



Congregational Meetings in the Time of COVID-19

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the life of the church and, in particular, has led to a pause, or at the least, serious limitations, on in-person gathering. What does this mean for planning and hosting your annual congregational meeting? There is no “one size fits all” for congregational meetings. Each church’s plan for the next meeting will be made based on the unique and specific needs and realities of your geographic location and membership. In addition to local church bylaws and UFMCC bylaws, it is also crucial to check the laws of your state or country regarding meeting and voting regulations.

Below is a list of questions and ideas to consider as your church looks to the future in these uncertain times. Also included is a list of resources with more information to guide the decision-making process.

- **Initial planning**

- When is your meeting traditionally held?
 - In accordance with your Bylaws, could it be postponed a few months?
- Are you currently holding in-person or virtual worship and programming?
- What are the current COVID statistics in your country, state, county, city?
 - Are they on a decline, plateau or rise?
 - Has your country, state or region issued regulations calling for public gatherings to cease or be limited?
- What restrictions are in place in your location for in-person gathering?
 - Mask requirements?
 - Space capacity?
 - Will a quorum be safely able and willing to attend?
 - Is space large enough to hold membership at a safe social distance (6ft)?
- Is the membership of your congregation in a high-risk category based on age, pre-existing conditions, and other indicators?
- Is there an outdoor space available that is safe to gather in-person for your annual meeting?
- Who would be excluded from an in-person gathering?

- Who would be excluded by a virtual meeting?
- Bylaws
 - What do local church bylaws say about virtual meetings and voting?
Note: Virtual meeting is not the same as absentee voting.
 - Do your church's bylaws explicitly prohibit or allow alternative meeting/voting options?
 - Review the Governance Committee Advisory about Virtual Meetings.
 - What do the laws of your state or country say about virtual business meetings?

- **Communication**
 - How and where to communicate time and location.
 - Clearly stated reason for virtual meeting (health and safety concerns).
 - Detailed instruction on how to participate and to vote.
 - Establish pre-registration to help with planning.
 - Hold pre-meeting trial run or Forum to inform members and to practice voting.
 - Create and share agenda.
 - Over communicate changes in meeting procedures.

- **Implementation**
 - Platforms
 - Zoom, Adobe Connect, Go-to-Meeting, WebEx, Bluejeans, etc.
 - Hybrid (in person and virtual attendance)
 - Multiple means of participation make planning more complicated.
 - How will you ensure equal participation for those gathered in person, by video, and by phone?
 - How will you accommodate anonymous ballots?
 - In-person
 - Review Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation and social distancing.
 - Establish safety protocols for handing out, collecting, and counting ballots.
 - Attendance
 - Record attendance.
 - Print the list of participants. Have members "sign in" using the chat.
 - Persons participating virtually are recorded in the minutes as present.
 - How will you know if non-members try to vote?

- Absentee ballots are a separate issue and should be addressed in local church bylaws. Currently they are not permitted unless local bylaws allow otherwise.
 - Establish quorum.
 - Quorum is 20% of members in good standing.
 - What business is on your meeting agenda?
 - What votes will be taken?
 - Do any voting items require secret ballots?
 - Secret ballots or anonymous voting can happen using Zoom polls.
 - Ways to vote.
 - Voice vote (unmute participants).
 - Show of hands.
 - Use Zoom “raise hand” button.
 - Use Zoom poll.
 - Requires a registered Zoom account.
 - If more than one member of a household is attending, separate sign in will be needed for each person to vote.
 - How to include members with vision and hearing limitations?
 - How will motions and amendments to motion be handled?
 - What is the nomination process?
 - Will nominations be accepted from the floor?
 - Begin meeting with instructions, guidelines, and test vote (use a fun question).
 - Ensure equal voice and vote to virtual participants and in-person participants if using hybrid model.
 - Record the meeting and save the video file for official records.
 - Save all entries in the comment box.
- **Resources**
 - Central for Disease Control COVID information for Community and Faith-Based Organizations
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>
 - Technical Guidance on Virtual Voting for Online Congregational Meetings from Unitarian Universalist Association
 - <https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/voting-online>
 - PowerPoint slides from Church Law and Tax Webinar on “Making Sure Your Virtual Church Meeting is Legally Valid.”
 - <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:93828712-6a27-4af5-a81f-7c040ad715b6>

- Five questions about virtual business meeting and detailed answers.
 - <https://www.churchlawandtax.com/web/2020/march/5-questions-churches-should-ask-before-holding-virtual-busi.html>
- UFMCC Bylaws
 - <https://www.mcccchurch.org/files/2019/08/UFMCC-Bylaws-as-of-July-2019-FINAL-07.02.19-ENG.pdf>
- UFMCC Governance Committee Advisory
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