

GENERAL ASSEMBLY BUSINESS COMMITTEE

A Guide to Assembly Procedure

1. **Members of Assembly** consist of all ministers in active duty or retired and some elders, ex officio, together with a representative elder from each established congregation plus other elders commissioned by presbyteries to correspond with the number of ministers serving in special appointments. The Assembly quorum is fifty members.
 - (a) Normally, deaconesses, licentiates, presbytery representatives of Presbyterian Women and youth, representatives of the Youth Assembly and some others are invited to 'sit and deliberate' as associates – i.e., to take part with members freely in debate but without voting. In addition to a representative elder, kirk sessions have normally been given permission to name a further person aged up to 30 years of age who may sit and deliberate. This person may be an elder or simply a communicant member. However, for the 2021 Assembly, as a result of numbers being limited by Covid-19, only voting members are able to be present.
 - (b) While members should bear in mind any opinions or concerns of their congregations, kirk sessions or presbyteries, neither ministers nor elders attend as 'delegates', obliged to vote as instructed by any of these. The Assembly should be a gathering of fully responsible, free Christian men and women, always open to spiritual guidance and information on a Church-wide basis, not a device for counting up decisions already made elsewhere.
2. **The Moderator** chairs the Assembly and is in charge of proceedings, but should not take sides in debates. Former Moderators may deputise from time to time, should the Moderator wish to take part in debate or to withdraw from the House.
 - (a) When the Moderator rises to speak at any point all other members must yield to the Chair.
 - (b) Members should stand when the Moderator enters or leaves at the beginning or end of proceedings. Members may enter or leave at any time during proceedings, but should do so with as little disturbance as possible. It is a courtesy in so doing to give a slight bow to the Chair.

- (c) The recommended form of address to the House is simply ‘Moderator’ (not ‘Mr.’ Moderator, etc). Speakers should face towards the House and the microphones, not towards the Moderator.
3. **Councils and Commissions:** Work for which the Assembly is responsible is generally entrusted to various General Assembly councils and commissions. These must each present a report to the Assembly. Councils normally have a number of General Assembly committees working under them, along with permanent panels and ad-hoc task groups. A Commission of Assembly is entrusted with the executive powers of the Assembly, within the terms of its appointment. Members of commissions, councils and General Assembly committees are appointed by the Assembly itself, on the nomination of the General Assembly’s Nominations Committee. Councils and commissions are led by a convener, supported by a secretary, with the latter often being a senior member of staff. In what follows the word ‘councils’ covers councils, commissions and the General Assembly Business Committee.
4. **Reports of Councils:** While the Assembly is obliged to ‘receive’ the report of each council, it does not ‘adopt’ or accept responsibility for the contents of any report. Reports carry only the authority of the council concerned and not of the Assembly.
- (a) If found too unsatisfactory the report, or a section of it, may be received and referred back. This is done by an amendment to the resolution “That the report of the [name of council] be received”. Any matter to which the Assembly is to be committed must be stated in a specific resolution. Resolutions should be kept to conclusions, rather than include arguments in support such as are appropriate to reports and speeches. Similarly, speeches in the Assembly carry the authority only of the speaker.
- (b) Reports are first of all ‘presented’ and the appended resolutions ‘proposed’ en bloc, usually by a council convener who will make a speech in support highlighting aspects of the council’s work. The resolutions are then ‘seconded’ en bloc, usually by another officer of the council, who again speaks in support and usually addresses a different aspect of the council’s work. There is then an opportunity for questions to be asked. Routine and non-controversial resolutions have been grouped into one consolidated resolution for each council, where appropriate.

5. **Questions to Commissions or Councils:** These should quite strictly be asked only for further information or explanation, whether of something in the report or not in the report but for which the council carries responsibility; they should not be rhetorical or debating ‘questions’ to score a point. Questions should be written out and placed in the box provided as early as possible during the Assembly. They may also be submitted by e-mail to the Deputy Clerk (deputyclerk@presbyterianireland.org) in advance of the Assembly or during the Assembly, up to 15 minutes before the report in question is scheduled. Questions will normally be limited to two per person and ten minutes in all, unless the Moderator judge that a particular subject merits an extension of these limits.

6. **Resolutions of Councils:** These are then taken in succession, as printed at the back of the General Assembly Reports, and on occasion also in the Supplementary Reports. Resolutions are called by number. Those wishing to speak should at once come forward, or otherwise indicate to the Moderator their desire to speak: it will be helpful if they move in good time to sit on one of the seats reserved for the purpose on the front row, ready for the Moderator to call them. *Anyone seated in the gallery or an overflow room who wishes to speak, should follow the guidance given by the Moderator.* The final resolution of a council is “that the report of the [name of council] be received”. This is the point where members may discuss (not ask questions about) any matters in the report or for which the Council should bear responsibility, but which do not arise under any previous resolution.

7. **Timings during debate:** Unless otherwise arranged, speeches are limited as follows:

Presenting a group of reports and resolutions	7 minutes
Seconding a group of reports and resolutions	7 minutes
All other speeches	4 minutes

 - (a) If lapsed business accumulates, these timings may be shortened.
 - (b) A flickering light is given 1 minute before the end, a steady light for 30 seconds and a buzz when the time is up. Before commencing, speakers should announce their name and Congregation (or PW, under 30s representatives etc) and Presbytery. Apart from the proposer (or alternatively the seconder) having the right to speak again in closing the debate,

no one may speak twice in debating any one resolution or amendment, except to clarify some misunderstanding.

8. **Alternative format:** The Assembly may decide from time to time to conduct a particular item of business using an alternative format. This is usually on the recommendation of the General Assembly Business Committee. In such circumstances alternative rules of debate and timings may apply.
9. **Amendments:** These may be moved without prior notice by any member so as to change the terms of a resolution within its general scope but not so as to introduce another subject. Before debate on an amendment commences, the amendment must be given in writing to the Clerk's desk (or be submitted electronically to deputyclerk@presbyterianireland.org).
 - (a) Amendments may be submitted to the Clerk of Assembly in advance of the business concerned, and if received in sufficient time and licensed by the General Assembly Business Committee, will take precedence over any other amendments.
 - (b) At least one day's notice must be given of an amendment which would substantially affect the scope of a motion or overture. A plea for the outright rejection of a resolution is not an amendment.
 - (c) An amendment, if seconded, must be dealt with before further debate on the original resolution or consideration of any further amendment. If passed, the amendment is then put as a substantive motion, when one more amendment may be considered. If the first two amendments are rejected, one more amendment may be considered before reverting to the original resolution.
10. **Additional resolutions:** When a matter is not covered by existing resolutions from a council an additional resolution may be submitted by any member or associate as notice of motion for license. Unless there are exceptional circumstances these should be received by the Clerk at least one week before the Assembly. Resolutions rescinding or reversing a previous decision of the Assembly require notice of motion to be first given and accepted at the preceding annual meeting. Those invited to sit and deliberate may 'present' resolutions or amendments in the usual way, but these must be formally proposed and seconded by a member of Assembly before being debated.

11. **Voting:** This will normally be by voice, when the Moderator calls for those in favour to say “Aye” and those against to say “No”. The Moderator may also call for a standing vote, with voting cards displayed, to be counted. A vote by ballot will be held when asked for by not fewer than twenty-five members or at the discretion of the Moderator, by the use of voting tickets, to be counted by tellers. As this is a voting member only Assembly, the votes of all those present will be counted, whether they are on the ground floor, the gallery or in overflow rooms. Proxy voting for an absent member is not allowed. A member who has spoken or voted against any decision may intimate his or her personal dissent or protest immediately after the decision has been pronounced, but does not thereby free himself or herself from obligation loyally to implement the decision taken.
12. **Overtures:** These are proposals for a change in the Code, the Church’s Constitution and Government. Changes in rules, of which notice has been given in the printed Reports, may be adopted forthwith if approved by a two-thirds majority, or without such notice if approved with no one voting against. If approved by a lesser majority it is ‘placed on the books’, to be decided upon at the following Assembly. This applies also to rules governing the Central Ministry Fund and other Ministry Funds. In the Basic Code, where immediate operation is desirable, the change may be adopted temporarily during the intervening year as an ‘Interim Act’. If an overture contemplates a significant constitutional change it must also be sent down to presbyteries to be voted on during the intervening year.
13. **Memorials:** These are petitions to the Assembly, usually from some person or body who is not a member of Assembly, such as a subordinate court of the Church, a Church member or group of members, or persons unconnected with the Church. Procedures and forms are laid down by which the circumstances of the memorial are outlined and a definite request or “prayer” is stated. A memorial is also the procedure by which someone, whether member of the Assembly or not, asks for exemption from some Church rule on the plea of special circumstances.