

Letter on Congregational Meetings

To: Congregations of the Presbyteries of Northern New England and Boston

May 12, 2020

Dear Friends,

We have received several questions about whether or not we may conduct congregational meetings online. This is becoming especially important during the time of year when many of you elect new elders and deacons. The purpose of this memo is to provide guidance for how to conduct congregational business both now and in the coming months when we are able to meet in-person again.

Robert's Rules of Order states the organizations may only conduct electronic meetings if there is a provision to do so in its bylaws. At this time most of our congregations do not have a provision for electronic meetings in your bylaws. In our current circumstances, this creates an obvious problem because terms will expire at a time when we will need session members and deacons in place, especially as we make critical decisions about re-opening buildings and adjust to a new post-pandemic reality. Given the circumstances, I have consulted with Stated Clerks in other Presbyteries to find a workable solution. I have reviewed guidance from a lengthy memo distributed by Robert's Rules. I have also taken cues from the General Assembly of the PC(USA) which does not have a provision for electronic meetings but still plans to hold an online General Assembly in June.

After much research and consideration, I am recommending a way forward for congregations. As many of you will see, this is an imperfect solution. But it is, in my opinion, the best option given the circumstances.

1. You may hold an electronic congregational meeting to consider actions that you as a session deem non-controversial.
2. Any electronic meeting must allow voice and vote for active members. Everyone should be able to hear and speak.
3. The chair should set ground rules for how to request the floor and how to vote at the beginning of the meeting.
4. If you have a member that you feel may be unable to participate, try to help them before the meeting. That being said, once a meeting begins, members must be responsible for their own technology. You can try to help someone if there is a need, but one person losing a connection should not stop the meeting.
5. When you are able to meet in person again, you must call an in-person congregational meeting. The purpose of this meeting will be to ratify any actions taken during an electronic meeting. This ratification process follows the procedures of the upcoming General Assembly. If your bylaws contain provisions for online meetings of the congregation, this rule does not apply.

6. You may conduct installations and ordination of elders and deacons online.
7. When you are able to meet in person again, I am recommending that all congregations modify their by-laws to allow for online meetings in the future. I have attached an addendum with instructions on how to modify your bylaws, operating manual, and/or standing rules to allow for future electronic meetings.

As always, thank you for your service to the church. I hope that you are well, and I look forward to seeing you electronically or in person soon.

In Christ,

T. J. DeMarco, Stated Clerk
Presbyteries of Boston and Norther New England

Addendum: Guidance for Making Provisions in your Bylaws to allow for Electronic Meetings

When changing your bylaws, standing rules, and/or operating manual, you will still follow the same rules written in your governing documents that direct how you may make changes to said documents. Also, with electronic meetings, the same rules apply for calling a stated or special meeting. While it is customary to call a last-minute zoom meeting, this is not proper for meetings of the congregation, session, or other deliberative bodies within your congregation that require specific processes for calling a meeting.

For your **by-laws** under the section labeled “Meetings” or similar section use the following language as your guide:

“The congregation, session, deacons, and other deliberative bodies of the congregation may meet in face-to-face sessions, by teleconference or videoconference, provided that full opportunity for full simultaneous communication is available to all members and that minutes are duly kept and approved.”

For your **bylaws, standing rules, and/or operating manual**, *consider* the following rules for your electronic meetings. You may want to change these to fit your context. I hope that this will help to serve as a guide:

1. Login Information: For electronic meetings of the Presbytery the Stated Clerk shall send notice by email to every member of the Presbytery at least 7 days before each meeting. This notice shall include the time of the meeting, the URL and codes necessary to connect to the Internet meeting service, tele-conference service, or other means of communication. For electronic meetings of committees, commissions, and

other deliberative bodies of the Presbytery, the chair or clerk of said group shall follow the same procedures.

2. Signing in and out: Members shall identify themselves as the electronic service allows and shall maintain Internet and audio access throughout the meeting whenever present. Members shall sign out upon any departure before adjournment.
3. Quorum calls: The presence of a quorum shall be established by audible roll call, or in the case of video conferences through the listing of names of those logged in. The continued presence of a quorum shall be determined by the online list of participating members, unless any member demands a quorum count by audible roll call. Such a demand may be made following any vote for which the announced totals add to less than a quorum.
4. Technical requirements and malfunctions: Each member is responsible for his or her audio and Internet connections; no actions shall be invalidated on the grounds that the loss of, or poor quality of, a member's individual connection prevented participation in the meeting.
5. Forced disconnections. The chair may cause or direct the disconnection or muting of a member's connection if it is causing undue interference with the meeting. The chair's decision to do so, which is subject to undebatable appeal that can be made by any member, shall be announced during the meeting and recorded in the minutes.
6. Assignment of the floor: The chair will provide instructions at the beginning of electronic meetings for how members may request the floor.
7. Interrupting a member: A member who intends to make a motion or request that under the rules of order may interrupt a speaker shall use a feature designated by the chair at the beginning of the meeting for so indicating, and shall thereafter wait a reasonable time for the chair's instructions before attempting to interrupt the speaker by voice.
8. Voting: Votes shall be taken by the anonymous voting feature of the Internet meeting service, unless a different method is ordered by the Board or required by the rules. When required or ordered, other permissible methods of voting are by electronic roll call or by audible roll call. The chair's announcement of the voting shall include the number of members voting on each side of the question and number. Business may also be conducted by unanimous consent.