present, and some participants may object to these requirements. Some of the requirements may be difficult to enforce.
- There will be a significant cost associated with necessary COVID-19 protocols and health and safety checks. GSC staff have consulted with In-House Physicians, a medical group that provides services such as temperature checks, rapid COVID tests, and other medical services for large meetings such as the General Synod, and we would most likely be looking at upwards of \$32,000 for these services at a six-day meeting the size of General Synod (fees are calculated on a per-person, per-day basis).

- There would be a significant increase in logistical costs: for example, the cost of accommodations would double, since it would be necessary for the General Synod to provide single accommodations, and the cost for audio-visual services would increase because additional screens and other equipment would be needed since the synod meeting space would be much larger to accommodate social distancing.
- Meeting in June would enable essential annual business to take place, such as approving the Commission on Nominations' slate of nominees, setting assessment amounts, and election of officers.
- Meeting in June would enable the General Synod to process the Vision 2020 report and recommendations, and there are parts of the denomination that are feeling a significant urgency to complete that process.
- Central College has asked that if we decide to not hold General Synod there in June 2021, we make that decision by March 1. If the RCA decides to proceed with plans for an in-person June meeting, and later in the spring it becomes clear that it will not be possible to meet in person, there will be cancellation charges owed to Central. There would also be significant cancellation charges in other areas - audio-visual services, nonrefundable airfare, etc.
- Due to the Vision 2020 report, it's likely that there will be an increased number of people wanting to observe General Synod. With COVID protocols in place, it may not be possible or safe to allow in-person observers, and this could cause frustration. However, permitting in-person observers would represent an increased risk to staff and delegates.
- Currently, Iowa has no restrictions on the size of indoor gatherings, though social distancing is required (gathering size restrictions were lifted on Dec. 16), but this could change again at any point if COVID-19 rates increase and the state's hospitals are under strain, forcing a last minute cancellation.

Scenario B: Do not meet in June 2021; hold a special session of the General Synod meeting in the fall, using the process for calling a special session provided in the *BCO*.

The *BCO* says that "the president of the General Synod shall call a special session of the synod...upon the joint application of three ministers and three elders from each of the regional synods, all of them serving currently as accredited delegates to the General Synod" (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 2 [2019 ed., p. 70]). This method could be used to request that the president call a special session of the General Synod to take place in October 2021. The agenda of the special session would be the Vision 2020 report and essential annual items of business like assessment amounts, nomination approvals, and election of officers. It would be shorter than a typical stated General Synod meeting, probably 3-4 days, and would most likely take place on a college campus over a fall break.

Considerations:

- Even if a special session of General Synod is held in October 2021, there would still be no annual session of the General Synod held in 2021.
- Though the time constraints of a shorter meeting would not permit the full slate of business that would come before an annual session of the General Synod to be addressed, essential items such as setting assessment amounts; approving nominees to councils, commissions, and boards; and the election of new officers could take place.

- In this scenario, the Vision 2020 report and recommendations would be able to be processed by the General Synod in 2021 rather than waiting until 2022, although if the Vision 2020 team's ultimate recommendations included changes to the Government, Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, or the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship [BCO, p. 75]), those could not be voted on at a special session. The Commission on Church Order has been working on a proposal for the Vision 2020 Team to include in its report that would not require such changes and could be acted upon at a special session.
- Costs for accommodations would be increased - though fewer nights of lodging would be needed, delegates would need to be housed in hotel accommodations because students would already be living in college dorms. On average, single hotel accommodations are about three times more expensive per night than single accommodations in a college dorm.
- Transportation between lodging locations and the college campus would be a logistical challenge, would add significant commute time, and would likely represent an added expense.
- COVID-19 protocols such as masking and social distancing would likely still be necessary in some form, though to what extent is unknown. Additional medical screenings may still be necessary, which would represent a significant added cost.
- It's possible that some participants will still not feel comfortable traveling or attending a large gathering in October 2021.
- It's possible that even by fall 2021 a greater number of delegates would still choose to drive from longer distances to avoid air travel in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, and carpooling on long drives may still be less likely for the same reason. If this were the case, it would significantly increase travel costs borne by the General Synod.
- It is possible that all, or nearly all, of the general public in the U.S. and Canada will have had the opportunity to receive the COVID-19 vaccination by October 2021, although, depending on timing, the general public may not have reached full immunity.
- In this scenario, the need for a last-minute cancellation is still possible should it prove to be still unsafe to travel or gather in October 2021, and this would bring with it significant cancellation costs.

Scenario C: Hold the stated session of the General Synod in October 2021

Under Roberts' Rules, the stated session of General Synod could be adjourned to a fixed time in the future if a small number of delegates met at Central College in June in order to declare no quorum and make a motion to fix the time to which to adjourn, which would be set to October. Roberts permits this procedural action in the absence of a quorum (*Roberts Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 11th ed., p. 347, XI. 30-32). The meeting to declare no quorum would properly need to take place in person at Central College, the place where the annual session was set to take place. This meeting to declare no quorum would be livestreamed if other delegates or others wanted to watch. They would not, however, be able to participate in the meeting virtually.

Considerations:

- This would qualify as an annual session according to Roberts' Rules of Order, thus fulfilling the requirement that the General Synod meet annually.
- This method of calling for an October session would require a few people to travel (the General Synod president and/or vice president and probably a few staff members) and meet in person at Central College in June 2021 in order to take the procedural actions

(as opposed to Scenario B, in which the delegates could petition the president and the president could call a special session in writing).

- In this scenario, the Vision 2020 report and recommendations would be able to be processed by the General Synod in 2021 rather than waiting until 2022 (assuming the October meeting can take place).
- Because it would be an adjourned meeting of the regular session of General Synod rather than a special session, amendments to the constitution could be proposed and approved at this session (amendments to Chapters 1 and 2 of the *BCO*, the Formularies, the Liturgy, and the Directory for Worship may only be made at a stated session, not a special session, as referenced under Scenario B).
- Logistical constraints would necessitate that this adjourned session be shorter than a typical General Synod because it would need to be held over a college's fall break to be able to use its meeting space, breakout rooms, and dining services. (Due to the balance between the amount of meeting and breakout space General Synod requires and financial constraints, a college campus is still the most feasible location.) Most likely, the full slate of business that would have come to the General Synod in 2021 would not be accomplished. However, the General Synod would be able to accomplish such necessary annual business as setting assessment rates, approving the Commission on Nominations' slate of nominees, and electing new officers.
- Costs for accommodations would be increased - though fewer nights of lodging would be needed, delegates would need to be housed in hotel accommodations (students would already be living in college dorms). On average, single hotel accommodations are about three times more expensive per night than single accommodations in a college dorm.
- Transportation between lodging locations and the college campus would be a logistical challenge, would add significant commute time, and would likely represent an added expense.
- COVID-19 protocols such as masking and social distancing would likely still be necessary in some form, though to what extent is unknown. Additional medical screenings may still be necessary, which would represent a significant added cost.
- It's possible that some participants will still not feel comfortable traveling or attending a large gathering in October 2021.
- It's possible that even by fall 2021 a greater number of delegates would still choose to drive from longer distances to avoid air travel in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, and carpooling on long drives may still be less likely for the same reason. If this were the case, it would significantly increase travel costs borne by the General Synod.
- It is possible that all, or nearly all, of the general public in the U.S. and Canada will have had the opportunity to receive the COVID-19 vaccination by October 2021, although, depending on timing, the general public may not have reached full immunity.
- In this scenario, the need for a last-minute cancellation is still possible should it prove to be still unsafe to travel or gather in October 2021, and this would bring with it significant cancellation costs.

Scenario D: Postpone General Synod 2021 to the next year

June 2022 would be the next time the General Synod meets.

Considerations:

- Most likely, all U.S. and Canadian residents who wish to be vaccinated will have been able to receive the vaccine at this point, making it less likely that large numbers of

delegates and/or staff will feel uncomfortable or unsafe traveling or gathering. A large proportion of vaccinated participants will also mean less risk that the General Synod meeting could contribute to a large spread of COVID-19.

- Eliminates risk of financial liability due to last-minute cancellations of either a June or an October 2021 in person session (venue, contractors, air travel).
- Eliminates additional expenses for a nontraditional in-person session (either an in-person session requiring enhanced COVID-19 protocols and social distancing, and/or an in-person session at a different time requiring hotel accommodations and additional transportation).
- Most likely, there will be fewer COVID restrictions by June 2022, so there will be fewer logistical challenges with planning a large in-person gathering.
- Increased frustration and anxiety in some areas of the denomination with the delay in consideration of the Vision 2020 report and recommendations. A greater number of churches may decide to leave if the report is not considered before 2022.
- There would be no annual session in 2021, which is not constitutionally permitted. In addition, some business that must be taken care of annually, such as approving nominations to councils, commissions, and boards, as well as setting the assessment amount, would again need to be handled in a nonstandard way. One possibility would be a brief, half-day virtual meeting of the General Synod to handle these essential items; because the General Synod's bylaws do not permit virtual meetings, any decisions made would need to be ratified by the next session of the General Synod.
- The current General Synod officers have already served extended terms due to the postponing of the 2020 General Synod, and if General Synod is postponed to 2022 the synod would again not have a way to elect new officers.