

Organizing and administering congregational annual meetings

It's nearly time for your congregational annual meeting! Here are some tips for organizing and conducting effective meetings.

Meetings for church members to make decisions that affect their common life together grow out of the Reformation idea of the "priesthood of all believers."

The ELCA Constitution for Congregations states that the powers of the congregation are vested in the congregational meeting called and conducted as provided in this constitution and bylaws. (C5.02) Congregations hold annual meetings at a time specified in their bylaws.

The annual meeting is usually planned by the Congregation Council and led by the council president. Thorough attention to pre-meeting tasks helps the meeting move as efficiently as possible.

The purpose of the annual meeting is to conduct the official business for the year. Members read minutes, make and receive reports, vote on the budget, elect new officers and/or council members, elect members to committees, elect members to attend synod assembly, and transact any other official business. The agenda is therefore structured like a business meeting.

However, some churches also use the annual meeting as a time to celebrate the congregation's life. One way to do this is to separate the meeting into three segments: "Stating Our Purpose Together as a Congregation"; "Celebrating the Life We Have Had Together in the Past Year"; and "Looking Ahead into the New Year and Asking's God's Blessing upon Us."

It is important to make members aware of the meeting and the importance of their attendance. Notice of the annual meeting must be given, consistent with the congregation's constitution and bylaws.

Before the annual meeting, the Congregational Council should:

- Begin praying for the annual meeting;
- Give notice of the meeting in accordance with the requirements of the congregation's constitution (usually C10.03);
 - a) Publish a meeting notice in the Sunday bulletin on the preceding two consecutive Sundays.
 - b) Mail meeting notice to members at least 10 days in advance of the date of the meeting
- Review last year's minutes and note any "carry-over" items from the meeting for inclusion in the upcoming meeting's draft agenda;
- Request written reports from ministry/committees by a specific due date for inclusion in the annual report;
- Receive reports from the president, treasurer, and financial secretary for inclusion in the annual report;
- Hold congregational budget hearing/review prior to annual meeting (optional)
- Receive the proposed budget from the finance committee, amend or accept it, and approve it for submission to the congregation at the annual meeting;
- Determine any visioning activity, including its purpose, who will conduct it, resources needed, and the hoped-for outcome;
- Prepare a draft agenda;
- Review the draft agenda with necessary persons (Pastor for devotions, those presenting, doing prayer breaks, conducting the elections, etc.);
- Discuss and prepare for potential 'hot topics' that might surface during the meeting; and
- Ensure that the meeting packets and annual reports are assembled and distributed to members.

Annual reports and meeting packets should be distributed to the congregation in advance of the meeting. The annual report should be made available to the congregation prior to the meeting. The meeting packet may contain:

Devotions, draft agenda, meeting covenant/communication guidelines (optional), minutes, reports, proposed budget, nominee profiles, Roberts Rule's cheat sheet, list of membership status changes, membership list (optional), any proposed constitutional/bylaw changes, additional information, and note paper. A copy of the Congregation constitution and bylaws should be available

The sample Agenda could include:

- Call to order
- Devotions
- Meeting covenant-respectful communications guidelines
- Minutes of last meeting
- Pastor's report
- President's report
- Lunch (if included)
- Ministry reports
- Prayer break
- 'Visioning' activity—discerning where the Spirit leads and how to follow faithfully
- Finance reports
- Ministry reports
- Closing of nominations
- Appointment of tellers for election
- Elections
- Prayer break
- Recognitions and thanks
- Other business
- Election report
- Benediction
- Adjournment

Notes:

Written ministry reports do not have to be read aloud during the meeting. The writer may speak (very briefly) to the report and ask if there are any questions.

“Respectful Communication Guidelines” provide a foundation to uphold the wellbeing of the community. Conditioned by our society, we may react to others who are different with negative attitudes, put-downs, judgments and dismissal. If we are to express the essence of God's inclusiveness, we need to agree to behave differently when we are attempting to build a more inclusive community.

Materials for the meeting

- Member attendance sign in sheet
- Printed ballots with nominations and write-in space for from-the-floor nominations
- Pencils for ballots
- Additional meeting packets for the meeting
- 'Visioning' materials
- Microphones
- AV for PowerPoint presentations
- Gavel

Here's to a successful annual meeting!

R = take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others

E = use EMPATHETIC listening

S = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles

P = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak

E = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions

C = keep CONFIDENTIALITY

T = TRUST ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

I agree to uphold these guidelines for the time we have together.