

Enews for 09132023

Clerk's Corner

One of the changes to the *Book of Order* that went into effect this summer was to permit congregations, sessions, presbyteries, and the other councils of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to meet electronically (G-1.0501 & G-3.0105) so long as "the technology employed allows for all members present to hear and be heard simultaneously." Now you might be asking yourself, haven't our sessions and presbytery been meeting via zoom for a while now? Does that mean that those meetings weren't legal? To be honest, many of them were not.

Before the pandemic a few presbyteries had started experimenting with video conference technology for committee meetings but very few congregations saw a need to do so. Then suddenly, every church went online for worship, Bible study, youth group, and, yes, session meetings. However, most organizations' bylaws had never considered this possibility and therefore included rules like how many people had to be *present* to establish a quorum and that for a motion to prevail it must receive the support of a majority of those who are *present* and voting. At the time, the Stated Clerk of the denomination counseled that we should keep meeting as best we are able but that we should also take two actions whenever we had our next meeting that comply with the bylaws:

1. Vote to ratify all the decisions made at those electronic meetings.
2. Amend the bylaws to permit electronic meetings and establish any necessary rules to govern them.

At the time, none of us anticipated how long it might be until our next regularly held meeting! While some resumed in-person meetings a few months later, some congregations continued to meet electronically for several years. Indeed, one session in this presbytery just has its first in-person session meeting since 2020. Over the last few months, I've also attended several hybrid session meetings where one or more member was brought in electronically because of work, illness, or family obligations and I've heard that others plan to go back online when winter comes to Northeast Ohio.

Since it took much longer for us to return to in-person meetings, many congregations forgot to ratify those electronic actions or adopt updates to the bylaws when the time came. If your congregation is one of those, then now is the time. The update to the *Book of Order* is a good start but it also says that "Congregations should adopt special rules of order and standing rules to govern such meetings" (G-1.501). I would encourage congregations to use this or similar language for those updates:

The session and the congregation may meet by electronic means if all members have reasonable notice of the electronic meeting and the ability to simultaneously hear and be heard so that they may discuss, deliberate, and discern the will of God together. The quorum for such meetings shall be the same as physical meetings.

While this matter may seem like a technicality (it is), it is a technicality that matters. Decisions that are not made in accordance with the bylaws will not stand up if challenged (in civil court or

in front of the Permanent Judicial Commission). More importantly, however, our polity reflects our belief that Christ has called his Church together so that we might “seek together to find and represent the will of Christ” (F-3.0204) because together we “are the body of the Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). We have a *Book of Order*, bylaws, and standing rules because we believe that they help us to act in ways that are faithful to Christ by making sure that all parts of the body are respected and included. If you have questions or need assistance in updating your bylaws, please feel free to contact me.

May the Peace of Christ be with you,
Barry

Stewardship Tips

<https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/stewardship-tips-is-it-time-to-pass-the-plate-again/>