Guidance on Annual Meetings of Congregations

The Model Constitution for Congregations of the ELCA states (C10.01.) “This congregation shall have at least one regular meeting per year.” In general, this meeting (or meetings) include reports from committees and officers of the congregation, elections of council members and others, and adoption of the annual congregation budget. What are we to do considering the COVID 19 pandemic and our need to restrict regular gatherings and interactions? Should a congregation hold its regular meeting(s)? If not, how do we address expiring terms and the need for a budget?


- The more people an individual interacts with at a gathering and the longer that interaction lasts, the higher the potential risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 and COVID-19 spreading.
- The higher the level of community transmission in the area that the gathering is being held, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spreading during a gathering.
- The size of an event or gathering should be determined based on state, local, territorial or tribal safety laws and regulations.

The risk of COVID-19 spreading at events and gatherings increases as follows:

- **Lowest risk:** Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings.
- **More risk:** Smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings in which individuals from different households remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, wear masks, do not share objects, and come from the same local area (e.g., community, town, city, or county).
- **Higher risk:** Medium-sized in-person gatherings that are adapted to allow individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and with attendees coming from outside the local area.
- **Highest risk:** Large in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and attendees travel from outside the local area.

The following offers some guidance for congregation meetings in this time of pandemic.

**Should we hold a meeting?**

- Although the congregation’s constitution may state a requirement to hold an annual meeting, in times of emergency the appropriate decision may be to postpone or cancel the meeting. If you choose not to hold the meeting, do so in a way that lets all members know why you have made that decision and how you plan to handle such things as council terms and budgets.
- Without a meeting to adopt a new budget, the council can continue to operate with the current budget. Adjustments to that budget, such as compensation increases, may be made within the
restrictions in C12.05. In these cases, the budget should be considered “provisional” until the congregation can meet to adopt an official budget.

- Pennsylvania law (and some congregation constitutions) states that council members and officers serve until their successors are elected. Even if your constitution states specific terms (see C11.02. and C12.02.), in this emergency, the state law can be considered to supersede a constitution. Council members and officers should confirm their willingness to continue to serve an extended term. If a council member or officer decides not to continue in office, C12.03 describes the process for vacancy appointment.

- When a congregation decides to hold a meeting, they may meet in person or virtual.

**What if we decide to hold a meeting in-person?**

- Congregations should consider CDC and Department of Health guidance for gatherings.

- Pennsylvania guidance for religious institutions suggests indoor gatherings should be limited to 25 with mask wearing, physical distancing, and other general health and safety measures. (see https://www.governor.pa.gov/covid-19/business-guidance/)

- Limit the length of the meeting to reduce time of possible exposure.
  - Share the agenda before the meeting and stick to the agenda.
  - Consider offering times before the meeting for questions to be asked during a video meeting or conference call.

- Provide clear guidance to voting members regarding all restrictions required for the meeting. Consider codifying precautions in the rules for the meeting that can be adopted as a first order of business. This will also grant the chair enforcement power so that a person who fails to comply may be ejected from the meeting.

- Ask anyone with possible COVID 19 symptoms to stay home. (NB: Model Constitution C10.05. forbids voting by absentee or proxy).

- Because of the need for physical distancing, extra attention may need to be given regarding voice amplification. Attendees need to be able to hear the chair and any other speakers.

- Voting
  - Voting by raising of hands provides the least chance of exposure (from speaking or passing papers). Most constitutions do not require written ballots for elections. When nominations do not exceed the available seats for a position, a simple vote to accept the entire slate will suffice.
  - If paper ballots are necessary, have people bring their ballots to one or two drop boxes rather than pass them through many hands or walking around to collect them. Tellers should wear gloves and masks for counting of ballots.

- Make sure to keep accurate record of attendance for contact tracing purposes in the event someone in the meeting is diagnosed with the coronavirus in the days following.

**What if we decide to hold a meeting on Zoom or another internet service?**

- Confirm the congregation constitution does not explicitly preclude meeting remotely.
  - Differing opinions have been given as to whether congregations can meet via electronic means without a clause in their constitution explicitly allowing such meetings. A good plan might be to consider an electronic meeting provisional and informal and understand that any decisions will be ratified at the next in person meeting. Roberts Rules (12th ed.) section 40:9 describes the ratification process.
• Clearly state the instructions for attending well in advance of the meeting.
  o You may need to provide a way for members without internet access or proper equipment to access the meeting, perhaps in a limited size gathering.
• Appoint a moderator for the meeting who can mute and unmute participants, as well as monitor participation.
• Share the agenda before the meeting.
• Establish and share rules for online meetings.
  o Consider holding one or more practice sessions before the meeting. These might double as informational meetings at which participants have opportunity to discuss issues on the agenda.
• Decide how you will vote. Options include
  o Voice vote – unmute all participants and call for the vote. You might need to take a roll call vote in order to confirm a majority.
  o Use an online form (JotForm, Google Forms, etc).
  o Use the hand raising or reactions buttons in Zoom. (Make sure anyone calling in from a phone knows how to use this function from their keypad). Recording the meeting will provide a way to audit hand raising in case of a question after the meeting.
  o If you need to vote anonymously, you might need to invest in an online elections system.
  o Ask participants to email their votes.
    ▪ The secretary or other individual(s) need to be ready to receive and count votes. Emails should be saved as a record of the vote.
  o Plan to ratify decisions from the online meeting at the next in person congregation meeting.
• Take attendance by Roll Call. The secretary can read the names of voting members and have attendees respond when their names are read. The chair can then announce a quorum. Having each participant respond to a roll call ensures that they can hear and be heard.
• Speak clearly. Slow down the pace of the meeting. People need time to process what is being shared.
  o Consider including breaks for questions throughout the agenda.
  o Do not rush voting.
• Take good notes.
  o Consider recording the meeting.
• For more detailed recommendations see https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/voting-online

**What about a hybrid meeting (in person and online)?**
• When a congregation meeting is to take place with a combination of in person and online, care should be taken that all in attendance can participate equally.
• An online facilitator/moderator should be appointed to monitor those in attendance through electronic means. The moderator can make sure the chair of the meeting knows when online attendees wish to speak. The moderator can also count votes of those online.
• Video screens with images of those participating online should be positioned so that the chair and as many in person as possible can see them clearly.