**General Assembly to meet next month**

The governing body of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), its General Assembly, will meet next month from Monday morning, 4 October, to Wednesday afternoon, 6 October, at Assembly Buildings in Belfast, the all-Ireland denomination confirmed today (2 September). Welcoming the news, Rev Trevor Gribben, Clerk of the General Assembly, described the autumn coming together of Presbyterians from across Ireland as ‘an exceptional meeting that reflects the exceptional times we are living through.’

Meeting for only three days, with the necessary Covid mitigations in place, will mean that only ‘full voting members’ of the General Assembly will be able to be present in person, thereby ensuring the necessary social distancing required at the city centre venue.

“There can be absolutely no doubt that the life and rhythm of our church, since the first lockdowns of March last year, along with other organisations, businesses and society a whole, has witnessed extraordinary change that has required unprecedented adjustment as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, one of the casualties was our June 2020 General Assembly, which had to be cancelled,” Mr Gribben said.

The cancellation, the first time in PCI’s 180 year history, was agreed by ministers and elders meeting in a unique virtual Special Meeting of the General Assembly during April 2020. They also agreed that all necessary business of that year’s General Assembly be conducted through a special ‘2020 Standing Commission of the General Assembly’. Mr Gribben explained that the Standing Commission met via video conference last June to enable the Church’s work to continue.

This included the formal election and installation of Dr David Bruce as Moderator in a special livestreamed service of worship from the Assembly Hall in Belfast. With many hundreds watching online, there were just four people physically present. Over the following two days, and two further meetings, the Commission dealt with normal routine business, with only non-controversial, necessary, or time sensitive decisions being taken. All other business was remitted to a full General Assembly when it could meet.

“When April 2020’s Special Meeting voted to cancel that year’s General Assembly, I said at the time that, ‘unprecedented times often call for unprecedented responses to provide for a measure of certainty and continuity’. While somethings had to be done differently by necessity, decisions were taken collectively, prayerfully and democratically in the best sense of Presbyterianism,” Mr Gribben said.

“In considering different options for the 2021 General Assembly, we have kept a constant eye on the changing situation across the island. The rollout of the vaccination programmes, the easing of restrictions and the general reopening up of society, has meant that we will be able to hold an in-person meeting, though shifting our normal June week to the first week in October.”

Mr Gribben continued, “I very much welcome the fact that we can meet again in General Assembly this autumn. It will be an exceptional meeting that reflects the exceptional times that we are living through. The safety and wellbeing of those attending will be paramount, so we will ensure that all the necessary Covid mitigations are in place and public health guidance is followed. For these reasons, our General Council has agreed significant and necessary changes to this year’s Assembly.”

Mr Gribben explained that the first significant change is that the General Council, with delegated authority from the General Assembly itself, after consulting widely, agreed that only full voting members would be able to be present in person. In the main, these will be PCI’s ministers in congregations, active retired ministers and a commissioned representative elder from each of the Church’s 532 congregations. To ensure appropriate social distancing, the floor of the Assembly Hall, its large gallery, along with a few suitable overflow halls in Assembly Buildings, will be used.

Unfortunately this will mean that civic dignitaries and senior representatives from overseas and partner churches won’t be in attendance this year, neither will those other PCI members who usually are invited to ‘sit and deliberate’. While all sessions will be livestreamed, there will be no public access. The attendance of the media, however, will still be facilitated.

The second significant departure from normal practice is that the Assembly will open on Monday morning, instead of the traditional Monday evening, with a service of worship where Dr David Bruce will be formally confirmed as Moderator for an historic second term. Having given his address to the General Assembly, Dr Bruce will then chair it, with business scheduled across three days in ten sessions, closing on Wednesday afternoon.

Mr Gribben concluded by saying, “We will be announcing the key elements of the business nearer the General Assembly, but as October approaches we will continue to seek God’s guidance in preparing for this year’s Assembly, especially in the context of the easing of restrictions north and south, committing all to Him, who can do more than we can possibly imagine.”