

CLERK TIPS #22

CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS, ELECTIONS, BALLOTS, AND MORE

As it comes time when most congregations have annual meetings, it may be helpful to go through why a congregational meeting should be called, how a congregational meeting is run, and some additional tips and information about congregational meetings for specific purposes.

An important point is to check your bylaws about congregational meetings. If your bylaws conflict with the Book of Order or Robert's Rules of Order, you should probably contact the Stated Clerk for advice.

Here's what the Book of Order has to say about congregational meetings:

G-1.05 Meetings of the Congregation*G-1.0501 Annual and Special Meetings*

The congregation shall hold an annual meeting and may hold special meetings as necessary, for any or all of the purposes appropriate for congregational consideration. The business to be transacted at special meetings shall be limited to items specifically listed in the call for the meeting.

All active members of the congregation present at either annual or special meetings are entitled to vote. Congregations shall provide by rule the quorum necessary to conduct business.

G-1.0502 Calling a Congregational Meeting

Meetings of the congregation shall be called by the session, by the presbytery, or by the session when requested in writing by one fourth of the active members on the roll of the congregation. Adequate public notice of all congregational meetings shall be given. Congregations shall provide by their own rule for minimum notification requirements and give notice at regular services of worship prior to the meeting.

G-1.0503 Business Proper to Congregational Meetings

Business to be transacted at meetings of the congregation shall be limited to matters related to the following:

- a. electing ruling elders, deacons, and trustees;
- b. calling a pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor;

- c. changing existing pastoral relationships, by such means as reviewing the adequacy of and approving changes to the terms of call of the pastor or pastors, or requesting, consenting to, or declining to consent to dissolution;
- d. buying, mortgaging, or selling real property;
- e. requesting the presbytery to grant an exemption as permitted in this Constitution (G-2.0404).
- f. approving a plan for the creation of a joint congregational witness, or amending or dissolving the joint congregational witness (G-5.05).

Whenever permitted by civil law, both ecclesiastical and corporate business may be conducted at the same congregational meeting.

As part of the PCUSA Constitution, the provisions of the Book of Order must be followed. Therefore, these are the only types of business cannot be transacted at a congregational meeting. Notice the types of decisions not made at congregational meetings:

- Approval of the budget (Session)
- Election of the treasurer (Session)
- Dissolving a congregation (Presbytery)
- Deciding the time for worship (Session)

Sometimes, members who come from a congregational background may not understand the level of trust given to Session in our polity. In the Presbyterian polity, Session, not the congregation, is responsible for most decisions relating to the congregation.

Also notice how many of the items that require a congregational meeting also require Presbytery action. Items (b), (c)(except review and approval of terms of call), (d), (e), and (f) require Presbytery as well as congregational action. This is why, when a congregation is considering these actions, the congregation/Session should get in touch with the Presbytery, usually through the Committee on Ministry, as soon as possible. Property transactions require the approval of the Committee on Ministry, Trustees, and the Presbytery under the current Bylaws of Presbytery.

Note that certain items of corporate business, such as the adoption and amendment of bylaws, are transacted at congregational meetings, but are not listed here. These actions are authorized by G-4.0101. Note also that corporate and congregational meeting can (and should) be conducted at the same meeting. This avoids confusion or possible inconsistency.

These are the actions that should be taken at congregational meetings. However, additional reports may and should be given, such as the reports of officers and committees. Questions can be taken on those reports at the discretion of the reporter and/or moderator.

CALL/NOTICE

The Book of Order provides:

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The Bylaws of your congregation should provide specific notice requirements for congregational meetings. Generally, a number of calendar days (such as ten) rather than a number of Sundays is preferable to avoid confusion. The method of publication should also be specified in the bylaws. Both electronic and paper mailing, as well as announcement from the pulpit, is my guidance.

If it is a special meeting, the purpose of the meeting must be stated in the call, and no other business may be considered. RONR 9:13.

OFFICERS

Congregational meetings are moderated as follows:

G-1.0504 Moderator

The installed pastor shall ordinarily moderate all meetings of the congregation. If it is impractical for the pastor to preside, he or she shall invite another minister of the Word and Sacrament who is a member of the presbytery or a person authorized by the presbytery to serve as moderator. If there is no installed pastor, or the installed pastor is unable to moderate and/or to name another moderator, the presbytery shall make provision for a moderator.

There are instances when the pastor does not preside. Most notably, this would include a meeting when the pastor's dissolution of call is to be considered at the request of the congregation. G-2.0903. In this instance, the Presbytery would find a moderator. In Detroit Presbytery, the Committee on Ministry should be contacted.

The Clerk of Session serves as secretary for the congregational meeting; if the Clerk is not present, the congregation elects another secretary for that meeting. G-1.0505.

MINUTES

Minutes of the congregation should be approved at the next stated (regular, not special) meeting of the congregation; however, because Robert’s Rules of Order requires that minutes be reviewed within a quarterly time interval (RONR 48:12), if there is no regular meeting within the next three months (and ordinarily, there is not), then the congregation should vote to commit the review and approval of minutes to the Session.

Minutes of congregational meetings should be kept with the minutes of Session meetings in a physical book or binder in the location where the congregation meets for worship.

ELECTIONS

When an election occurs, there is always the opportunity for nominations from the floor. RONR 46:6. Candidates may be voted on individually or as a group, generally following the custom of the congregation. RONR 46:19. A candidate need not be present to be elected, but the election is not complete until the candidate has consented to serve in the office. RONR 46:46.

VOTING

Voting may take place by voice vote, unanimous consent (“are there any objections?”), rising vote, or show of hands. A single member may call for a rising vote instead of a voice vote by calling “Division!.” RONR 4:50.

The following provisions apply to votes by ballot:

- An electronic ballot may be used, such as in a hybrid electronic meeting, through a polling or other function, so long as secrecy of votes may be maintained.
- A teller’s report should be entered in full in the minutes whenever ballots are used. The report should include:

Number of votes cast ____
Number necessary for election/approval ____
(Name) received ____
OR
Number of yes votes ____
Number of no votes ____
Illegal votes (with details as to why the votes were rejected)

- “All ballots that indicate a preference—provided they have been cast by persons entitled to vote—are taken into account in determining the number of votes cast for purpose of computing the majority.” RONR 45:32.
- Blank ballots are treated as abstentions (and abstentions don’t count against a majority; a majority is more than fifty percent of those present *and voting*). RONR 45:31.
- Tellers may be appointed by the chair to distribute, collect, and count the ballots. RONR 45:26. Tellers may have an opinion, even a very strong opinion, on the

question and normally do vote themselves. Id. However, they should not have a personal involvement in the question. Id.

- If two filled out ballots are folded together, then both ballots are counted as illegal votes. However, if one filled out ballot is folded with a blank one, then the filled out ballot is counted and the blank ballot is ignored. RONR 45:32-33.
- A ballot may be simply a piece of paper in which the individual writes “yes” or “no” in response to the motion. If the motion is known ahead of time, the congregation may wish to print ballots in advance with check boxes for “yes” or “no.” “For” and “against” boxes, however, are not used in voting for candidates. RONR 45:25. Blanks may be used for write in votes. Id.
- A candidate that does not achieve a majority is not elected. Therefore, sometimes it is necessary to have more than one vote until a candidate receives a majority for an office.

CALLING A PASTOR

The Pastor is an officer of the church because the Pastor is the moderator. Officers are normally elected by a secret ballot. RONR 46:30. Therefore, the Pastor should be elected by ballot. Note that the call is not complete until the Presbytery has approved the call.

PROPERTY TRANSACTIONS

Minutes of congregational meetings when a property transaction is taking place should include the legal description of the property. This is a requirement of Presbytery and Synod. Most property transactions also need to be approved by Presbytery as well. Please contact the Trustees of Presbytery.

I hope these notes are helpful to you as you prepare for your congregational meeting. Thank you for your service to God’s Church.

Grace and peace,

Rev. Marianne Grano, Esq., Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Detroit