



Congregational Meetings amid Extraordinary Times

Congregations may find themselves in the midst of extraordinary times (e.g. during a state of emergency, pandemics) when it is unlawful and/or ill-advised for members to gather together for a congregational meeting. Nevertheless, a congregation may find itself in a circumstance where the postponement of a meeting is not possible due to ultra-time sensitive or other extraordinary issues.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, two possible alternatives that might be considered include an E-meeting and an absentee ballot. These options work well for decisions that do not require a lot of conversation or debate. For potentially contentious matters or complex items, it should be carefully considered if an E-meeting would be a helpful or appropriate solution.

E-Meetings

1. A congregational meeting may be held by means of a telephonic, electronic or other communication facility that permits members to participate in the meeting (E-meeting). Congregations will need to be able to respond to any Accessibility issues so that members who request will be able to take part (e.g. signing for the hearing impaired).
2. Each voting member participating in an E-meeting is deemed to be present at the meeting for the purposes of attaining the required quorum (as noted in the congregation's Constitution and Bylaws).
3. Each member participating in a congregational E-meeting will need to have access to a device and a program or application which allows participation by telephonic and/or video conferencing means; consider having an alternative call-in number so that participants can call in by telephone for audio.
4. Written notice of the E-meeting shall be sent by mail or electronic mail to all voting members and the rostered minister(s) under call to the congregation at least ten (10) days in advance of the date of the meeting.
5. The notice for any special congregational E-meeting shall specify its purpose and no other business shall be transacted.
6. The notice shall include the wording of a motion to be voted upon, and any additional information for the member to be able to make an informed decision. The notice shall also indicate whether a majority or two-thirds vote will be required to adopt the motion.
7. No E-meeting shall intentionally exclude any member of the congregation. Members take part in an E-meeting voluntarily unless there is a conflict of interest, in which case the member is excused.
8. Minutes of the meeting shall be recorded in the usual manner.
9. Before voting occurs, a method must be determined to identify the eligible voting members.
10. The motion shall be presented in the same manner as a face-to-face meeting; it shall be moved and seconded; discussion of the motion shall follow. When the vote is called by the Chair, members shall vote in a manner as directed by the Chair.
11. Other motions may be made during a special congregational meeting only if they are germane to the main motion and issue.
12. Minutes of the E-meeting shall be approved at the next congregational meeting.

Absentee Balloting

Guidelines¹

1. Voting by mail may be used only if,
 - (a) the votes may be verified as having been made by members entitled to vote; and
 - (b) the congregation is not able to identify how each member voted.²
2. Any method of absentee voting must set out procedures for collecting, counting and reporting the results of any vote.
3. All voting members must have the same access and privilege; no member must be perceived as having an advantage.
4. Ballots should be printed and marked so as not to be easily falsified. Such a mark could be a numbering system or some other way not necessarily evident to the recipient of each ballot.
5. Ballots are delivered to each voting member (multiple ballots to the same household to be in separate envelopes).
6. An accompanying letter would outline the question to be voted upon, the procedure of the balloting process, and a reasonable deadline by which all ballots need to be submitted. The time between the distribution of the ballots and the deadline for them to be returned should be roughly equivalent to the regular notice that the congregation receives about a congregational meeting, plus reasonable time for the ballots to be returned. Ballots could be returned by mail or in person, as long as this is made known in advance.
7. When a ballot is sent to a member, the inclusion of any information that will help the member make a responsible decision is prudent.
8. All ballots returned should be “sealed” in some manner such that the vote is not evident to the handler of the ballots.
9. All ballots should be stored together in a secure place and not otherwise disturbed until the day of the ballot counting.
10. Ballot counters should be two or more persons, and at least one or more shall not be a member of council.
11. Results of the ballot are announced or published in any usual way as long as every voting member has some kind of access to get the information.

Reviewed by: Eastern Synod Officers – May 2020; February 2021

¹ Based upon “Proxy and Absentee Voting, A Guide for ELCIC Congregations whose Incorporated Status Requires Proxy and/or Absentee Voting,” *October 2017, by Wendell Grahlman*

² cf Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, 2009, c. 23, s. 171(1); also CNCA Regulations, <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/SOR-2011-223/page-4.html#h-32>