

## Guidance for Pastors, Clerks, and Sessions: Holding Congregational Meetings during a Pandemic

The Book of Order requires congregations to hold an annual meeting (G-1.0501), but **how do we hold an annual meeting during a pandemic?**

Our **Goal** is to conduct necessary business while keeping everyone safe and upholding our polity: **Everyone should have equal access and be able to hear, discuss, deliberate, discern the will of God, and vote on business items.** (Inclusion is even better if people can see each other.)

### Process for Sessions:

1. Determine if in-person congregational meetings can be safely held, following CDC guidelines of masking, social distancing, self-isolating of symptomatic persons, and cleaning protocols. Consider voting by raising hands rather than voice vote.

2. Consider whether an in-person meeting excludes congregants who would be included in a meeting held by telephone, internet, or a combination of means.

3. If Session determines that the congregation may need to hold a meeting by partial or total electronic means, the steps will be:

**(1) Amend the church's Bylaws to allow electronic and hybrid congregational meetings, as well as electronic committee meetings.**

Session can present the motion to amend the Bylaws as the first action in the electronic or hybrid meeting of the congregation.

**(2) Hold the meetings.** (See #4 below.)

**(3) Ratify the actions of the electronic and hybrid meetings (including the Bylaw change) in the first in-person meeting.**

(All actions can be ratified in a single vote, if there are no objections.)

4. If a meeting can't be held outside, socially distanced (a problem in winter), and can't be held inside (too small a space, people afraid to attend a gathering, even socially distanced), your **options** are to hold a meeting by:

- a. teleconference,\*
- b. videoconference,\*\* or
- c. hybrid meeting (such as Zoom AND in-person, socially distanced).\*\*\*

\*Teleconference – Use free teleconferencing service such as freeconferencecall.com or everyone dialing into Zoom

\*\*Videoconference—such as Zoom; easiest if everyone can be online, but works with computers, tablets, smart phones, and standard telephones

\*\*\*Hybrid Meeting: Hybrid meetings are logistically more difficult, but—if all goes well—allow for the most inclusion of members.

To make sure everyone has equal access, the people in the room have to be able to see the people online and visa versa, and the moderator has to keep an eye on everybody. You could project on-line attendees on a side wall, as if they were in the room, and provide a laptop for the moderator on the pulpit. Run the house sound system through Zoom and back through, so everybody online can hear anything said live, and vice versa (This takes good high tech help.) Discipline is required: you cannot tolerate people in the room not using a microphone, since people online are excluded if they don't. Use a camera in the room for people online, which means speakers MUST move to a camera position and use the microphone. Clerk must interrupt when the moderator forgets to enforce these logistical rules.

To receive recognition: Use raise hand feature in Zoom; walk to the microphone in physical room.

To vote by unanimous consent, use raise hand to make an objection.

To vote by what would normally be a voice vote or a rising vote (where people usually speak out or stand up as a way of voting, but votes are not counted) use raise hand to vote (aye or nay, as the moderator directs).

If there is a division of the house, you will need a count, so Zoom people use yes/no vote button and hands are counted for yes and for no in the physical room. (People on the phone will have to use the “raise hand” feature for both seeking recognition and voting on the standard telephone. Otherwise, the people on the telephone could un-mute when called upon and say their vote.)

If there is an anonymous ballot vote, use chat visible only to the Stated Clerk and a physical ballot in the physical room. (Some groups use the polling feature in Zoom, which can be problematic, or a paid service such as electionbuddy.com or simplyvoting.com.)

More suggestions for a hybrid meeting: Clerk hosts the meeting. Both moderator and clerk watch for online participants. Make sure your moderator is VERY comfortable using the technology (practice, practice, practice).  
Have a very good tech team in place.

Online and in –person participants count in the attendance and quorum.

### **Considerations for all of these meetings:**

In planning, work to make sure the business is as uncontentious as possible.

Give yourselves grace—we're living through an unforeseen pandemic.

Give adequate public notice of the congregational meeting, according to your church's rule. (G-1.0502)

Full opportunity shall always be given for nomination from the floor of the congregational meeting. (G-2.0401)

Require all motions in writing (post to the chat; screen-share)

Vote by unanimous consent or yes/no or raise hand feature.

Record the meeting to help with minutes.

Prepare a complete script for the meeting with roles/tech tasks delineated

Address every detail:

- Recognition in person/Zoom, voting in person/Zoom (voice/division of the house/ballot)
- Quorum
- What happens in the event of technology failure

- Limitation of debate, etc.
- Multiple attendees on a single device- attendance, voting

Tech Tasks may need to include:

- Ensuring the moderator has a script/ agenda and any other tool required for meeting management
- Recognizing speakers/capturing motions/issues with voting and any counted votes
- Letting people into the meeting
- Muting careless unmutes
- Renaming
- Integrating share screens, slides, and videos
- Recording the meeting
- Live streaming the meeting

*See Also: Advisory Opinion of Stated Clerk of General Assembly 3/24/2020*

To discuss options, contact:

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