

Online meeting protocols and best practices.

The church has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in how we continue to offer ministry in this time of pandemic. This can be seen specifically in the quickness by which councils, committees, and parish meetings took to online forums and video-conferencing platforms. “Zoom” has become a common word amongst churches today.

Online ministry creates unique opportunities and challenges for church committees. While lamenting the lack of physical meetings, on-line meetings also carry some benefits. No longer do people have to worry about driving at night, managing icy roadways, or managing inclement weather condition. For these reasons, it is safe to assume that, even after the pandemic, some version of online meetings will continue.

Below are some procedures and “best practices” to consider as the church moves forward with online ministry.

Protocol for private and confidential meetings:

Steps should be taken to ensure online privacy in the same way that privacy would be observed in an in-person, physical meeting. Confidentiality in online meetings can best be handled in two ways:

Privacy in Email Communication: As ministry becomes mediated through e-mail exchanges, it is important that each member of a committee/council have a private email address dedicated to ministry related communication. This email should not be an e-mail address provided by one’s employment, nor should the email be a shared account with one’s spouse or partner. With the multiplicity of email providers today, creating a dedicated email account should not prove difficult.

All ministry-related communication is to be kept in the private email. It is not to be forwarded to non-committee/council members. If the minutes of a meeting are a matter of public record (such as parish or diocesan council minutes), only the official minutes of the meeting may be forwarded. Even here, however, it is best that the forwarding of the minutes be left to the council chair or secretary.

In the case that a document is to be shared, it is a best practice that all word documents first be converted to Pdf format. This is done to ensure that no alterations or changes can be made.

Privacy in shared spaces: Video conferencing platforms, like Zoom, allow for people to attend meetings from the comfort of one’s home. Not every home, however, has a dedicated space for such meetings. People attend meetings from their kitchen table, their living room, or other spaces in their residence. Furthermore, people often raise their voice to ensure clear communication during online meetings. Thus, it is highly possible that members of one’s household are within ear-shot of online discussions. Not only may this become a hindrance to council members feeling like they can speak freely and openly within the meeting, but this may also create the public dissemination of confidential material.

For these reasons, steps should be taken to ensure the confidentiality of online meetings. Specifically:

- Headphone/Ear buds should be worn for all online meetings. This ensures that all discussions and comments remain with members of the council/committee.

- Speaker phones should not be used: The demand for private conversation is such that any member who connects with an online meeting via cellphone should not place the call on speaker phone.

Protocol for “open” meetings

Parish council meetings are open to any member of the parish. All parishioners (as defined by the diocesan Constitutions and Canons) may attend a meeting of the parish council. This means that a parishioner may be physically present at an “in person” meeting of the council or may log on to a virtual meeting.

Certain guidelines are to be followed if a parishioner wishes to attend a meeting of the council, either in person or virtually. These guidelines are aimed to protect the efficiency of the council’s work, while respecting the rights of the parishioner.

- Any parishioner wishing to attend a meeting of parish council *must disclose him/herself*. Just as council would be aware of any parishioner physically present during an in-person meeting, council members must be aware of anyone who is virtually present. Listening in to an online meeting in secret is both unethical and inappropriate. It is best practice that any parishioner wishing to sit into a meeting of parish council do so through a personal video/phone-connection, rather than simply “listening” in the background.
- Parishioners attending a meeting of the parish council have no voice at the council, unless it is granted by the approval of the council. It should be understood, however, that speaking to a matter under discussion is to follow the general principles and procedures as laid out by the Council, or Roberts Rules of Order. Rude interruptions, verbal abuse, or personal insults will not be tolerated. Parishioners who have been granted a voice at the meeting of parish council do not have a vote at parish council.
- Private conversations and/or “chats” with a member of council are not to take place during the sitting of the council. A parishioner’s right to VOICE pertains to the right to speak to the entire council. Private conversations, questions, or challenges are best left to after the meeting.
- Abuse of the chat function during online meetings may result in the host restricting or denying the chat feature in future meetings.

Other helpful practices

Here some other helpful suggestions when engaging in online meetings.

- It is considerate to others to mute one’s microphone when not speaking. This keeps distracting background noise to a minimum.
- When attending an online meeting, pick a location that maximizes privacy as well as minimizes background noise. If attending the meeting from the kitchen table, for example, it is best not to run the dishwasher!
- Avoid answering the phone or doorbell during an online meeting unless it is an emergency. If one needs to respond to an interruption, ensure that your microphone and your camera are turned off. This indicates that you have stepped away from the meeting. Answering a phone call while “present” during an online meeting is as rude as answering a phone call during an in-person meeting.

- Minimize distractions from pets. What is cute and funny the first time can quickly become a nuisance if it continues.