

Electronic Meeting Guidance

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The Churchwide Organization the ELCA released in October guidance on Electronic Meetings. Please review that document first to answer if an electronic meeting is an option for you. For your information, South Dakota state law stipulates that for a congregation meeting to be held electronically, it must be provided for in the organization's bylaws.

Below are suggestions for practices to allow for the best possible meeting. ***Note that this is not legal advice but does seek to follow the principles of Robert's Rules of Order.*** These suggestions should also be used within your context. The size of the meeting, the technology available for both the church and members, whether the meeting is a mix of in-person and online or all online, along with your congregation's culture means there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach.

If you have questions about how an electronic meeting at your congregation, please feel free to contact Pastor Jonathan Vehar at pastorjonathan@peacelutheran.com.

Before the meeting

Preparing for a meeting has never been so crucial for a meeting to be successful. There are a few questions to answer beforehand. I also suggest that proposed Standing Rules be sent with the meeting notice to know how they can participate and be prepared to do so.

Just because your constitution allows for electronic meetings does not mean you have to use it. So it is key that expectations are laid out ahead of time.

- 1) Decide if the meeting will be in-person only, a combination of in-person and online, or online only.
- 2) If there is an online option, what tools will be used for the electronic audience to participate? Teleconference (voice only), Zoom (video only), or Zoom (with video and dial-in). Zoom is probably the most widely used platform at the moment, and many of your members might already be familiar with it. You may wish to review the section on voting before making this determination. How you're going to meet needs to be clearly stated. If you have troubles finding a video meeting solution that works best for your congregation, please feel free to contact the synod office communications director at 605-274-5035.
- 3) Consider asking electronic participants to register ahead of time. This allows you time to prepare for the number of online users and if they will have Zoom or being dialing in.
- 4) Ensure that the meeting president has a stable internet connection so that the meeting can stay on track.
- 5) If holding a mixed meeting, how will everyone hear what is happening? Ensure that the online audience can listen to everything that is happening in-person and that there is a way for the in-person audience to hear if someone from online wishes to speak, ask a question, make a motion, or vote.
- 6) Ensure equal access to reports and material. If there are presentations, make sure they are also screen shared with those online. Consider making presentations available by print for those who will be dialing in. Make printed reports available ahead of time so everyone can be looking at the same information.

- 7) The notice should be sent to all members with the date, time, location, and information for accessing the meeting, Standing Rules.
- 8) Establish a clear agenda, with everyone knowing their parts. This helps the meeting move along in an efficient manner.
- 9) If there are elections, try to have all the spots nominated ahead of time. If you thought it was hard before to get people to volunteer on the spot for committees, it would only be more difficult and awkward now.

At Meeting

I would recommend that a meeting Host be identified whose primary responsibility is to follow the online meeting. Host Responsibilities:

- 1) Welcome participants
- 2) Keep a Roster of online attenders (this is needed to establish a quorum and keep track of votes)
- 3) Mute participants
- 4) Read questions or comments from the chat
- 5) Manage online votes
- 6) Follow the chat to help solve problems

Quorums

Establishing a quorum is an essential part of the meeting. The quorum should consist of all eligible voters who are present in-person or online. A list of eligible voters should be ready to compare against. Over Zoom, many participants can be seen; others may have their cameras off or have called in. They will need to place their names in the chat or verbally identify themselves in a roll call to know who is present. Besides knowing that a quorum is present for a legal meeting, it will also help ensure that there were not more votes cast than people attending.

Speaking

It is good practice that all members, either in-person or online, only speak when called upon by the chair. It is recommended that online participants stay muted unless needing to speak. In programs like Zoom, the meeting Host can mute participants to reduce distractions and unwanted background noise. The need to remain muted should be listed in the pre-meeting expectations. If there are questions, debate, or a member wishes to make a motion; there needs to be a way to occur. For questions, discussion, and most motions, an online participant can raise a hand, either literally or with the raise hand icon, or type their desire to talk in the chat. The host would then need to relay that information to the chair, who would call on people to speak. A question or comment could also be typed in the chat, and read by the host or chair. Those dialing in will have the most challenging time, and it might be good practice to at the end of each time of conversation, to invite those who are dialed in to unmute and speak or ask their question. Giving just a moment to allow this to happen helps everyone feel a part of the meeting. Again, this expectation should be communicated so that dial-in participants know how they can participate.

In there is also an in-person meeting, participants should be encouraged (required) to use a mic. We all know those who never use a mic when talking because their voices are loud enough, but without a mic, the online community is unlikely to clearly hear.

Voting

The voting process can become complicated. Take a few moments to think through the types of votes possible. Select the most straightforward vote process whenever possible.

Voice vote: Most votes during a meeting can happen by voice. Try this method whenever a simple or uncontroversial matter is being handled. Votes such as approving the agenda, receiving the Treasurer's report, etc., are often formalities. When the vote happens, simply ask people to unmute themselves and speak. Because there is sometimes a delay in people unmuting, give an extra second before calling for "no" votes, and ask for different responses. For example, "those voting in favor say Yes, (*wait 3 seconds*), those voting against say 'No'. (*wait 3 seconds before announcing the vote*)."

Written Ballots

There are times where a written ballot is either required or needed for a vote. Written ballots for those in-person can be handled as normal—no need to complicate this too much. Written ballots for online participation can follow a few different steps.

First off, note that it will be difficult for complete anonymity in the below examples. Trusted members of the community will need to help receive votes to ensure a healthy process.

Zoom offers a "Polling" feature. Simple questions can be set up quickly, such as "yes" or "no." More complicated questions, such as a ballot that elects council members, could be pre-loaded.

Two problems to consider:

Zoom Polling is excellent if there is only one person per computer. But if two people are sharing a screen, they are only permitted to enter one response. One creative workaround is to play the same question for each poll twice, for example:

Question A: Do you vote in favor of adopting a church puppy?

Yes

No

Question B: Do you vote in favor of adopting a church puppy?

Yes

No

N/A

The first person would answer Question A, and the second answer, Question B. If only one person was using that device, they would answer 'N/A.'

The totals would then be added together, along with those in person, for the results.

The second problem is that dial-in participants can't access the Polling feature. They might have to submit a written ballot by mail, dropping it off, or email and the final vote announced at a later time.

A second option for Ballots with multiple questions is to create a Google Form. They are free, easy to set up, anyone can respond to them. The link to the form can be placed in the chat and submitted electronically. I would still recommend that a name or identifying mark be placed on the form, so that it can be compared against the roster of those in attendance. Remember, they need to be present at the meeting to vote. With a google form, it might be possible for one person to receive the responses, verify they were at the meeting and eligible to vote and pass the response along for someone else to count.

With Google forms and mail-in ballots, consideration will need to be given for how long afterward to receive ballots.

Post Meeting

Follow-up with members to announce the results of any elections for which ballots were to be received after the meeting.

Survey both those in-person and online about their experience and ways to improve. The hope maybe never to do this again. But, we may also find that an electronic meeting proved to be a useful tool and may open new ways for snow-birds to join or keep a meeting in case of snowstorms.

Standing Rules

Standing Rules are a way to establish group norms, so everyone is aware of how they can participate. The newest edition of Robert's Rules of Order includes several examples of rules for electronic meetings. Some ideas for consideration when writing your rules:

- Login Information: How will they get the information to join
- Login time: when will the meeting be open (this would happen before the actual start time)
- Sign in and Out: How will members identify when they come and leave so that the meeting roster will be correct.
- Quorum: what is the number needed, and when will it be called?
- Technical requirements: If you are only going to allow electronic participation through video conference (no dial-in), etc., give the expectations so people can prepare.
- Forced disconnections: Give the chair the ability to mute participants (this will most often happen because of background noise).
- Assignment of the floor: How will members be called upon to talk, ask questions, etc.
- Voting: Outline how voting will happen (Zoom polls, Google Forms, voice, etc.)

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