

# **Guidelines for Vestry Meetings During the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused a wide and powerful range of impacts on our lives and how our churches function. Not surprisingly, this extends to Annual Vestry Meetings as well.

## **Vestry Meetings in 2022**

We continue to live in a pandemic that forces us to manage our church life within restrictions on in-person public gatherings, including meeting at and as the church. As we begin the year, another activity that is normally an in-person gathering is the annual meeting of Vestry.

The annual meeting of Vestry plays a core and important role, both legally and missionally, in our life together as church. It is a gathering of qualified persons in a congregation to review the work of the past year, to chart a course for the year or years ahead and to elect key positions. It is a way each member shares in discernment and decision-making while also facilitating mutual accountability. Due to the risk of COVID-19 spread, however, there are restrictions placed by government and local health units as well as the care being taken by all of us out of “an abundance of caution” in protecting each other. Therefore, as a temporary measure, it is necessary for us to carefully consider how this year’s meetings will happen and where required, to find new or adapted means to engage safely and effectively in our annual meetings as parish vestries.

Thankfully, over the last year, many people have become familiar and accustomed to participating in virtual meetings and online worship services. The Synod Council of the Diocese, many of our committees/working groups, our Wardens, Treasurers, Clergy and Diocesan Leadership have been holding virtual meetings since spring 2020.

This document is intended to provide guidance to parishes as they plan for their 2022 Annual Vestry Meetings. It covers both requirements laid out in the Canons as well as best practices to help in planning and conducting meetings. The greater part of the requirements and guidance below also is applicable to those parishes that may require a special vestry meeting while pandemic restrictions on public gatherings remain in place.

For clarity, it is still recommended and preferred for churches to hold annual meetings in the timeframe laid out in the Canons of the diocese. Exceptions must be by approved application.

In order to help minimize the time gathered during an In Person meeting, the Worship Committee has prepared a Liturgy which can be used to combine worship and the annual meeting in a time effective way. Copies can be found on the diocesan COVID Hub.

## Annual Vestry Meetings – Requirements

The requirements for Vestry meetings are spelled out in Canon 13. These requirements and their intention need to be met, though we recognize some may be addressed in a revised or alternate way given the pandemic.

The primary (and minimum) responsibilities for Annual Vestry Meetings remain:

- Each vestry must hold an Annual Vestry Meeting no later than the 15<sup>th</sup> day of March unless given special dispensation by the diocese.
- Confirmation of the minutes of the last Annual Vestry Meeting and any Special Vestry Meetings held since the last AVM.
- Report of the Incumbent or Priest in Charge on the condition, progress and needs of the Church.
- The reception and approval of all financial accounts for the past year.
- Approval of the budget for 2022.
- The appointment and/or election of churchwardens, Synod delegates, financial auditor/reviewers, and other officers for the ensuing year.
- Presentation of the reports of church organizations.

Quorum of 25% of members whose names are on the vestry list must exist for any meeting, regardless of how it is held. The Incumbent/Priest In Charge and Wardens are responsible for creating a list in alphabetical order of all those entitled to vote at a meeting of Vestry. The qualifications are provided in the canon.

As required by Canon 13, notice of the annual vestry meeting or special vestry meeting must be communicated no less than two weeks immediately preceding the date on which the meeting is to be held. Notice may be communicated by any reasonable means available, including a verbal announcement during in-person and/or virtual worship services, parish-wide email or mailing, individual phone calls, and/or posting on the parish website. The Incumbent/Priest-in-charge and Church Wardens are responsible for taking all reasonable steps to reach every household on the parish vestry list and must keep a written record of the steps taken to provide notice of the meeting to the members of vestry.

The Meeting is to be chaired by the Incumbent or Priest in Charge. In the absence of the Incumbent or Priest in Charge a chairperson shall be elected by the majority present.

Business conducted at the annual meeting should be guided by clear governance and serve the building of discipleship, formation, and mission.

There must be prompt submission of annual statistics for 2021 and Officers/Key Church positions to the Synod Office following the annual meeting of Vestry, regardless of how the

meeting is held. Minutes must be recorded and approved at the next meeting, regardless of how the meeting is held.

### **Modes of Meeting**

As we have seen, the requirements and limitations imposed as a result of the pandemic continue to change and evolve. Depending on the restrictions of the day, there are three options for an Annual Vestry Meeting

1. Held with all present in a room, adhering to the current guidelines
2. Held entirely online
3. Held with some people in the room and some attending online (a “Hybrid” meeting)

#### 1) In Person Meeting

This is most similar to the meetings that have occurred each year in each of our churches. If In Person meetings are permitted at the time of the meeting, some key differences (governed under the Amber Stage of Loving our Neighbours) would include:

- Total people attending (including the chair, wardens, secretary, etc) would be a maximum of the lesser of 30% of normal capacity, the capacity dictated by Physical Distancing (the “Bubble Chart”) or 50 people. If this capacity does not allow for the normal number of attendees at a AVM or of those who have stated an intention, then an In-Person only is not sufficient.
- Proper physical distancing must be reflected in the room setup and be maintained at all times
- All present must have Self – Assessed for COVID 19 Symptoms
- Hand sanitizer must be available and used
- Masks must be worn by all present, at all times
- No food or drink can be provided
- For sign in sheets, it is best not to use a common pen. If one is provided, it should be sanitized between each use
- The total time in the space of the meeting should not last more than an hour, including any worship service

In Person meetings are not possible while we are in the Red Stage of Loving our Neighbours.

#### 2) Online Only Meeting

The technology and experience is now in place to allow governance meetings to successfully occur online.

### 3) Hybrid Meeting

While Vestry meetings may be held entirely via an online video conferencing platform, it may prove more desirable to hold a “hybrid” form of meeting. This is consistent with what has evolved in the worship life of many of our churches during the pandemic. This allows for situations where there is not sufficient capacity to hold all those entitled who wish/plan to attend or for where individuals are unable, uncomfortable, or unwilling to attend in person and onsite. It also allows for situations where individuals do not have access to technology or have a comfort level attending online.

In these cases, it is recommended that the officials for the meeting (Incumbent/chair, wardens, vestry clerk or recording secretary, treasurer, others as deemed necessary) are together and physically distanced in one location.

For those present in person, the same guidelines as for an In Person meeting apply (see above). The same guidelines as for Online Only meetings also apply. The hybrid meeting will be successful if online participants can see and hear in-person participants and in-person participants can see and hear online participants.

## **Regulations & Guidelines for Holding Virtual or Hybrid Vestry Meetings**

- 1) The Church Wardens, together with the Incumbent or Priest in Charge, should research and then select a virtual meeting platform that is most appropriate and accessible for the members of their parish vestry. Video conferencing platforms (e.g. Zoom, GoToMeeting, Teams) that permit participation by telephone as well as PC/Smart Device are most desirable, allowing for the participation of persons without the means, or not wishing, to participate by video. The method selected must have the option to have an audio recording available following the meeting. Parishes are responsible for any costs associated with the use of such platforms. Calling in to participate via telephone apart from the chosen conferencing platform is not permitted. No proxies or voting by anyone who is not present In Person or Online is permitted.
- 2) It is recommended to select a Conference Co-ordinator (or point-person). This person will be responsible for taking care of participants joining online, watching for raised hands, muting people, unmuting people, managing distractions, dealing with any technical questions, etc.

- 3) Prior to the actual meeting, it is strongly recommended that parish leaders hold a rehearsal (Dry Run) meeting using the technology chosen to conduct the meeting and to ensure a smooth flow and outcome.
- 4) Set the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting to ensure there is equal opportunity for all. This would include how participants ask questions both in-person and online, the expectations for balancing listening and speaking, not speaking over each other, how voting will occur, etc.
- 5) The Incumbent's Charge, all reports, and financial documents should be circulated or otherwise made available prior to the Vestry meeting for participants to read in order to reduce the length of the meeting time while still providing required information and transparency for members of vestry. It also is advisable to prepare and circulate a slate of nominees for elected positions and a list of appointments prior to the meeting.
- 6) In order to keep the meeting within the one-hour boundary (In Person or Hybrid), items for discussion on the agenda for the 2022 annual meeting should be limited to those listed above in the bulleted points in the requirements section. Discussions which may be informational or generally useful but not a vestry decision can take place at a follow up meeting.
- 7) The method of voting during vestry meetings shall be at the discretion of the chairperson and may include polling, visual cues, an audio roll call, or votes taken in the negative and abstentions. Confidential voting is not permitted at this time. There must be clarity for all that the chair has an accurate count on decisions being made by vestry.
- 8) Minutes must include a list of those qualified members present for the virtual vestry meeting, including those who chose not to vote or were not entitled to vote. A member of vestry will be considered to be present at a meeting if that qualified member establishes a communication link to, or votes at, the meeting.
- 9) For a Hybrid Meeting to be successful, in the physical room you will need:
  - Display - There should be either one screen or multiple screens so that the in-person members can see the online members.
  - Microphones – In a small space it may be possible to use a conference phone or speaker phone, but in a medium or large room it will be necessary to use multiple microphones. Passing a microphone between different speakers is not advised, therefore a better practice is to have microphones on stands in appropriate places such as for the chair of Vestry, a presentation lectern, and a designated speaking position for audience members.
  - Speakers - computer speakers or "Bluetooth" speakers may work in a small room. In a larger room the computer used to "run" the meeting will need to be connected to a PA system.

- Camera(s) - An external (not embedded in the laptop) camera will be necessary to show both the chair and the audience. Inexpensive “capture” devices allow the external camera to work with teleconferencing applications. Someone will need to operate the camera and point in the direction of the current speaker. Using multiple cameras is also possible but requires a video “switcher.” These can be a physical device or special software running on a separate computer from the meeting software.

10) Note that much of this equipment can be rented from local vendors if necessary, but many churches will be able to adapt their existing equipment for these needs (for example, by holding the Vestry Meeting in the sanctuary so that they can use the church's PA system).

If you need help with technology, please contact the Communications Officer (Mark Hauser).

Questions should be directed to the Diocesan Executive Officer (Alex Pierson)