



The Presbytery of Eastern Virginia

Guidelines for Holding Congregational Meetings in Extraordinary Times

“As it participates in God’s mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks...a new openness to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God’s activity in the world.”

(Book of Order, 2019-2021, F-1.0404)

In the season of Covid-19, the leadership of our churches and ministries have faithfully responded creatively to how we continue the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in unprecedented circumstances. Given the duration of this ongoing pandemic, congregations will find it necessary to hold congregational meetings virtually. We hope these guidelines will provide a roadmap that will ensure an open and successful virtual gathering, allowing for thoughtful decision-making.

Whether in-person, virtual, or a combination of both, planning is key to a successful congregational meeting. For virtual or a combination of virtual and in-person, the following items need to be planned and thought through well in advance of the meeting to **ensure all members have the ability to participate in the meeting.**

- **Determine if your bylaws include a provision for virtual congregational meetings.** If not, your first action at that virtual congregational meeting be to “amend your bylaws” or manual to include language that would allow you to make decisions virtually in “times of natural disaster or global pandemic that do not allow community to gather in person.” This recommended amendment would come as a recommendation from the session.

OR

The meeting will be provisional, with its actions subject to later ratification. Members should be made aware that the actions taken in the meeting will need to be ratified at a later in-person meeting.

For more information, please see the PCUSA’s [“Advisory Opinion: Church in an Emergency / Pandemic - 3/24/2020.”](#)

- **Choose a platform** that all members can access, regardless of internet access or technological ability. If you use a video conferencing platform, make sure there is an option for members to call in (Zoom has this capability, for example) or you can use a conference call platform like FreeConferenceCall.com

- **Offer time for members to use and test the platform** you are using. You may want to set up practice sessions to allow members to familiarize themselves with the technology. Provide written instruction guides for members to use to assist them in learning the technology. The practice sessions and guides were implemented in the last 2 Presbytery meetings (held via Zoom) and they enabled the meetings to run smoothly and efficiently.
- **Adequate notice of the meeting must be given** to ensure that all members have the opportunity to participate in a congregational meeting. Each congregation's bylaws should elaborate on what is considered "adequate notice"—how far in advance must notice be given and by what means the call for the meeting is to be communicated. (G-1.0502)
- **Relevant documents** must be made available to all members in advance of the meeting.
- **Create a plan for determining a quorum.** One connection to an electronic meeting does not necessarily equal one member toward a quorum. Some connections may be shared by two members; other connections may include no members at all if guests are permitted to watch the meeting.

TIP: Using some form of registration can be a helpful way to limit participation to only those who should be involved in a meeting. It can also serve as a roster for determining attendance.

TIP: Zoom provides a waiting room and registration to help prevent unwanted parties disrupting the meeting. Be sure to check these settings often, especially after a software update.

- **Establish a voting process for the meeting.** Many business items to be considered in a virtual meeting can be handled by unanimous consent, where the moderator asks only for objections rather than votes both for and against. If there is an objection, be clear on the desired protocol for conducting a vote. Zoom offers a "raise hand" feature and a "polling" feature that can be useful for voting. *If those features would not work for some/all members or if you are meeting by conference call*, it may be necessary to use e-mail ballots and/or phone-in voting with a pre-determined limited time frame for people to respond, for example, two hours after conclusion of the meeting. E-mail and phone votes can be checked against the attendance at the meeting since there is no proxy voting in the PCUSA.

TIP: Set a deadline in advance of the meeting for members to submit questions or nominations from the floor. Questions can be read and answered at the virtual meeting and any additional nominations can be presented prior to voting. The moderator should still ask if there are questions but it should simplify the meeting with fewer people needing to be recognized when using electronic platforms.

TIP: Remember that some people may be sharing a connection or in the meeting as observers only, so if a more exact vote is required, consider having members submit a ballot via email or phone call to the clerk of session or other pre-identified party. Submissions can then be checked

against the meeting attendance list (since **absentee and proxy voting is prohibited by the Book of Order**) and votes counted and the outcome reported via email announcement after the meeting.

For the past 2 Presbytery meetings, we used a combination of Zoom's "raise hand" feature and "polling" feature. All business items were handled by "unanimous consent" and Commissioners were instructed to "raise hand" if they objected. If there was an objection, the "poll" was used capture Commissioners' votes.

Be sure to allow Commissioners sufficient time during your practice sessions to familiarize themselves with the voting process and the controls they will use to do so.

- **Ensure all voting participants in the meeting are to be able to be heard by the other voting participants in real time.** In the absence of specific rules for electronic meetings in a congregation's bylaws, it is advisable to follow the minimum standards for such meetings from Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised: *"regardless of the technology used, the opportunity for simultaneous aural communication is essential to the deliberative character of the meeting."* Zoom and conference call technology all generally provide this functionality.

Communication platforms used by PEVA– The Presbytery has used the following platforms for virtual meetings.

Zoom – WWW.ZOOM.COM

The Zoom **Basic Personal Meeting package is FREE**

- Host up to 100 participants
- 40-minute maximum group meetings
- Unlimited 1:1 Meetings
- Free, forever, no credit cards required.

The Zoom **Pro package is 14.99/Monthly or 149.90/Annually**

- Host up to 100 participants – Note: A "Large Meeting" addon package is available to increase participant capacity up to 500 for \$50.00 a month. You can add the package when needed and remove the package when not needed.
- Unlimited group meetings

FreeConferenceCall.com - [Free Conference Call | Full Featured Free Conference Calling](http://FreeConferenceCall.com)

It's Easy to Get Started - Receive a FreeConferenceCall.com account instantly with just an e-mail and password. Once you sign up, you will be provided with a Dial-in Number and Access Code for immediate conferencing, and an Online Meeting ID for hosting meetings with Screen Sharing and Video Conferencing.

Your account is available to you 24/7 and there is no need to schedule or make any reservations. Each audio conference can accommodate 1,000 callers on an unlimited number of free conference calls.

What are the costs involved in a FreeConferenceCall account?

FreeConferenceCall.com is free. They don't charge their customers; however, phone carriers may apply standard charges.

Is there a limit on the length of a conference call?

Each conference call can last up to six hours with an unlimited number of calls allowed.

Other communication platforms include [GoToMeeting](#) and [WebEx](#).

Best Practices for managing electronic meetings:

- **Establish a tech team.** Use the gifts of your members who are more familiar with technology to assist those who are less comfortable with it and to run the meeting. Designate tech assistants to respond to concerns from those who need help getting comfortable with the technology and to assist with running the meeting.

Ideally 2 people should be tasked to run the platform that is hosting the meeting. They need to be very familiar with the platform that you are using and comfortable with teaching members how to use it. Most platforms offer training documents and videos.

If you need help with Zoom, you may contact Raymond Rodrigues (rrodrigues@pcusa-peva.org) to set up a time to chat.

- **Zoom best practices** (some could be applied to a conference call)
 - 2-3 Tech people running Zoom for the meeting (not including moderator) – 1 to run meeting and share screen, 1 to monitor attendance, chat and polling, 1 to assist members who are having difficulties Require registration for the meeting.
 - Use the meeting agenda or create a “cue sheet” from the agenda to guide the leadership and tech staff through the meeting. As an example, here is the [cue sheet](#) that was used at the last presbytery meeting.
 - **Conduct practice sessions** with the moderator, tech staff, and anyone else who will have an active part during the meeting.
 - **Conduct practice sessions** so members can familiarize themselves with the Zoom Controls and voting procedures.
 - **Open the meeting early to allow plenty of time for members to sign on** (especially those who will need assistance).
 - Review meeting procedures before the meeting begins (especially voting).
 - Practice, Practice, and Practice.