

ELECTRONIC MEETINGS

There is no substitute for the richness of conversation and debate that is possible when we gather in one place to listen and watch and open ourselves to the work of the Spirit. We best subject ourselves to each other and to God's discerning power when we are together.

There are circumstances though, when being physically present with one another is impossible or impractical." Also, a principle of Presbyterian government is that decisions reached in church bodies shall be "by vote, following opportunity for discussion, and a majority shall govern (G-4.0301)."

With all the above said, we do a lot of things electronically these days. One thing church sessions, presbytery commissions and committees may want to do electronically is to hold meetings. *Robert's Rules of Order*, the parliamentary authority for PC(USA) councils, contains rules for holding electronic meetings in Chapter IV. §9.

Pursuant to Robert's, church sessions or the presbytery, which are established by the *Book of Order*, can hold electronic meetings only if so authorized in the church's or presbytery's bylaws. On the other hand, a committee or commission of a session or presbytery, if it is established by the session or presbytery and not by church bylaws, can be authorized to hold electronic meetings by simple session or presbytery action.

The main principle to be followed in holding an electronic meeting, though, is that the meeting must provide opportunity for simultaneous aural communication among all participating members equivalent to those of meetings held in one room or area. This means that a telephone conference is permitted, but an email meeting is not. Repeat: NO EMAIL MEETINGS. Voting, yes. Meeting, no.

The notice of an electronic meeting must include instructions on how to participate. For instance, you may wish to include rules for these meetings such as how to obtain the floor or methods for taking votes. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* recommends that churches or presbytery agencies wanting to authorize electronic meetings of boards and committees consider addressing the following issues in either the bylaws, manual of administrative operation, or policies:

- the type of equipment required for participation in meetings;
- contingencies for technical difficulties or malfunctions;
- determination of a quorum;
- how to raise a point of order challenging the continuing existence of a quorum;
- how to seek recognition and obtain the floor;
- how motions are to be submitted in writing;
- methods for taking and verifying votes;
- provisions for ensuring that nonmembers do not participate, especially in the case of special meetings in which confidential information will be shared.

Under such conditions, an electronic meeting that is properly authorized by the bylaws is treated as though it were a meeting at which all the members who are participating are "actually present."

NOTE: (1) *Membership meetings in most churches are too large to be conducted by electronic means. As a result, the option of electronic meetings will have the most relevance to board and committee meetings consisting of a smaller number of participants.* (2) *Secret ballots generally are not possible in electronic meetings, which may make such meetings inadvisable in some cases.*

EMAIL VOTING

Email voting can work if the matter being voted on is a matter on which no discussion is needed or on which there has already been full discussion.

If anyone feels a need to discuss the issue being voted upon, since email meetings are not permitted by *Robert's*, the session, committee, or presbytery commission or committee should call an electronic or in-person meeting prior to taking a vote.

For email voting, following *Robert's Rules* for voting by mail, the moderator possesses the question/motion and asks, "are there any objections?" If any member has an objection or desires to discuss, then a meeting needs to take place before a vote may be taken.

Furthermore, when taking a vote by email, it also functions like a roll call vote. Every member must acknowledge the email ballot in order for the vote to carry. Every person must respond.

After every member has responded and there were no objections, then the action is then recorded in the minutes of the following meeting.

ADVISED PRACTICE

Sessions, Presbytery's Commissions and Committees, of the Presbytery of Milwaukee may conduct occasional assembly by telephone or video conferencing when:

- 1) The moderator has determined that a particular meeting or actions within a meeting should be conducted by non-traditional methods such as telephone or video conferencing or electronic means. To provide this opportunity, all members entitled to participate must be polled and this format of meeting may be followed if a majority of members agree in advance to this format. If the poll is conducted by email, following the process outlined above from *Robert's Rules*.
- 2) Any non-traditional form of meeting must provide an opportunity for simultaneous communication and deliberation, and care must be taken that all qualified to participate in the meeting are included.
- 3) Matters addressed at a non-traditional meeting may be time-sensitive matters that must be acted on prior to the next stated meeting or may be "regular" pieces of business that have already been thoroughly discussed and debated.
- 4) The system for meeting must provide access by which every member participating in the meeting can communicate with each other.
- 5) Voting on a video or phone conferencing system will be done by roll call and the moderator will record the result of the vote. If voting is done by email, the moderator will post the item as a group email and all comments are to be addressed to all participants. Email voting must be done within a stated set time from when the moderator sends out the item, and the moderator will tally and notify the group of the results.

6) Minutes of the meeting must be recorded and added to the minutes record of the committee, council or board. At the following meeting of the group, the tally of conference or electronic votes is reported for verification.

Some Websites for Further Investigation:

www.adobeconnect.com (a very versatile online meeting provider – subscription)

www.gotomeeting.com (another popular online meeting provider – subscription)

www.zoom.us (free online meetings – for meetings up to 100 people, 40 minutes at a time)

www.freeconferencecall.com (conference calls, control panel, online meetings)

www.polleverywhere.com (anonymous online voting)