Planning a Virtual Congregational Meeting

General Questions to consider:

1. Will the meeting be conducted exclusively using a virtual platform or do you intend to use a blended format? Have you updated your session's manual of administrative operations to allow for such a meeting?

2. Who will serve as the "tech" expert, responsible for coordinating and hosting the meeting on the virtual or electronic platform (such as Zoom) and communicating with the Moderator?

3. There is most likely a need for a "tech" help desk, so how will you create a "tech" help desk, and who will serve as "tech" help?

4. What is the plan should there be technical issues?

5. Is there a need for outside consultation to adapt and navigate polity, process and procedure or technology? Contact Ed Thompson or Maureen Wright for information.

6. Active members of the congregation present may vote. (see G-1.05) So **only active members present virtually (or if blended, in person or virtually) at the Congregational Meeting may vote.** For more information, see below. No proxy voting is permitted.

7. While not required for this process, it may be helpful for the pastor, Clerk of Session, session or Presbytery Stated Clerk to engage in an intentional educational campaign on polity/Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised or technology. Moments for mission, newsletter, video, orientation sessions, are all options.

8. What business is to be conducted?

    - Election of officers or a Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC);
    - Calling a pastor or approving changes to the terms of call of the pastor;
    - Communicating annual reports from the session and committees of the church including the presentation of the budget;
    - Buying, mortgaging, or selling real property?

   What are the planning implications of the particular business? What information needs to be communicated to members of the congregation before and during the meeting? How will information be communicated?

9. What is the quorum for a Congregational Meeting according to your session's manual of administrative operations? Those planning the meeting need to make every effort to allow

all who wish to participate access to the meeting. In balance, members of the congregation need to accept responsibility for participating.

10. If electing officers, consideration will need to be made for nominations from the floor. How will this be done? The Stated Clerk recommends preparing a pamphlet/flyer (electronic and print) and/or video introducing the members being nominated to serve, especially when electing a Pastor Nominating Committee. This will promote transparency and help members understand the diversity and representation of those nominated to serve. It may also proactively serve to limit the desire to nominate people from the floor.

11. If calling a pastor, what are the PNC's plans for the congregation to meet the candidate? Options include small in person gatherings (when it is safe to do so), one large virtual meeting, or small virtual meetings (enough so that all who want to participate are able to do so).

12. If electing a pastor, will the session need to use or adapt virtual worship to feature the "candidating" sermon/service, if using this model?

13. If electing a pastor, the PNC may want to prepare a pamphlet/flyer (electronic and print) and/or video introducing the pastor. This will reinforce virtual and/or in person interactions.

14. The Clerk of Session will need to have multiple copies of the list of active, confirmed members of the church in order to determine quorum and voting privileges.

Planning a Zoom Congregational Meeting:

Even if you do not have a provision in your Manual of Operations for virtual congregational meetings, you can still do one, subject to later ratification of action taken (See, 2(b), below). Whether in-person or virtual, the basic elements of a meeting still apply; they are – proper notice, opportunity for members to attend and participate, and compliance with the polity applicable to the type of meeting. You shall follow the Book of Order and your Manual of Administrative Operations to the fullest extent possible. The following is an outline for resources and concepts to help adapt your meeting to a virtual platform or blended model. If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Stated Clerk for assistance: Maureen Wright, statedclerk@wvpresbytery.org or (304) 546-9820.

1. **Notice** – Be sure to follow the notice requirements in your Manual of Administrative Operations regarding meetings and provide information sufficient that even a technologically challenged member can figure out how to participate. On that point, consider giving as much notice of the meeting as possible, to allow time for people to work with your technology person

to download whatever app is being used in advance. <u>You may even want to offer an orientation or practice session</u>. Here is what Robert's Rules has to say on this point:

> A group that holds such alternative meetings does not lose its character as a deliberative assembly… so long as the meetings provide, at a minimum, conditions of opportunity for simultaneous aural communication among all participating members equivalent to those of meetings held in one room or area. (RONR, 12th ed., 9:31)

2. **Polity** – The requirements of the Book of Order are the foundation for whatever kind of meeting is held and must be followed. The only thing that changes with a virtual meeting is the manner of conducting it. If a church has not revised its Manual of Administrative Operations, <u>virtual meetings are permitted, as long as actions taken at a virtual meeting are later ratified</u>. An Advisory Opinion from the Office of the General Assembly and Presbyterian Church (USA)'s Stated Clerk, from March 11, 2020, states on page 3 of 5:

> What if the congregation or session does not have a rule that provides for a meeting by electronic or virtual means? . . .
>
> Although the meeting is not constitutional, in the case of an emergency, the session [congregation] could meet by electronic means with reasonable notice of the electronic meeting, quorum, and at least one moderator, and take actions required to address the emergency or public health order. Reasonable notice may vary according to the emergency and the needs of the community. These decisions will need to be ratified at a later properly called meeting, regular or special.
> OGA Advisory Opinion: Church in an Emergency/Pandemic

Simply stated, plans for the process of a virtual meeting should allow the virtual meeting to be substantively "the same as" an in person meeting. This means be sure to give plenty of notice and opportunity to participate, and the congregation may have to call an in person Congregational meeting as soon as is practical to vote to ratify the actions taken and any other actions, related to such business, taken in the virtual meeting. That can be as simple as a motion: "To ratify all actions taken in the virtual meeting held on _____ [insert date], during the Covid-19 emergency."

The Stated Clerk advises that you plan to amend your Manual of Administrative Operations as soon as possible to allow for virtual meetings (See Advisory Opinion, p. 3 of 5 and the Presbytery website, under *session documents* for suggested language).

3. **Agenda** – It is strongly suggested that the Moderator, session and other leaders provide a means for members to view the agenda and any meeting-related documents either on a website or at the beginning of the virtual Congregational Meeting using features such as the share screen

option. Due to the unfamiliarity of virtual platforms, the session, the moderator, and other leaders should allow double the time of an in-person meeting to accomplish the business.

4. **Technology** – Using virtual platforms such as Zoom requires an individual, or a team, to handle technology needs. The technology team should set-up and test the platform for the meeting (prior to and the day of), and be available during the meeting to help should anything unexpected happen.

5. **Extra Coordination** – It can be helpful to have a pre-meeting for the moderator and other people who will be "working" the meeting to run through the agenda and be clear on who is doing what, when, and how long it should take. <u>Good clear coordination can make all the difference with regard to how well your virtual meeting goes, and how much time it takes</u>.

6. **The Virtual Meeting** – **Be sure to make clear at the start of your meeting that non-members may observe, but they may not vote or submit questions/comments**. In addition to the moderator and the clerk, you may wish to consider assigning the following tasks to an individual or small group, for the sake of keeping things orderly and timely.

   a. <u>Comment/question collectors</u> – These people track written questions submitted by members through the chat function. Assigning people just to this task is important to ensure that all member questions are answered, without causing undue distraction to the moderator or other speakers.

   b. <u>Dedicated technology person(s)</u> – As noted above, this is important to ensure you are able to efficiently run the meeting.

   c. <u>Voting</u> – Virtual platforms provide a number of possible voting options, those planning the meeting should carefully consider the best voting method. If using a blended format you may use voice vote; the yes/no buttons for virtual participants and raised hands or standing in person; or the polling function for virtual participants and paper ballots in person. It is possible to use paper ballots in person and call in voting for members joining via Zoom. In the call for the congregational meeting, the intention to recess for the counting of votes will be stated and active members should be provided a landline phone number(s) to call during a 15 or 20-minute period. The church's landline(s) would work best. Once the number of call in phone numbers is determined, the specifics can be set. Two members of the session (not the Clerk of Session and practicing appropriate social distancing precautions) are present at the church to receive and record the votes of the members during the congregational meeting. The votes will be recorded on a sheet that has each active member's name and space for specific names, and write in spaces, with yes and no. These session members would agree to keep confidential all votes. Once complete, the session members will sign the sheet attesting to its authenticity and provide the sheet in a sealed envelope to the Clerk of Session for safekeeping. The result of the

vote will be shared with the moderator. The meeting will stand at recess for the time of the phone voting period, and reconvene immediately following the voting.

d. <u>Time management</u> – As noted several times above, plan on the virtual meeting taking about twice as long as the same agenda would take in-person. Everything is more cumbersome procedurally, and understanding that ahead of time will enable all to plan ahead, and to be patient on the day of the meeting.

7. **Adjournment** – Following the announcement of the vote, a simple way to conclude without need for a lengthy vote is to ask for a motion to adjourn. Then, once the motion is on the floor, ask if anyone objects. Allow a few moments for objections and, assuming no objections are posed, the Moderator declares the result by acclimation and your virtual meeting is over! Close with prayer.

8. **Minutes** – Minutes of a virtual meeting are identical to minutes of an in-person meeting with the exception that they should state that the meeting was virtual and record the virtual platform used. In addition to the minutes, if the actions need to be ratified, the record of voting and the recorded votes, should be kept by the Clerk of Session, at least until the action is ratified and preferably for one year.

Supplemental Resources: Advisory Opinion from the PC (USA): *Church in an Emergency/Pandemic, Simplified Special Rules of Order and Standing Rules* [Zoom] from the Association of Stated Clerks, the Book of Order, and Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th Edition.

Special thanks to Seattle Presbytery, the Association of Stated Clerks Google Group, and Stated Clerks throughout the Presbyterian Church (USA) for sharing documents, thoughts, and opinions on virtual Congregational Meetings.