



**Lower Susquehanna Synod**  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.



A Reconciling in Christ Synod

The Rev. Beth A. Schlegel  
Synod Secretary

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To: The congregations and the rostered ministers of the Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA  
From: Beth A. Schlegel, synod secretary  
Re: Insights on Congregation Meetings in time of Pandemic

As congregations cope with the realities of the coronavirus pandemic and navigate the possibilities for gathering for worship, the question of Congregation Meetings also arises.

There is no single guidance to provide, since governing documents vary among congregations. Generally, there are a few things designated in the constitution and bylaws of each congregation that are reserved for the Congregation Meeting that cannot be done by the Congregation Council. These include adoption of a budget, election of officers and/or council members, calling a pastor or deacon, and amending the governing documents.

The following are offered as suggestions and should not be considered legal advice. It would be wise to consult with a legal advisor, particularly with regard to conducting elections in a hybrid environment.

*First:* Know what your congregation's governing documents say, particularly in \*C5.03., \*C5.04., Chapter 10, C11.02., C12.01 and C12.02., Chapter 16, and any related bylaws.

*Second:* Consider how you will conduct your meeting, whether in-person, remotely, or hybrid.

1. Legally, churches are exempt from health department guidelines. Morally, we have been encouraging compliance with the guidelines for businesses for the sake of people's health and safety.
2. The current guidelines suggest indoor attendance up to 50% of the room's capacity, using face coverings and social distancing. We are hopeful that this will permit most congregations to conduct meetings in person and achieve a quorum. However, we recognize that there are some who are not ready to gather in person, and thus we encourage remote or hybrid approaches.
3. Remote participation in congregation meetings is permitted by Pennsylvania statutes as long as it is not expressly forbidden in the congregation's governing documents. Such remote participation must allow for simultaneous aural communication. All participants must be able to hear each other and speak in real time.
  - This may be accomplished with a telephone conference call on speakerphone; with multiple people on cellphones with the speakerphone activated and audible to all; or with a Wi-Fi connection, laptop with speakers connected to Zoom or other conferencing platform, and a projector; or a combination of these.
  - Some people could attend in-person and others remotely. Individual attendance should be carefully recorded and voting membership status verified. Those participating remotely are considered present for voting purposes.
  - If your congregation does not have the technology to allow for remote participation, consider partnering with another church that does. Just make sure your voting members are notified of the location.

*Third:* Consider how you will conduct elections and other votes.

1. If your Nominating Committee has a slate ready in time for the voting member notification, it could be included as a ballot. Nominations from the floor would be added manually.
2. In instances where written ballots are required, such ballots could be returned in a sealed envelope by drop-off during a specified time frame to a person who would check off the names of those voting against the attendance register. The sealed envelopes are then opened together with all other ballots and the votes tallied. Loving congregations will devise a method of picking up sealed ballots from those remote meeting participants who cannot drive.
3. Another form of written record may be to use the Zoom chat function. A teller on Zoom is appointed to receive votes from attendees as a private chat post or text message. This may be construed as a form of proxy voting, so exercise caution. Some written record of each vote should be created, perhaps by screenshot or download. Zoom may work best for votes that are public and “Yes” or “No”.
4. Some congregations have placed their items for action into SurveyMonkey and distributed the link only to those voting members who attend the meeting remotely.
5. In a remote environment, it is very difficult to achieve a truly “secret ballot”. Exercise care not to fall into a situation of proxy voting, such as telling someone else how you wish to vote and having that person record it. The drop-off method is recommended for secret ballots.
6. Paid online services such as ElectionBuddy and Eballot may fit the needs of some congregations.
7. In every case, only voting members who participate in the meeting are permitted to vote. Attendance by name should be recorded.
8. According to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania statutes for incorporated entities, if there are no elections because a meeting cannot be held or there is no quorum, those currently in office whose terms would have expired retain their seats until the next Congregation Meeting. If they choose instead to vacate their seat, the Congregation Council may elect a successor until the next Congregation Meeting (C12.03).

*Fourth:* It is an urban legend that business can be conducted without a quorum as long as no one calls for a quorum. According to *Robert’s Rules of Order*, a quorum is necessary to conduct business. Absent a quorum, there can be informal discussion, but no actions may be taken except to adjourn.

1. If you are concerned about quorum, you could encourage participation by limiting the meeting to a simple yes or no to continue the current mission plan (budget). That would allow the ministry to continue being funded until a new budget can be adopted.
2. Quorum would include all participants, in-person and remote.

*Finally:* Good communication regarding what you plan to do will help people participate fully.

There are a number of **resources on our synod website** to assist you in planning and carrying out your meetings, including guidance from the ELCA Secretary on congregation meetings.

If you have specific questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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