Guidelines for Eastern Synod Congregations Holding Annual E-Meetings

Prologue

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has forced congregations to consider alternatives to in person meetings when holding annual and congregational meetings. Whether holding an in person meeting, an electronic meeting, or no meeting at all, this document outlines a number of guidelines and things to consider as congregations plan for those events. At the same time, it also does not pretend to be a "how-to" process of holding a congregational meeting; as each congregation has its own traditions and practices, there is no "one size fits all."

An electronic meeting may also be referred to as an online, virtual, or e-meeting. A meeting that is held where members are present both in person and by electronic means is known as a hybrid meeting.

Our congregations exist in four provinces, and include those incorporated federally or provincially, and those not incorporated. In addition, each province has its own public health and governmental authorities related to pandemic and emergency situations. Each congregation needs to keep abreast of the pandemic regulations in its own region, so that, for example, it knows the limits for how many people may gather indoors/outdoors for a meeting, while at the same time keeping in mind the space needed for physical distancing (among a number of other factors to consider).

Guiding Principles

Love of God and love of neighbour is the ultimate principle which guides us. The setting of a congregational meeting is one of many places where we express faith, hope and love for others.

The congregational council always has the duty to act in the best interest of the congregation, and now especially by protecting the health and well-being of members and not subjecting them to the risk of virus infection at congregational gatherings, a duty higher than any constitutional and bylaw requirement. Congregational councils are required in general to: a) act honestly and in good faith with a view to the best interests of the congregation; and b) exercise the care, diligence, and skill that a reasonably prudent person would exercise in comparable circumstances. The council is not expected to be perfect, but it needs to take all reasonable measures to fulfil these obligations.

Authority for Electronic Meetings

In general, congregations are allowed to hold congregational meetings electronically because these kinds of meeting have not specifically been denied. Note that in the ELCIC Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations, Bylaw Part VI Section 3 says: "The annual meeting of the congregation shall be held within three (3) months of the congregation's fiscal year end." Nothing in that statement indicates that the annual meeting must be an in person meeting, nor does it say that an electronic meeting is prohibited.

In the case of incorporated congregations, even if the congregation's bylaws have prohibited e-meetings, governmental amendments have occurred and take precedence to allow for e-meetings and voting to be held. This is a temporary measure, so if any incorporated congregation's bylaws prohibit e-meetings, they may be wise to amend their bylaws.

Regardless of one's constitutional documents, it is strongly suggested that congregational councils approve a motion in their Minutes to allow for electronic meetings; this will acknowledge the change in normal practice and make it clear to members that all things are in order. On the other side, it's also wise to record any motion that has to do with not holding an annual meeting and the supporting reasons for that decision.

So What About…?

…whether to have an electronic annual/congregational meeting?

Any form of an e-meeting requires that participants can communicate adequately with each other during the meeting. This is essential to hear and have any meaningful discussion in order to make an informed decision. Note, therefore, that one-way live-streaming is not a suitable platform.

First of all, you need to know if in person meetings can be held in your area. Secondly, consider how it might work best in your congregation: do you hold only an in person meeting? only an e-meeting? or a hybrid meeting?

What kind of meeting will be held?
- Will the meeting contain information and decision-making that is fairly simple and straightforward? Can voting occur by hand or voice?
- Does the meeting's agenda require significant discussion or reflection that needs time for members to digest before making a decision?
- Would an information meeting be sufficient, with an email ballot in the following weeks?
- Do you expect the vote to be contentious? Is it wise to consider waiting to hold this meeting and vote when the congregation can again gather in person? How long can the decision wait?

The answer to these questions may determine different ways to accomplish your intentions.

Remember the duties of care, good faith, diligence – and love! You may come to the conclusion, that for public health and safety reasons, an annual meeting is not the most responsible thing to do at this time.

…the things that have to be done at an annual meeting?

At the minimum, there are few items that have to be accomplished at an annual meeting: approval of draft Minutes of previous congregational meetings; approval of the previous year's financial statements; election of new congregational council members; appointment of the year's financial reviewers or auditors. At the next level, reports can be shared (which could also be distributed via email and hand delivered where appropriate) and then have a time for Q&A. Note: the annual budget is first approved by the congregational council, and if required by constitutional documents, can later be ratified at a congregational meeting.

…notice of meeting?

You'll give the same kind of notice that your Constitution/Bylaws indicate regardless of how the meeting is taking place.

…quorum?

The minimum number for meeting the quorum remains as your Constitution/Bylaws indicate. However, the quorum includes all those present in person and those participating electronically. The quorum also includes those who have submitted a proxy where proxies are legislatively in force. In all cases, remember that the quorum consists only of voting members who are present, and not the total number of all people in the (electronic) room.

…voting members and attendees?

While you may allow for many people to attend a meeting and you may even allow giving them voice at the meeting, at some point you will need to be able to identify who your voting members are. (The congregational/council secretary's job includes responsibility for maintaining and keeping an up-to-date list of voting members.) Access to your voting member list should be available at each congregational meeting to determine and certify if necessary the identity of voting members.
Keep in mind that in some online locations, more than one member may be present/participating (and be aware then that, a Zoom poll for example, it will be difficult to account for more than one vote per connection).

…voting?

There could be many reasons where membership decisions may be required, such as making emergency decisions, approving the budget, having a call meeting, approving real estate transactions, and mergers or amalgamations. Any method of voting is acceptable as long as the membership approves it (hand, voice, standing, electronic poll…).

Whether voting electronically via online or by secret ballot at an in person meeting, it's important that the vote be gathered in a manner that permits its subsequent verification, and that the report of the tallied vote can be made without anyone identifying how a person voted.

A Google search for electronic meeting platforms will provide a number of options. The size of your meeting might dictate which platform to consider; this will be true also for voting platform options. The following has no particular recommendations; factors may come down to the technical capability of those running the meetings, and cost.

Examples of meeting platforms:
- GetQuorum
- GoToMeeting
- Zoom (includes a poll function that can be used for voting)
- Onstream Meetings
- Broadbridge
- ClickMeeting
- Pragmatic
- Google Hangouts
- Skype

Examples of voting platform (used with meeting platform):
- Election Buddy
- Simple Survey
- Simply Voting
- Secured Voting
- Lumi

If confidentiality is deemed necessary for a particular kind of vote, there are forms of electronic voting that maintain confidentiality (e.g. Zoom poll feature, software voting platforms. An email ballot is a possibility if an immediate decision isn't required.

…electing a congregational council?

Unless the number of nominees for congregational council is greater than the positions that need to be filled, a simple vote by hand or voice will elect those councillors by acclamation.
If a ballot is required because there are more nominees than positions available, a mail in ballot may be a reasonable option.

...minutes/recording?

Make sure that someone takes the minutes at any annual or congregational meeting, and forward them to the next congregational council meeting. While an audio/video recording may be made of a meeting, it can't be considered as the "recorded minutes" of the meeting.

Other Things to Keep Mind

- There will be some members who will not be able to attend in person (elderly, illness, disability issues) or connect via an electronic device (no easy access to technology, difficulty negotiating with technology). There's no quick answer of how to include them.

- New rules and the designation of spaces that are deemed to be safe won't necessarily address people's fears or anxieties of gathering together in person.

- Some "meetings" might consider finding ways of polling members ahead of time so that everyone feels included in deliberations, and doesn't feel disenfranchised from information and decision-making. When polling members and/or distributing information about potential decisions, find opportunities for members to ask questions (and receive answers).

- Create a process document for the council of how an electronic meeting might be held in your congregation, how it looks from the planning stages through implementation and as a follow-up for evaluation in anticipation of the next meeting. Let the congregation know how the meeting will happen so that everyone understands what will take place.

- Practice, practice, practice! – a rehearsal and dry-run of an electronic meeting is a great idea to iron out any potential bugs with respect to online issues, software/app concerns and so that everyone has some familiarity with the environment.

- When it comes to distributing information, make as much available as possible so that members are able to contribute through informed and responsible conversations and decisions. This can include paper/email documents, slide decks, motions to be voted on, and directions on how to use software. Some people will login with no video or won't be able to get their video working. By providing materials before the meeting, they'll still be able to fully participate.

- In some cases, absentee voting (by using mail-in ballots) has been a suitable solution. Note that while absentee voting is not allowed in the ELCIC (refer to the Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations, Part VI Section 7), in these extraordinary and temporary circumstances and times – where we need to be acting in good faith and exercising care for the best interests of the congregation – this option can be used responsibly for some kinds of specific decisions. There are guidelines and an outline-template available for this kind of voting.

Much of what precedes is indebted to the gleaning of documents and experiences and from those who have shared how meetings and voting have worked successfully in congregations. You may be aware of other ways and experiences to add to this; if so, please drop a line to the Secretary of the Eastern Synod, either by phone (519-743-1461, ext 214) or via the contact page on the Eastern Synod website (https://easternsynod.org/contacts/synod-staff/).

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