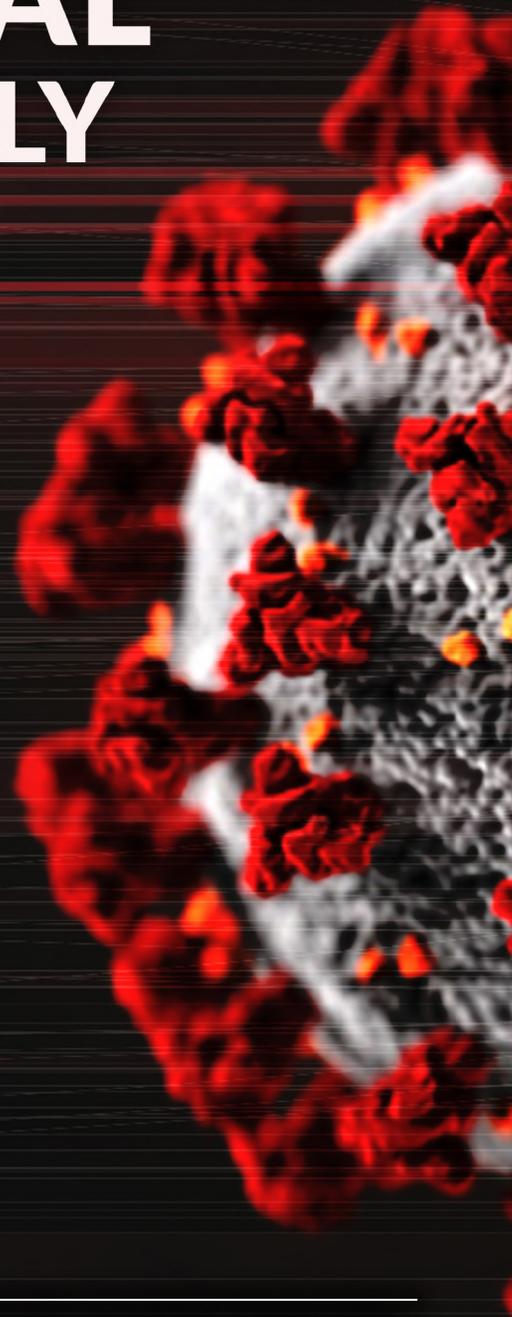


COVID - 19

AND THE CHURCH OF GOD
INTERNATIONAL
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF 2020



A PRIORITY REPORT ON THE POSTPONEMENT
OF THE 78TH INTERNATIONAL GENERAL
ASSEMBLY FROM 2020 TO 2022



COVID-19 and the Church of God International General Assembly of 2020

*Postponement of the 78th International
General Assembly From 2020 to 2022*

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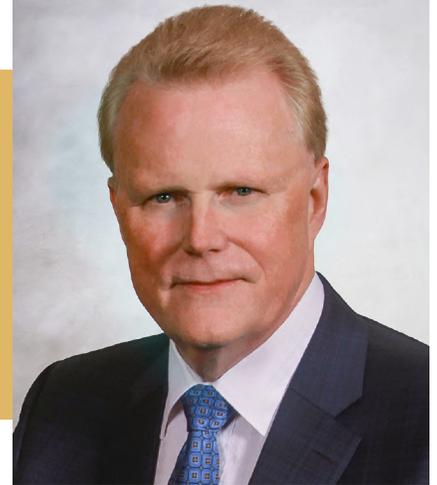


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Introduction

from General Overseer Tim Hill



At the close of the 77th Church of God International General Assembly, delegates left Orlando with refreshed spirits and an anticipation for the next two years—what we refer to in the Church of God as, “The Assembly Period.” Prior to 1948, that period was just one year. Not since the WWII years of 1941–1945 have these lapses of time between General Assemblies been interrupted. We always anticipated we would be back together again, and all planning worked within the Assembly period.

The span of 2018–2020 was no different. At the drop of the gavel of the last Assembly on August 3, 2018, a prospective 2020 agenda was already being formulated. Items left on the agenda in Orlando were being planned for Indianapolis, and action deferred to committees was soon to be tasked.

Perhaps the most significant development arising from the 77th Assembly was the implementation of Global Ministry Forums. By November of 2018, a task force to outline the scope of the forums was in place and four critical topics had been proposed as the key elements of a prospective 2020 International General Assembly agenda:

- Ministry Ranks
- Qualifications for Ministers
- Women in Church Leadership Positions
- Use of the term “Bishop”

For ten months in 2019, between February 7 and November 15, at least one member of the Executive Committee and I traveled to 15 locations in the United States and eight overseas destinations in an effort to reach every region of the globe where the Church of God has a presence. We started in Fountain Valley, California, and we ended the quest in Manila, Philippines. While in the process, we gathered a mountain of data from dialogue and surveys. By the end of 2019, we had a clear direction of how the Church of God worldwide was trending on these topics, and it set the core of a prospective agenda for the 78th International General Assembly due to take place in Indianapolis, Indiana, on July 21–24, 2020.

Then came January 2020. Rumors of a mysterious virus originating in Wuhan, China, was making brief headlines in the rest of the world. Like the Bird Flu or H1N1, caution was being observed and health officials were contemplating a potential spread. But by the end of February, this “coronavirus” had wreaked havoc in China and was emerging catastrophically in Italy. Fear of the unknown, combined with a faster-than-normal transmission rate, placed the world on edge.

On March 1–10, 2020, Paula and I were privileged to accompany a wonderful group of pilgrims to the Holy Land for the “Journey of Pentecost” tour. The Lord moved in our midst, and He revealed Scripture in powerful ways as we walked where Jesus walked. While somewhat “unplugged” from the news of the world during those ten days, the group could not escape the reality that the virus was seeping into all parts of the globe. Less than a week after our return from Israel, this country so dependent upon tourist dollars, shut down completely, not allowing visitors in for months.

We returned from Israel on a Tuesday and were immediately thrown into crisis-decision mode. Smoky Mountain Winterfest was set for that weekend, March 13–15. With youth groups already en route to Thompson-Boling Arena in Knoxville, the University of Tennessee announced their decision to cancel Youth and Discipleship’s premier event of the year. This was the first of a cavalcade of history-altering decisions that has now defined the year of 2020.

The purpose for this publication is twofold:

1. To describe the decision-making process toward the postponement of the 78th International General Assembly.
2. To outline the response of the Church of God to the Covid-19 pandemic.

These two events are forever intertwined, and documentation of this historic period reminds us that even in the midst of global crisis, our Lord Jesus Christ remained in control.



January 1, 2020
Huanan Market, identified as suspected center of the outbreak, is closed.

December 1, 2019
Earliest detection of virus.

DECEMBER '19

JANUARY '20

December 31
Chinese authorities alert World Health Organization about a string of pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan.

January 20
China's CDC announces coronavirus categorized as a Class B infectious disease.



February 6
An American citizen dies in Wuhan, the first known American death from the outbreak.

Feb 15–Feb 21
Cruise ship cases rise; outbreaks in Iran, Italy, and South Korea; more deaths outside mainland China.

Feb 29–March 6:
New outbreaks increase in Europe and the Americas.

FEBRUARY



February 11
WHO names the disease COVID-19, short for "coronavirus disease 2019." Death toll surpasses 1,000.

Feb 22–Feb 28
Outbreaks grow in Iran, Italy, and South Korea; travel restrictions increase; Middle East and Europe grapple with spread.

January 21

United States confirms its first case, in Washington state.

January 28

Japan and the U.S. evacuate nationals from Wuhan; United Airlines suspends all flights to China from the U.S.



February 5

WHO launches \$675 million preparedness and response plan to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus.

FEBRUARY

January 22

North Korea closes its borders to all foreign tourists to prevent the spread.



February 4

President Trump pledges to safeguard Americans from the coronavirus in State of the Union address.

CORONAVIRUS: A TIMELINE

MARCH

March 7–March 13

One fifth of all students worldwide are out of school; New York City declares state of emergency; NBA cancels season.

March 12

UT Knoxville cancels Winterfest at Thompson-Boling Arena set for March 13-15; coronacog.com website goes live with Winterfest announcement.



March 11

WHO declares pandemic.



March 11

International Offices close until further notice.

March 14–March 21

China reports no new Coronavirus cases for third consecutive day; Italy becomes country with highest death toll; Trump signs Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

MARCH

March 16
General Assembly Review Task Force appointed.

March 30–April 4
Worldwide coronavirus cases exceed one million; 10 million Americans file for unemployment; Wimbledon Tennis Tournament canceled.

April 5–April 12
Wet markets reopen in Wuhan; United States has most Coronavirus deaths.

March 22–March 29
Nearly one-third of the world’s population is living under coronavirus-related restrictions; Japan postpones 2020 Summer Olympics; WHO warns there is a “significant shortage” of medical supplies.



APRIL

April 2
GA Review Task Force convenes with Executive Committee.



APRIL

April 28
Executive Committee affirms continuity of Church Government Proposal.

April 29-May 6
Two percent of Moscow’s population tests positive for virus; global cases top 3.5 million.

May 7-May 14
Global cases top 4 million.

MAY

May 6
International Offices reopens on limited schedule; masks, gloves, and sanitizer provided to all employees.





April 13–April 20

China reports its first economic contraction in a decade; Austria becomes one of the first European countries to reopen; President Trump suspends immigration.

April 17

Zoom Call with IEC Task Force.

April 21–April 28

China pledges \$30 million to WHO; Italy and Spain ease lockdown restrictions.

April 7

International Executive Committee meets.

April 14

Zoom Call with International Executive Council; IEC Task Force appointed.

April 20

Zoom Call with Executive Council; votes to postpone 2020 International General Assembly at Indiana Convention Center.



May 23- May 30

U.S. deaths pass 100,000; House Democrats vote remotely; France pulls Hydroxychloroquine as COVID-19 treatment.

May 31

Some Church of God congregations resume in-house church due to a nationwide slowdown of the virus and reopening of the nation.

June 25

An IO employee tests positive for the virus; as a precaution, offices close until August 3.

JUNE

May 15- May 22

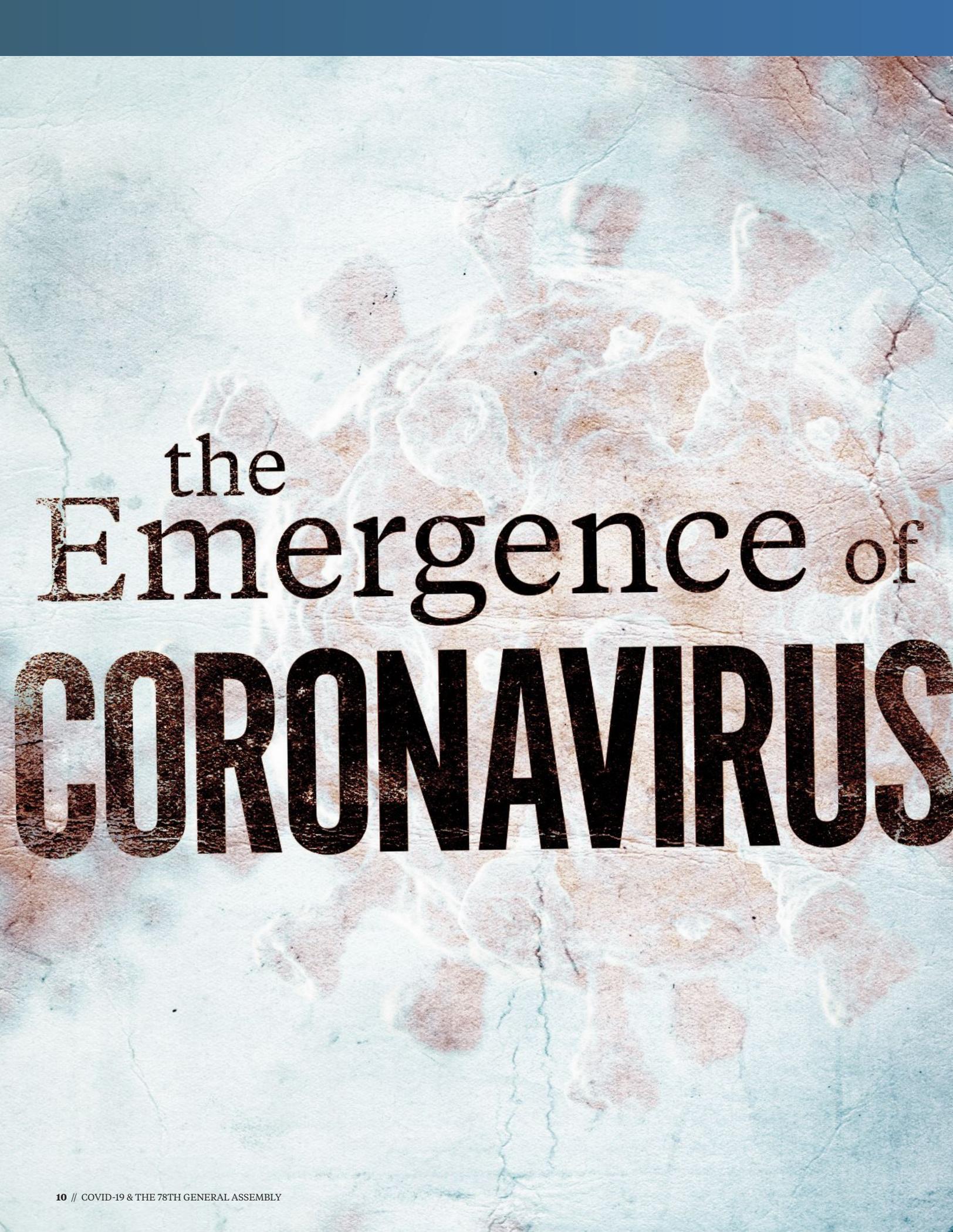
Number of global cases surpasses 5 million; China flattens the curve.

May 30- June 6

Countries begin to reopen; Spain extends State of Emergency.

June 8

International Offices (IO) reopen full time.



the
Emergence of
CORONAVIRUS

“Although the situation was dire at the time the pandemic was declared, the initial numbers were only a small indication of the death and destruction that would follow in the coming months.”

Background on the Virus

Although it was late January or early February of 2020 before most of the world heard about COVID-19 and the coronavirus, the deadly and highly contagious novel virus was spreading through many of the 11-million residents of the central Chinese city of Wuhan by late 2019; thus, the “19” designation in the name. By March 11, 2020, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside China had increased thirteenfold to more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, resulting in some 4,200 deaths. Based on those startling numbers, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 situation a pandemic—the first ever caused by a coronavirus.

Although the situation was dire at the time the pandemic was declared, the initial numbers were only a small indication of the death and destruction that would follow in the coming months. By mid-summer, some 13 million people worldwide—and more than 3.4 million in the United States alone—had been diagnosed with coronavirus and more than 600,000 had died from the virus around the globe with over 140,000 of those deaths in the United States.

Canceled Events

Only two days after the pandemic was declared, Smoky Mountain Winterfest was set to begin in Thompson Boling Arena on the campus of the University of Tennessee/Knoxville. The day before the start of the largest single annual event scheduled for the Church of God, the University of Tennessee issued a directive that Winterfest could not be held due to the potential spread of the virus. Even though there were no confirmed cases of

Initial Church of God Events to be Canceled

Smoky Mountain Winterfest	March 13-15
Ozark Winterfest	March 27-29
Frontier Kidfest	April 3-5
Midwest Kidfest	April 17-19
Carolina Kidfest	April 24-28
Smoky Mountain Gathering	April 28-30
National Youth Leaders Association (NYLA)	April 30-May 2
Smoky Mountain Kidfest	May 1-3
Ministerial Internship Program Commissioning	May 14-16
Eagles Youth Summit	July 1-4

coronavirus on the campus, the closing of Winterfest was the beginning of a series of closures that the church globally had to deal with over the next few months, including the cancellation of the 78th International General Assembly, scheduled for July 21–24 in Indianapolis.

Although state, regional, and international meetings of different church groups were canceled or postponed, the greater impact was the “shutdown,” “stay-at-home,” or “shelter-in-place”

orders that were issued in late March by different governmental entities, resulting in churches across America and around the globe being shuttered, many for months. While there had always been discussions about the church expanding outside the four walls of its building, the pandemic and the shutdown orders literally forced the church to leave the building. The phrase “the church has left the building” took on a new, but true, meaning.

To protect their congregants, churches implemented online services, drive-in services, and parking-lot church. Without access to their buildings, pastors improvised and came up with innovative ways to communicate with their congregations. In many cases, local churches experienced numeric growth online because they were “casting a bigger net” through Facebook Live, Zoom, and

Livestream. What could have been the end for many churches turned into an opportunity to reach more people using digital technology.

Financial Impact on Churches

One major concern for both churches and the business community was the financial impact of a long-term virus. With all but “essential” businesses closed, the global economy not only slowed down considerably, but it almost came to a complete stop. The economic fallout from the stoppage will be felt for months and years to come, and the total impact will only be observed in the pages of history. Hundreds of thousands of small businesses have already failed and many others will join them as they struggle to reopen in the coming months. Major businesses will also fight to gain back a customer base that is wary of venturing

out in public and being in large crowds.

Churches were not immune to the downturn in the economy caused by the coronavirus pandemic. According to two major independent surveys, as well as an internal survey performed by a church entity, two-thirds of pastors reported that giving to their church had dropped significantly since the pandemic was declared, with some reporting giving had declined 75 percent or more. However, with that bad news, all three surveys reported that a small number of churches had seen increased giving during the pandemic and an even greater number had seen their giving remain steady during the most trying times experienced by churches in a century. These numbers are being closely watched to see if there are any deviations as the congregations return to their church buildings once the shutdown orders are relaxed. Many

Smoky Mountain Winterfest, the largest annual event of the Church of God, was the first event cancelled in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.



fear that giving at pre-pandemic levels may not return in some congregations for months, or even years, into the future.

Global Financial Struggles

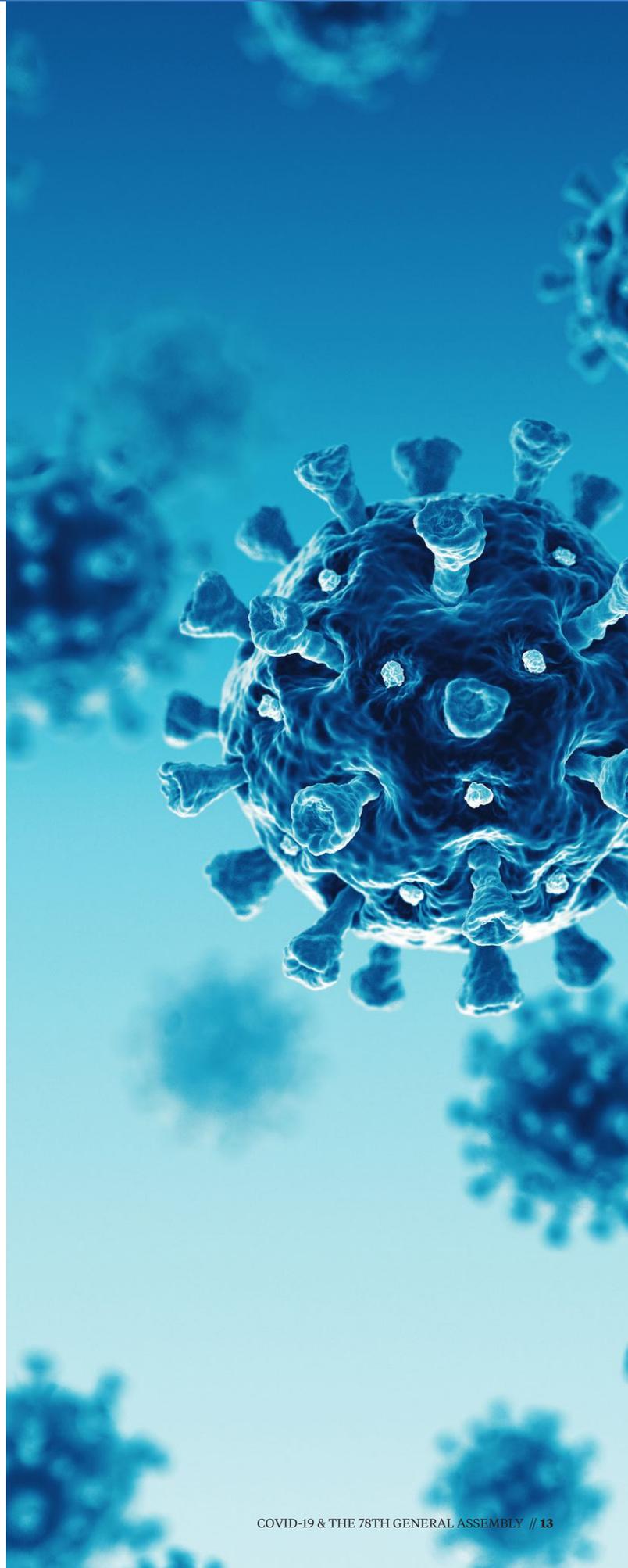
The impact on the global financial markets was something that had not been seen since the days of the Great Depression. For comparison purposes, it took the U.S. economy 43 consecutive months (1929 to 1933) to reach depression levels. In literally eight weeks, the coronavirus and the associated closing down of the economy produced similar economic output numbers, as well as similar unemployment numbers. The economy not only stopped growing, but it also went into reverse, going from a positive 2.3 percent growth in 2019 to a potential negative growth in 2020 of eight to ten percent annually.

With the slowing of the economy came job losses, again with percentages of unemployment not seen since the Great Depression. Tens of millions of people lost their jobs, going on unemployment to survive. Prior to this crisis, the most unemployment claims filed in one week in the United States had been 695,000. However, during a week in late March 2020, more than 6.9 million claims were filed nationally—a tenfold increase. During that same week, more than 880,000 claims were filed just in the state of California.

Although it seems impossible, these numbers would be even worse had the U.S. government not allocated more than \$3 trillion in a series of “stimulus” bills. That legislation provided support and direct relief to major businesses impacted by the pandemic, as well as more than \$659 billion to small businesses (including churches) to keep employees on the payroll. In addition to the business relief, individual taxpayers received direct checks from the government for \$1,200 each and an additional \$500 for each dependent child under the age of 17.

New Normal?

Coronavirus changed life as we knew it. Telecommuting took the place of going into the office. Video conferences replaced in-person meetings. Travel came to a halt, with airlines, ocean-going passenger ships, trains, and buses stopped because of the possible spread of the virus. Businesses and offices were shuttered. Unemployment soared to multiples never seen or even imagined. “Shelter-in-place” and “stay-at-home” orders spread across the nation and around the globe. And the global economy did not just experience a slow-down, it suffered a complete stoppage. Life as we knew it changed, maybe forever.



Covid-19's Impact on Ministry

Using biblical terms, a pandemic is no respecter of persons. It impacts individuals, businesses, and churches all in the same way. No one has been exempted from the shadow that the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic cast across the globe, including churches and church organizations.

Closure of International Offices

Shortly after the pandemic was declared in mid-March, the leadership of the Church of God made the decision to shut down the International Offices of the church, operating with very few task-essential employees in order to carry out vital functions of the church. With the main “campus” closed for seven weeks, the spread of the virus among International Office staff was stopped cold. For those individuals who did work during that time, strict social distancing was enforced and the cleaning process for the office buildings was increased drastically. Thankfully, most of the International Offices’ personnel were spared from the drastic health consequences of the virus.

While a good number of employees worked remotely, a few did have to come to the offices to handle essential tasks, such as disbursing funds for missionaries, drafting payroll, and providing assistance to churches and pastors in need. Some off-campus ministries, including Pastoral Care, Operation Compassion, and the Benefits Board, maintained normal operations during the crisis in order to provide their services to the church’s constituency worldwide.

“The Church Has Left the Building”

During the same time period, due to “stay-at-home” or “shelter-in-place” orders, most churches, not only in the United States but also globally, “left the building.” Due to the restrictive orders against groups congregating, pastors had to find innovative ways to showcase the church without a building in which to worship. Church of God congregations had parking-lot church, livestream church, Facebook Live church, and small group church. In some cases, the pastor stood behind the pulpit in an empty sanctuary but preached to literally thousands through social media, while in other cases, the pastor stood on a trailer, in the bed of a pickup, or on some other makeshift platform, preaching to people sitting in their cars. But in every case, the gospel went forward.

The resourcefulness of pastors and their resilience to the coronavirus pandemic was encouraging and enlightening. When forced outside the four walls of a building, the Church of God was still an effective witness to a lost and dying world. Pastors stepped up to the challenge and delivered.

While taking these drastic steps to maintain some sense of normalcy in church services, many churches were experiencing drastic drop-off in stewardship giving. Churches were being asked to do more, but with less resources. Many churches which had never transmitted a service over livestream, or some other media source, were immediately plunged into a world where their mere survival depended upon doing just that. An even greater number who had no digital giving option were forced to create some avenue for giving electronically in a matter of days.

Although some churches had considered broadcasting their services or adding digital giving before the outbreak, the pandemic forced action immediately. If the local congregations were going to survive, they had to act quickly, and they did. An acceptance process that would have normally taken years was forced upon some churches in a matter of days. Survival became the catalyst.

A “New” Normal

With those new tools now available to the vast majority of churches, there was much discussion about what “normal” would look like in the future for churches. Once the pandemic started subsiding, the question arose: “Will the church return to pre-pandemic operations?” Most observers and pastors believed that the pandemic had driven churches toward a “new normal.” Many were unsure how to predict what the “new normal” would look like; for example, “Would large church gatherings be a thing of the past”?

Passing the offering plate, communal hymn books, church bulletins, and “packing a pew” could become relics of the past under the “new normal” in churches. Even choirs and altar calls, where many huddled close together in corporate prayer, have been discouraged. Will these remain in the past?

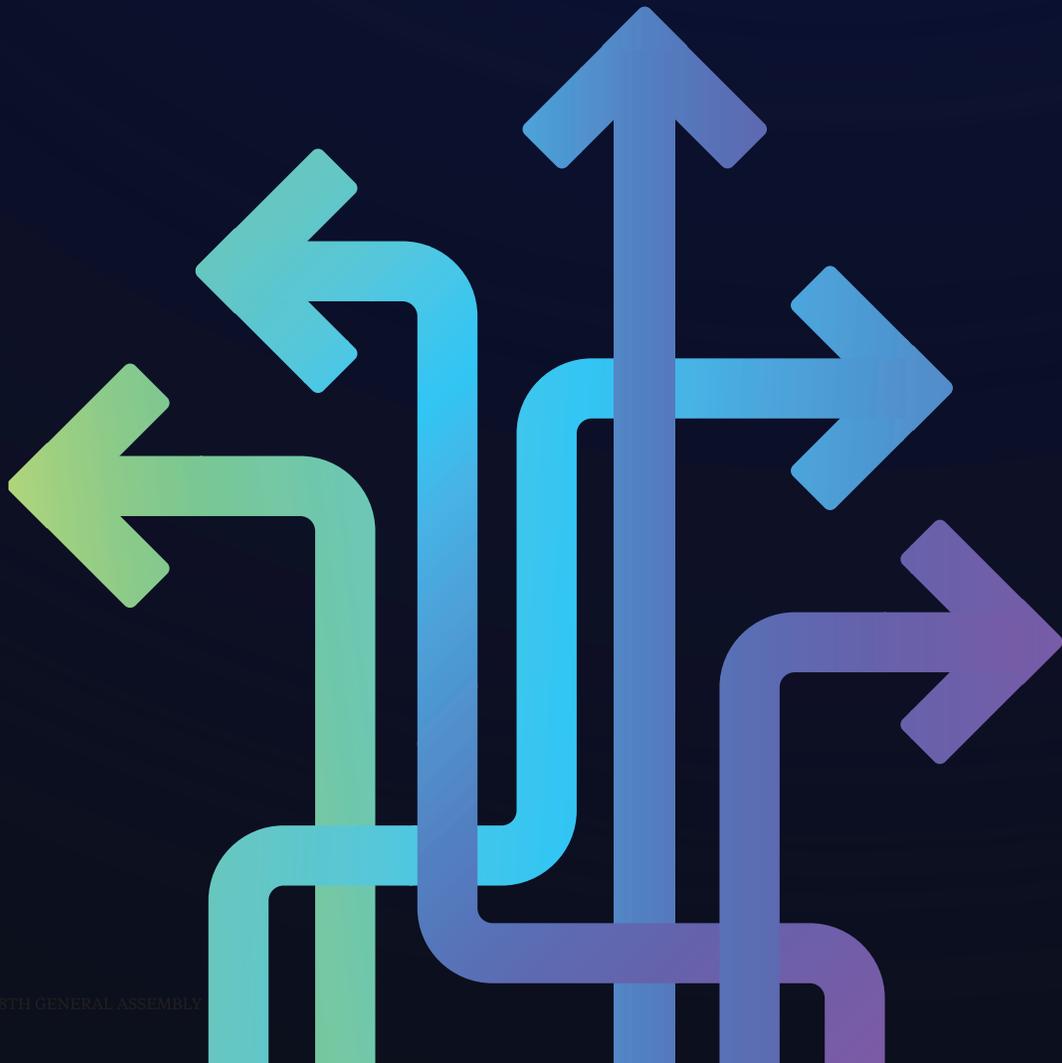
It seems obvious that hand-sanitizing stations and more regular deep cleaning of church facilities are here to stay. Further, there are some regular church attenders with compromised immune systems that may not feel comfortable returning to a regular church service. So, without doubt, alternative methods of services must continue to be used to reach others as an evangelistic tool, and also to reach those who would be considered regular churchgoers.

Certainly, there have been adjustments and changes in the way we were used to “doing church.” Hopefully, we have learned and will continue to learn from our corporate experiences and put that learning into efforts to better transmit the gospel to our congregations and to our communities. But through it all, God must be glorified as we meet each challenge that comes before us.



*The Church of God
International Offices
were closed for several
weeks during the
pandemic.*

**THE
PROCESS OF A
DECISION**



Zoom Conferences were the communication tool of choice as the International Executive Committee met virtually with world, national, and state leaders.



Once the coronavirus/COVID-19 was identified as a threat to society, it became immediately apparent that a recovery would not take days or weeks . . . but months. Around the world, shutdowns and cancellations began—some with no end in sight. Airlines deleted flight routes, or placed hard restrictions, particularly on foreign travel. NBA Basketball shut down mid-season. The Olympic Games, set for the month of August in Japan, were postponed until 2021. Major League Baseball didn't plan to take the fields until late July, and only then with empty stadiums. Large gatherings, like the International General Assembly, were viewed as perhaps the most vulnerable incubators of this unknown virus.

Even as far out as March 2020, the process of deciding a course of action for the Church of God's primary fellowship and business gathering had to be addressed.

Virtual Meetings Became the Norm

Because of COVID-19, meetings from mid-March on met virtually by "Zoom" conference—a service that would be implemented more than 150 times by groups and the International Executive Committee (IEC) over the next several weeks as the only way to gather individuals together for a group discussion. The first such meeting took place on March 12 with all administrative bishops to inform them of the difficult decision to cancel Smoky Mountain Winterfest.

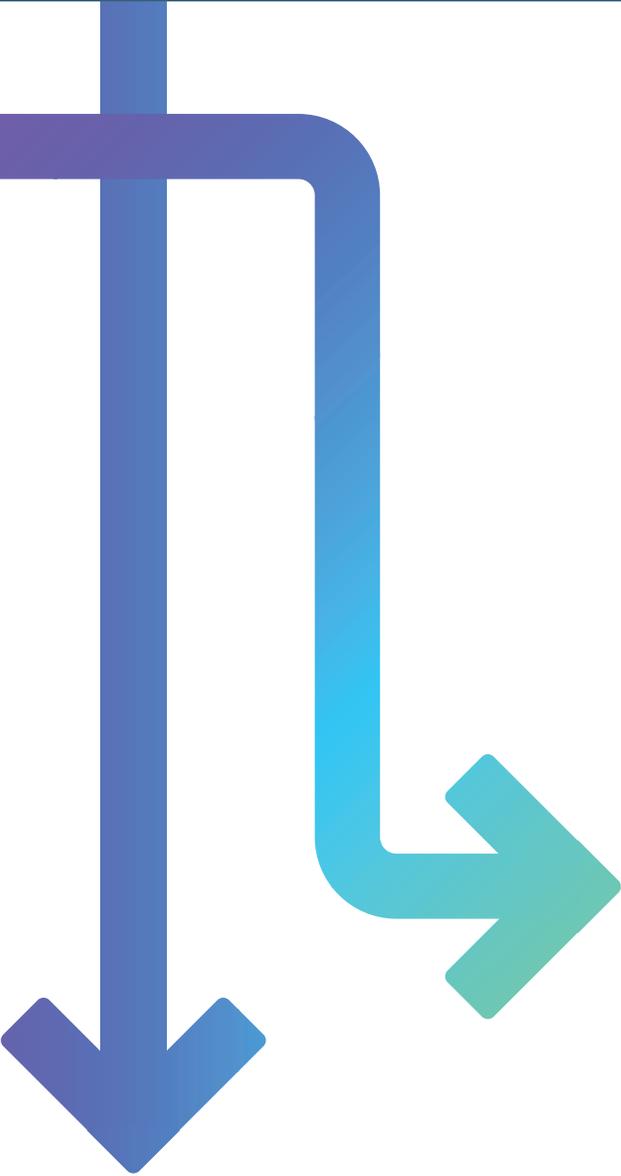
The IEC, restricted from travel like everyone else, met together in person many times, but with social distancing, as well as sanitization procedures in place. The Leadership and Communications Center studio became "Zoom Central," as the Communications staff assembled an elaborate video set, complete with multiple monitors to allow the IEC to view as many virtual participants as possible.

Coronacog.com

Recognizing the immediate and ongoing need for a central online location to obtain the latest information of progress, announcements, and resources, Church of God Communications established the website coronacog.com on March 12. For the weeks and months that followed, the website would be populated with informative articles assisting churches and individuals in navigating the pandemic.

Task Force Formed

Once the initial series of Church of God events were cancelled, starting with Smoky Mountain Winterfest, the IEC called upon a group of 40 individuals to make an initial assessment of the situation regarding the 78th International General Assembly, scheduled to be held in Indianapolis, Indiana. This International General Assembly Review Task Force was appointed on March 16 and consisted of a diverse group of church leaders representing every facet of the Assembly, including women's



ministries, children, youth, retired ministers, and leaders from World Missions. This task force met twice, including April 2, with the IEC. They initially recommended that the Assembly be cancelled; however, it was determined that the International Executive Council—consisting of the Council of 18 and the IEC combined—was ultimately the body to make the final decision regarding cancellation or postponement of the upcoming Assembly.

The Responsibility of the International Executive Council

On April 14, the International Executive Council (Council) met virtually and requested further study regarding an abbreviated Assembly and other issues, including online voting. General Overseer Hill appointed a separate task force from within the Council. Chaired by former General Overseer Mark Williams, these men took the findings and recommendations of the 40-member task force and sought to begin the process of bringing back to the Council the process of coming to a biblically-based decision that (1) took into account the safety of delegates that would attend the Assembly, and (2) would respect the processes outlined in the MINUTES and follow Robert's Rules of Order.

April 20, 2020 was the first day of the regularly scheduled April meeting of the International Executive Council. Ordinarily, in an Assembly year, this meeting would adjourn with a finalized agenda for the International General Council to review prior to the Assembly. However, the International Executive Council would convene this regular session, for the first time in history, by video conference. The primary item of business on the agenda was to come to a decision regarding the postponement or cancellation of the 78th International General Assembly.

The Council would take into consideration the findings and research of the task forces. They would hear reports on polity and parliamentary considerations (see page 20), historical precedents, and how the Minutes grant the authority to the Council to make the decision (see page 22). At the end of the day on April 20, 2020, the Council would adjourn their virtual deliberations with a decision to postpone the 78th International General Assembly until 2022 and a prayer for the decisions yet to come on the continuity of church government (see page 27).



The Council of Eighteen (left), along with the five members of the International Executive Committee, comprised the International Executive Council. Together they worked to come to the historic decision.

Front Row, L-R: H. Loran Livingston, Sean S. O'Neal, Jerry D. Madden, Gary J. Lewis, Thomas A. Madden, Terry R. Hart. Second Row, L-R: Keith L. Ivester, Timothy Wayne Oldfield, Travis C. Johnson, Eliezer Bonilla, T. Wayne Dority, Niko Njotorahardjo. Third Row, L-R: Stafford Petersen (South Africa rep.), Gerald E. McGinnis, Mark L. Williams, Barry A. Clardy, T. Bryan Cutshall, Kevin M. McGlamery and Ishmael Prince Charles.

Logistical Challenges Regarding Postponing the General Assembly

Within days of the COVID-19 pandemic being declared, discussions started regarding the International General Assembly, scheduled to be held in Indianapolis, Indiana, on July 21–24, 2020. Could we safely proceed with the meeting? Would the Convention Center allow us to use the facility without restrictions? Even if we were able to proceed with the International General Assembly, would delegates from around the globe be able to travel to the meeting and participate? These questions, along with many more, were the subject of discussions between the “VisitIndy” representatives and the International General Assembly “cabinet,” the church’s planning committee led by Dr. John D. Childers. Emails, phone calls, and video conferences, often on a daily basis, allowed for a continued dialogue.

Because of contractual penalties, the Church of God would have owed approximately \$2.5 million to the convention center and hotels had the church just outright cancelled the International General Assembly in Indianapolis. However, after much effort on the part of the International General Assembly cabinet, an agreement was reached that all penalties would be waived, if the Church of God would bring the International General Assembly back to Indianapolis at a time in the future. Although no workable dates were available in 2022, the International General Assembly will return to Indianapolis in July 2024.

Due to COVID-19, the contractual negotiations for a location for the 2022 International General Assembly were initially hampered. Once contracts were finalized later in 2020, the location for the 2022 International General Assembly was announced.

International General Assembly Review Task Force

Timothy M. Hill, Raymond F. Culpepper, J. David Stephens, David E. Ramirez, John D. Childers, David M. Griffis, M. Thomas Propes, David Blair, Rob Bailey, Michael L. Baker, Shawn Baker, Kenneth R. Bell, Andrew Binda, Eliezer Bonilla, Ishmael Charles, Paul Conn, Bryan Cutshall, Stephen Darnell, Wayne Dority, Ángel Marcial, Carlos Morán, Timothy Oldfield, Niko Njotorahardjo, Nick Park, Stafford Petersen, Dee Raff, Art Rhodes, Yvette Santana, Tommy Smith, Peter Thomas, R. Lamar Vest, Dennis Watkins, and Mark L. Williams. Consultants: Barry Blair, Kevin Brooks, H.W. Wilson.

Executive Council General Assembly Review Task Force

Mark L. Williams, chair, Eliezer Bonilla, Ishmael Charles, Barry Clardy, Terry Hart, Gary Lewis, Jerry Madden, Gerald McGinnis, Kevin McGlamery, Sean O’Neal.



Indianapolis, Indiana, was to be the site of the 2020 International General Assembly until it was postponed.

Polity & Parliamentary Considerations

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world and consideration was being given as to the feasibility, safety, and economic concerns in relation to being able to conduct an Assembly as normally convened, guidance from the *Minutes* was sought. Unfortunately, Church of God polity does not specifically speak to the issue of how to postpone an Assembly nor does it provide guidance regarding the effect of a postponement on tenure, elections, or the continuity of governance.

After a thorough review of historical precedents and polity statements, it was determined that the *Minutes* do speak of the general authority of the International Executive Council to act as the highest governing body of the church between Assemblies “in the general interest and welfare of the church” (S2. BYLAWS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, ARTICLE VI, Governing Bodies, 3. INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, *Authority*, page 63.; S5. INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, III. Duties and Authorities, 1., page 69).

Elections and Tenure

Elections scheduled for the 2020 International General Assembly were as follows: five members of the International Executive Committee, Council of Eighteen, director and assistant director of International Youth and Discipleship, and the director and assistant director of International World Missions. In each case, the individuals

serving in these positions had fulfilled their elected term, and some had completed the maximum tenure in office.

In accordance to the *Minutes*, eligibility to serve in any elected positions abides under the authority of the International General Council for election (Council of Eighteen) or nomination of elected positions, and by the General Assembly for elections. Once the issues of the postponement of the International General Assembly and the continuance of governance were resolved, the resolution of tenure issues resides until such time as nominations or elections by the International General Council and elections by the International General Assembly can be properly conducted and successors chosen.

A Virtual Voting Model?

This fact raised the question with the International Executive Council as to the possibility of having a “virtual” Assembly and conducting elections online. In an age that has seen major technological advancements, including online church services during the pandemic, some suggested that holding a virtual (or online) International General Assembly should be attempted, including requisite voting by the same method. The *Robert’s Rules of Order Manual* (Newly Revised, 11th Ed.) does have provisions for online voting, if an organization has authorized online elections and the conducting of online meetings (RRO, *Electronic Meetings*, pages 97-99) in its bylaws. The Church

... believing it is in the best interest of the Church of God, to hold in place the tenure of all state/regional administrative bishops and youth directors until the 78th International General Assembly in 2022...

of God has no such authorization or guidelines in its bylaws. Therefore, a “virtual” Assembly would violate the bylaws, which require voting members to be “present and registered.”

Travel Restrictions

It was suggested that perhaps the Executive Council could schedule an “abbreviated Assembly” with limited participation. However, because of the international travel bans that were in effect, very few, if any, of Church of God international delegates would be able to attend the General Assembly, and that would violate a basic parliamentary principle that the rights of the minority be protected. According to the Church of God Bylaws, the International General Council elects only the Council of Eighteen. All other actions, including nominations, must be approved by the International General Assembly in session. As of this time, no Bylaw changes have been adopted to allow for online voting among Church of God membership. The security concerns and the validation of votes with the International General Assembly “delegation” would be extremely difficult, simply because record of membership is maintained at the local church level, not at the state, national, or international level.

Without any codified rules or processes established, the rights of the minority could not be guaranteed. The “minority” would include international delegates, as well as those in the United States who were under locally mandated “Stay-at-Home” or “Shelter-in-Place” orders preventing travel or those who did not have the technology or the access necessary to accurately cast a vote. Again, the protection of the rights of the minority is a fundamental parliamentary principle guaranteed by *Robert’s Rules of Order*.

Continuity of Governance

The question was raised as to what would happen if the Assembly was postponed, and the Executive Council did not act to preserve the continuity of the governance of the church following the proposed date of the closing of the Assembly on July 24. The professional parliamentary consultant for the Church of God, Dr. Barry Blair, stated frankly that the Church

of God as an organization would cease to exist, as we know it, because there would be no general overseer or Executive Committee, Executive Council, director and assistant director of Youth and Discipleship, or director and assistant director of World Missions. Therefore, the Executive Council in its April 20, 2020, Zoom meeting adopted the following resolutions:

That the 78th International General Assembly be postponed until the summer of 2022.

That the International Executive Council herein exercises the above-noted authority granted it by the International General Assembly, and declares that all persons currently holding general elected positions continue in their positions with full legal and ecclesiastical authority until such time as nominations or elections by the International General Council and elections by the International General Assembly can be properly conducted and successors chosen.

Appointments

In accordance with Church of God polity, the International Executive Committee is empowered under “Duties and Authorities” to make church leadership appointments. With the resolution of the decision by the Executive Council to postpone the International General Assembly, the question regarding appointments was referred to the International Executive Committee.

In the meeting of April 28, 2020, the International Executive Committee made the following decision:

Believing it is in the best interest of the Church of God, to hold in place the tenure of all state/regional administrative bishops and youth directors until the 78th International General Assembly in 2022, at which time tenure would resume in accordance with the International General Assembly *Minutes*.

Executive Council Authority Considerations

Introduction

A primary consideration regarding the decision of postponement of the 78th International General Assembly was the question: “Who has the authority to postpone the International General Assembly?” The International Executive Council is the highest governing body of the Church of God between International General Assemblies and tasked with decisions to act upon the general interest and welfare of the church.

While there is no rule that specifically addressed the global COVID-19 crisis, the International General Assembly (Church of God Bylaws, Article VI, International Executive Council, Authority), does grant authority to the International Executive Council to “consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.” In addition, the International Executive Council is empowered by the International General Assembly to make “arrangements for the time and place of the International General Assembly.”

Minutes Authority

The *Minutes of the 77th INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY, Book of Discipline, Church Order, and Governance* provides insights regarding general perspective and directions concerning the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.

The following *Minutes* references are germane to authority, procedure, and emergency situations:

1. S2. BYLAWS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, ARTICLE VI, Governing Bodies, 1, INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Meeting*, page 60.
The International General Assembly shall meet biennially to consider all recommendations from the International General Council.
2. S2. BYLAWS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, ARTICLE VI, Governing Bodies, 3. INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, *Authority*, page 63.
This council shall consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.
3. S3. INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY, II. Procedures, 2., 3., page 65.
 2. *Arrangements for the time and place of the International General Assembly shall be left to the International Executive Council.*
 3. *The general overseer is authorized to call an International General Assembly of ministers provided that travel and other conditions are such that the International Executive Committee and the Council of Eighteen deem it wise to do so.*

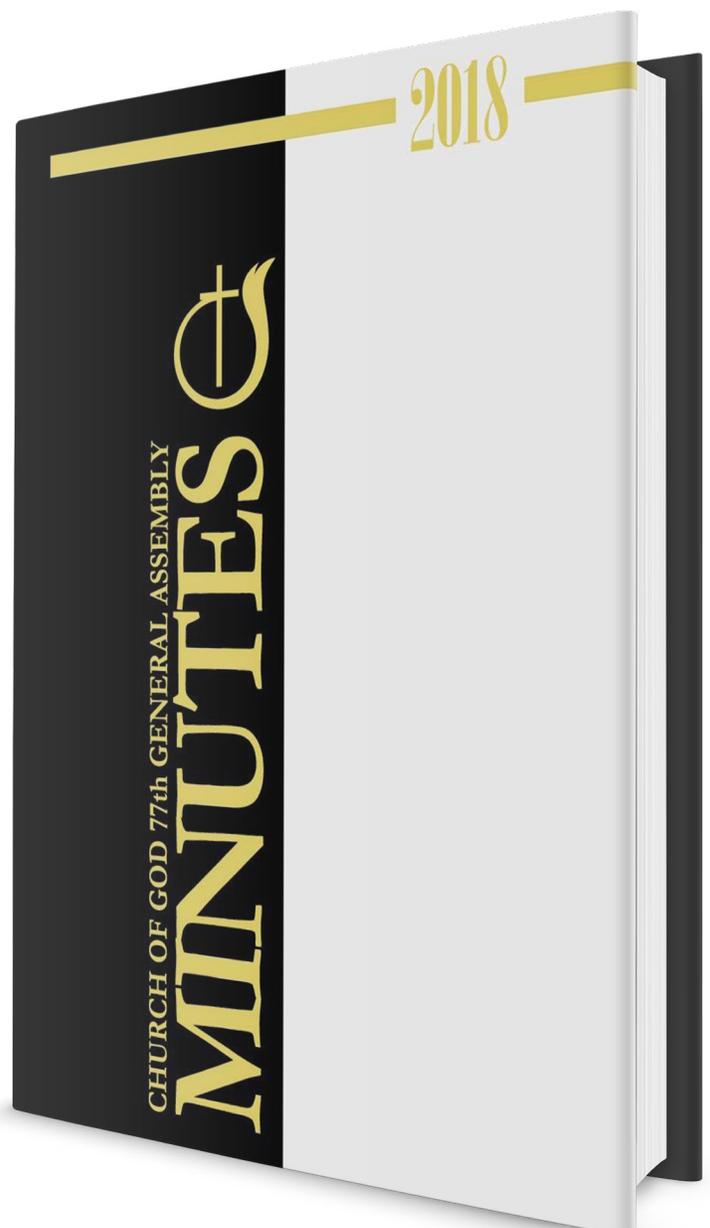
... the Minutes speak of the general authority of the International Executive Council to act as the highest governing body of the church between Assemblies in the general interest and welfare of the church.

4. S5. INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, III. Duties and Authorities, 1., page 69.
 1. *This council shall consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God. At a time set by the general overseer, the said council shall meet and adopt recommendations to be brought before the International General Council.*
5. S7. GENERAL OVERSEER, II. Duties and Authorities, 4., 9., pages 75, 76.
 4. *Look after the general interest of the churches.*
 9. *In the event of any emergency which warrants doing so, call the Council of Eighteen and associate councilors into session for counsel.*
6. S17. BOARDS AND COMMITTEES, GENERAL, III. Emergency Board, page 89.

The International Executive Committee is empowered to act as an emergency board.

In accordance with the references found in these provisions of the Minutes, the following summary was provided:

- Church of God Bylaws state, “the International General Assembly shall meet biennially...” While the Bylaws define the meeting of the International General Assembly as meeting biennially, the *Minutes* address emergency circumstances that allow the International Executive Council “to consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.”
- The Bylaws provide authority for the International Executive Council to “consider and act upon any and



all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.” Under emergency conditions, the Bylaws acknowledge the authority of the International Executive Council to deal and act on any and all matters regarding the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.

- In reference to the International General Assembly, the International Executive Council is empowered to make “arrangements for the time and place of the International General Assembly.” As a matter of historical precedence, it should be noted that this reference was decided by the 35th General Assembly in 1940 responding to a polio pandemic in the United States.
- Further, Procedure 3, page 65 indicates the general overseer is authorized to call an International General Assembly of ministers, “provided that travel and other conditions are such that the International Executive Committee and the Council of Eighteen deem it wise to do so.” In addition, as a matter of historical precedence, this reference was decided by the 40th General Assembly in 1945 in response to the impact of World War II and restricted travel during WWII.
- The general overseer is empowered to call an International General Assembly of ministers “provided that travel and other conditions” are such that the Executive Committee and Council of Eighteen deem it wise to do so. According to parliamentary authorities, *Roberts Rules* indicate that if the organization knows their constituency cannot attend a declared scheduled corporate meeting, the meeting should not convene.
- The general overseer’s authority includes looking after the “general interest of the churches” and further, “in the event of any emergency which warrants doing so, call the Council of Eighteen and associate councilors into session for counsel.”
- The *Minutes* provide for the International Executive Committee to be “empowered to act as an emergency board.”

While there is no rule that specifically addressed the global COVID-19 crisis, the International General Assembly does grant authority to the International Executive Council to consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.

...the general overseer is authorized to call an International General Assembly of ministers, provided that travel and other conditions are such that the International Executive Committee and the Council of Eighteen deem it wise to do so.

Historical Precedence

The historical record of the Church of God indicates that in 1918 a global influenza pandemic forced the cancellation of the General Assembly scheduled October 31–November 5. The newly formed (1916) Council of (12) elders and the general overseer had jurisdiction over all matters between General Assemblies. Without a vaccine, the severity of the pandemic ordered citizens to wear masks, and schools, theatres, and businesses closed. During the months of October, November, and December, Church of God local churches did not convene worship services. It was the responsibility of the Council of Elders, today the Executive Council, to make the decision to cancel the 1918 General Assembly.

Because of a polio epidemic in 1941, the general overseer and the Council of Elders, in cooperation with Public Health Department and city officials, agreed to a limited General Assembly, curtailing attendance and duration.

During the years of 1942–1945, identified as the World War II years, there were a number of restrictions. These included travels, rationing, some limited duration of the Assembly, international delegates could not attend, and missionaries returned to the United States. The Assembly convened in 1942, limited attendance in 1943, and immediately following the ending of WW II, the Assembly convened in 1945. Throughout the early history of the Church of God, the General Assembly convened annually. In 1946, the General Assembly moved to a biennial meeting.

Conclusion

While the Church of God has never faced a global crisis of the nature of COVID-19, it does appear that Church of God polity provides empowerment for the general overseer with the Executive Committee and the Council of 18 (Executive Council) to take action under circumstances that affect the general interest and welfare of the Church of God, including the decision of postponement of the 78th International General Assembly.

what is God saying?

By Tim Hill
General Overseer

Without doubt, we could provide pages after pages of information on the impact of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic on the countries of the world, the United States, and even on churches during 2020. Annals of history will record those happenings for generations to come. Regrettably, there will be things pointed out that we could have done better and some things that we should not have done at all. History - and hindsight - gives us that advantage point.

But the greater question is “what is God saying to us” as we go through this crisis?

Every crisis that we face requires us to re-evaluate our priorities and our purpose. It is my hope that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped the church in that regard. Have we determined what is important to us as a group of Jesus believers? Have we determined what we must keep and what we can do without in our traditional church services? What “tools” are necessary and what are luxuries?

As I ask those questions, I keep coming back to Isaiah 41:10 (NKJV): *“Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”*

That simple verse reminds me that regardless of my circumstances, my fears, or the pandemics

that I may be facing, God still has this all in control. He is with us. He will strengthen us. He will help us. He will uphold us. What more could we ask for? While we may have to go through the trials of life and we may have to face trying times, we should not fear because He is with us. What blessed assurance!!

For four years now, this great church that we call the Church of God has been focused on the **FINISH** Commitment - fulfilling, carrying out, and **FINISHING** the Great Commission. Collectively, we have committed to Find, Intercede, Network, Invest, Send, and Harvest. I can't help but recall the promises of Amos 9:13, *“The plowman shall overtake the reaper.”* Even in times of crisis, I still believe God will exceed all we expect, increase all we invest, and will impact time to accelerate the Harvest!

Understanding and believing these incredible promises, I encourage you to stay focused on the Great Commission during these troubling and trying times that we are going through now, and have been going through in the past, and that may go through in the future.

It often seems as though the world is spinning out of control. Because of that, it is important that we maintain our focus. We are *“the Church on Mission”* and we must maintain a **FINISH** Commitment Focus.



IN CONCLUSION

Appendix

Continuity of Church Government Proposal

Whereas the Church of God, as well as the world, is experiencing an unprecedented shutdown of the economy, churches, and businesses; and

Whereas the continuing worldwide pandemic of the coronavirus is preventing the usual operation of the denomination; and

Whereas no contingency plans for the continuity of government of the church exists in the bylaws or Minutes of the International General Assembly; and

Whereas the 78th International General Assembly is possibly going to be postponed which will prevent elections for tenure of expiring positions; and

Whereas the highest governing body of the church between Assemblies is the International Executive Council; and

Whereas the Minutes task the International Executive Council with the responsibility and authority to act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God (Church of God General Assembly Minutes, S5. International Executive Council; III. Duties and Authorities, paragraph 1, page 69);

Be It Therefore Resolved that the International Executive Council herein exercise the above-noted authority granted it by the International General Assembly, and declare that all persons currently holding general elected positions continue in their positions with full legal and ecclesiastical authority until such time as nominations or elections by the International General Council and elections by the International General Assembly can be properly conducted and successors chosen.

Motion to Postpone the 78th General Assembly

Whereas, the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has impacted millions of lives and caused countless deaths around the globe and, at present, there is no known vaccine or a drug that serves as an antidote to this destructive and deadly virus, and projections are that it will take from 12 to 18 months to develop a vaccine to fight the coronavirus; and

Whereas, the Centers for Disease Control contends that the virus and pandemic may continue for months and even spread further as we seek to open back up from the initial “stay-at-home,” “shelter-in-place,” quarantines, border closures, travel restrictions, and other containment orders; and

Whereas, even the “open-back-up” plans in the United States and other nations of the world, are being done in a phased-in and gradual process in which large gatherings are either prohibited or greatly discouraged; and

Whereas, the economic impact of the virus on most of our churches, ministers, and laity has been drastic even in the initial weeks of the pandemic, and unemployment and economic productivity are expected to decline further as the nations of the world seek to recover from the impact of the virus; and

Whereas, Indianapolis has been named a current “hot spot” of the virus by the Centers for Disease Control, with rapid spread of the virus to the citizens in and around that beautiful city; and

Whereas, as of this date, seeking to plan, secure a location for, and then finance the cost of an International General Assembly in 2021 and then another International General Assembly in 2022 seems cost prohibitive to both the international church, as well as the local church and laity; and

Whereas, there are no clear indications when certain travel restrictions and outright travel bans will be lifted by the United States and other countries, and further there is no indication when air travel, both

domestic and international, will allow for pure freedom of movement for delegates attending the International General Assembly; and

Whereas, contractual negotiations are currently underway for potential sites for the 2022 International General Assembly, such occurring in the normal course of events in planning for future International General Assemblies, and securing a sufficient site for an International General Assembly prior to that date would be difficult considering the current status of the virus and no clear understanding when the pandemic will come to an end; and

Whereas, the health and well-being of the membership of our church and every delegate to the International General Assembly is of the utmost importance and no person's health should ever be potentially jeopardized by attending an event sponsored by the church; and

Whereas, the Bylaws and Minutes of the Church of God do not specifically address a crisis like which the church currently is experiencing, but they do provide guidance specifically at S2. BYLAWS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, ARTICLE VI, Governing Bodies, 3. INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL, Authority, page 63, by stating that “This council shall consider and act upon any and all matters pertaining to the general interest and welfare of the Church of God.” And further at S3. INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY, II. Procedures, 2., page 65 by providing that “Arrangements for the time and place of the International General Assembly shall be left to the International Executive Council”;

THEREFORE, WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING: That the 78th International General Assembly be postponed until the summer of 2022. The International Executive Committee is authorized to continue its negotiations with the City of Indianapolis.



CHURCH OF GOD INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COUNCIL



CHURCH OF GOD
INTERNATIONAL OFFICES
CLEVELAND, TENNESSEE

**COVID - 19 AND THE CHURCH OF GOD
INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 2020**

POSTPONEMENT OF THE 78TH INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY FROM 2020 TO 2022