

Best Practices: Online Meetings for Congregation Councils

This guide is adapted from the journal article, Cathy Trower, “Going Virtual Fast and Well: 12 Steps to an Efficient Virtual Board Meeting,” *Trusteeship*, Volume 28, Number 3, May/June 2020. Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

It’s been said never to waste a crisis, and that moment is upon us. Congregation Councils carry the responsibility of being the congregation’s board of directors – fulfilling their duties with care, putting the best interests of the organization first, and following the church’s governing documents. As congregations think through how to do what they do during this pandemic, so must congregation councils **quickly move from face-to-face to online meetings**—and many are floundering. Here’s quick advice for congregation presidents, councils, and pastors to work together for online meetings and go virtual fast and well; and while much of this applies always—and is just good practice—these tips matter now more than ever.

With respect to the agenda:

1. Ask, “What do the council, president, and pastor need at this meeting?” This means, decide what is essential.
2. Use a consent agenda. This means that you group together all the reports that do not need actions into a list. Unless something is pulled out for special consideration the list is adopted in a single vote. The consent agenda can include standard committee reports, the pastor’s report, prior meeting minutes, and events calendar. To learn more about what a consent agenda is about and how to use it, see <https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/what-is-a-consent-agenda-for-a-board-meeting/>
3. State the meeting’s objectives up front and design a planned, timed agenda to meet them. Boards appreciate clarity, in crises moments more than ever. Respect the commitment participants have made to attend this meeting by starting and stopping on time.
4. Send all materials at least a week in advance. This would include the agenda, the most critical questions that council members should think about and be ready to discuss at the right time on the agenda, and any PowerPoints or other reports.

Running the meeting:

5. Welcome everyone, thank them for their attendance, and invite people to check-in with each other by taking a minute to share, How are you and how is your family? Building community among your leaders is especially important now.
6. Be grounded in God’s word and in prayer.
7. The president or chair should clarify what needs to happen in the allotted time and how to keep things moving. Because airtime matters more than ever, some (new, for many) norms should be stated, such as:
 - No repeat rule: No one should repeat themselves or simply parrot back what someone else has already articulated.
 - No dominance rule: No one should hog, or be allowed to hog, the limited airtime.
 - No soap box, prognostications, or pontificating rule: self-explanatory.

8. Remind everyone to state their name when they start to speak so it's clear who it is. For votes, it's especially important to be sure it's clear who makes the motion and who seconds it, number of 'yeas' and 'nays' and abstentions.

9. If using PowerPoint, keep it short and simple and send in advance with instructions for council members to read it and print it. If you have a second screen, it can be helpful. Set Zoom settings to allow your council to all be seen at once so they can follow along during the meeting if the slides will not be shown on the screen. The screen will be filled with small images of all meeting participants.

10. Use instant polling if, and only if, that's something you or a host know how to do and can do appropriately. It can be a good way to engage the council—as a collective, in the moment—on perspective views on important matters. Polling allows you to quickly see how aligned or disparate the council's thinking is on various matters.

11. Draw everyone into the conversation. This will be more difficult with large groups, but just as in face-to-face meetings, it is essential. Not everyone has to weigh in on every issue, but you do need to ensure that everyone has had a chance to raise critical questions and engage in the dialogue. A full Zoom screen will allow you to see up to 25 people on one screen.

With respect to logistics:

12. Provide training for all council members in advance of the meeting—ideally well in advance of the meeting. If there's not time, ask everyone who is unfamiliar with your online meeting platform to log-in 15 to 20 minutes prior to the start time to learn the basics. You should also send written notes on your online meeting platform's basics. Ensure everyone knows:

- How to use the camera and “unblock video” on their computer. Great online meetings require that everyone can see everyone else (even if only small view). When some are on video and some only dialing in, things get very challenging and small technicalities become annoying distractions or snowball into bigger issues that you don't need right now.
- The mute/unmute feature. This is something to be hyperaware of to ensure they are unmuted when speaking.
- Other essential features like raising your hand when you want to speak (some platforms have a little “hand” icon that shows up by your face on the screen); getting back in if disconnected; and the polling feature.

13. Ask someone on the council, who has the gift of technology, to serve as the Zoom host, and shepherd the technology for the meeting. It will help the meeting go more smoothly and free the chair or president to focus on chairing the meeting. Unless the president prefers to manage the meeting *and* the technology, this is a great way to involve the skills of others.

14. As the president or chair, project a non-anxious presence, show that you have prepared for the meeting, and ensure that you are in charge. Council members take their cues from the chair and now is the time to demonstrate calmness, confidence, and competence.

15. Keep the meeting to two hours or less. Online meetings require much more concentration than in-person. Provide a break halfway through if the meeting will run 2 hours. We've found that people are respectful of quick breaks given with a definite time – even 5 minutes.

In conclusion, online meetings provide a new opportunity for the wisdom, faith, and trust of the president/chair to lead productive and inclusive meetings, and to empower the council's effectiveness as a governing body.

*Almighty God, your Holy Spirit equips the church with a rich diversity of gifts.
Grant that we may use them to bear witness to Christ in lives that are built on faith and love.
Make us ready to live the gospel and eager to do your will,
so that we may share with all your church in the joys of eternal life;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 76*

Cathy Trower, PhD, is a nonprofit board governance consultant and coach who currently serves as board chair at BoardSource and at Riverwoods Exeter. Previously, she served on the board of three colleges and universities.

*Edits – Rev. Dr. Dee Pederson and Bishop Jon Anderson
Southwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA*

For further reading on the responsibilities of a Board of Directors see:
<https://www.ag.state.mn.us/Brochures/pubFiduciaryDutiesofDirectors.pdf>



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