

JANUARY 2021  
BEING CHURCH IN A PANDEMIC

# Annual Meetings Go Virtual

Greg Syler

Your congregation's upcoming annual meeting may be included on the list of things COVID will continue to overturn. But fear not: like other aspects of this devastating pandemic, it may bring some new learnings and growth opportunities.

Mandated most often in diocesan canons and reflected in congregational bylaws, the annual meeting is generally the only prescribed all-congregational meeting in a given year. It happens once a year, and provides the only time when certain business of the congregation's common life *can* be done. The congregation as a whole, gathered at its annual meeting, elects leadership to the vestry and representation to Diocesan Council. Annual meetings see the budget, even though in most cases they don't act to *approve* it (that's the vestry's job). Annual meetings can revise or adopt new bylaws, given a process of formation and information leading up to the meeting, thus reconfiguring the congregation's common life and moving it in new directions. And even though some think it's called an 'annual' meeting because it only happens once per year, there are often provisions in diocesan canons and church bylaws which allow for special (all-parish) meetings that can have the same convening, directive power as an annual meeting.

In other words, annual meetings are a big deal. They are the very place where necessary actions can be undertaken to keep the congregation's common life and witness moving forward. They are also marked by great opportunity. Even during COVID – or perhaps especially during COVID – it's a great idea to start planning ahead and thinking about how and in what ways you'd like to hold your upcoming annual meeting.

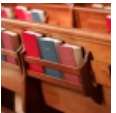


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Let me offer seven helpful suggestions to help you plan your congregation's next annual meeting.

## 1. Press on

The temptation around so much of this pandemic is to wait. It's wise to go slowly in a lot of church life, to make generous room, so people can feel comfortable and make the best decisions for themselves and their families. In planning for an annual meeting and moving the literal business of your congregation forward, this is definitely not a time to wait. Start planning now, even if your meeting is ordinarily scheduled for the spring. Begin sketching a plan, despite the likelihood that it will most likely be a virtual meeting. To be fair, I can't imagine there will be many *in-person* annual meetings this winter and spring, but that shouldn't stop us. Planning and thinking should start now, if it hasn't already.

## 2. Check the rules

As our diocese's vice chancellor advised me: "It's always good to check the statute – and, the *most recent version* of the statute." Most diocesan canons provide a baseline set of expectations and, in many cases, specific language that shall be included in parish bylaws. Some other dioceses have external controlling statutes. (In my state, there's an extant holdover from colonial days known as the Maryland Vestry Act, which some of us have to double-check also.) The language in diocesan canons and parish bylaws is generally sufficiently flexible as to allow other ways of gathering, even virtually.

Our parish bylaws, for instance, stipulate that the annual meeting shall be held on "a designated Sunday in January," but they give the vestry the right and responsibility to determine which Sunday, where, at what time and other necessary details. The bylaws also provide that the "date of the annual meeting may be chosen and/or changed by a majority vote of the vestry." The Canons of the Diocese of Washington provide that the vestry "shall determine the date and place of the annual meeting of the parish...and provide notice to the parish of the date and place of that annual meeting."

'Online' or 'virtual' may be the "place" of the annual meeting, but make sure you check your parish bylaws and diocesan canons and check with your diocesan chancellor if you have any questions. If your bylaws stipulate a specific place and time and would not otherwise permit the flexibility to go online, it would be wise to make a call to your diocesan chancellor this week.

### **3. Develop a process**

As you and your congregation's leadership go about making a plan for the annual meeting, even in rough sketches, try to imagine a process leading up to the meeting. Because this pandemic has forced so many into isolated spaces, we've missed hearing about random other things going on in our neighborhoods and communities and congregations. The weekly banter of coffee hour simply hasn't happened for a long, long time, and it turns out that those forums (yes, even coffee hour!) are vitally important to the intangible connections of the local congregation and Body of Christ.

Perhaps you could tie in your annual fundraising (stewardship) campaign, launching that campaign virtually as part of a run-up to the annual meeting. If you, like so many, need to take a sober, hard look at re-forecasting your annual budget, this may be a great time to have virtual groups engage the goal-setting process alongside the finance committee and vestry. Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because people are not coming to in-person functions, they are somehow disinterested in the work of the church and the mission of their congregation. Include them in a process leading up to the annual meeting.

### **4. Launch a series of conversations**

Like the areas I wrote about in developing a process, above, I think this is a great time to launch a series of ways to engage your people. I'm sure there are things you've done or had to do since everything shut down in March. Perhaps you've spruced up your website or made improvements to your buildings. Maybe your congregational leadership, being forced out of the church building, has begun walking the neighborhood, leading some to imagine new missional opportunities. Perhaps you'd like to talk about what we can learn on a deeper, spiritual level from our shared experience of this pandemic. (I recommend a book study of N.T. Wright's excellent new, little book, *God and the Pandemic*.)

The clergy and lay leaders of your congregation have been doing *a lot* since March, and no one has had the forum or opportunity to talk about it. Make that space this winter. Organize sessions and series, and make them a coordinated run-up to the annual meeting. There are also challenges ahead, I'm sure, and not only limited to finances and budget re-setting. Divide the parish list up by vestry members, and ask those leaders to reach out to the people on their contact list. This will not only extend those connections so vital to the Body of Christ, but

the vestry members themselves will likely hear some important things in addition to communicating the importance of this upcoming series of conversations.

## **5. Don't fear taking on big issues**

This is an unsteady, uncertain time for everyone, including all those involved in leading the life of a local Christian congregation. I'm sure leaders are already facing hard, scary truths. Make sure they're not alone, be they clergy, worrying about their compensation or funding for their staff, or treasurers and finance committees, fretting over cash flow.

But financial shortfalls aren't the only big issue on the table this year. If your community was working on something, and that work was dramatically interrupted this past March, don't be afraid to continue that conversation, even if it means you have to revise the approach or draw out the timeline. This is not the time to stick our heads in the sand, and do only the littlest, easiest bit to keep the engine room of the local Episcopal parish running. Nor is it the time to pretend like this'll just be a bad year or a temporary blip and everything will return to normal soon enough.

Take on the hard things – the difficult challenges presented by COVID or those big things you already sensed God calling you and your congregation to pre-COVID. Just because your annual meeting is virtual doesn't mean you can't have a real conversation about big issues.

## **6. Use the technology**

We've all certainly learned how user-friendly and accessible Zoom and Google Meet and other virtual meeting platforms can be. They've helped us stay connected during COVID, and provided meaningful forums for worship and small groups, Bible studies and committee meetings. Frankly, I'm excited that some things will *stay* on Zoom, given the ease with which people can join a meeting or participate in Bible study.

We've also learned how to develop good PowerPoint presentations and share screens and go live on social media outposts. All of the skills we've picked up over the past many months will serve us well as we plan for the upcoming annual meeting. Add to that, Zoom and Google Meet each have what they call "polling" functions that can be adapted for casting and recording votes at the upcoming meeting. A

Google Meet user needs to add a special extension to enable the polling function – GMP, for [Google Meet Plus](#). Zoom offers a very clear web tutorial, [Polling for Meetings](#), that explains how to set that up in advance of the session. It'll also be remarkable how much your congregation saves in the sheer cost of printing those massive annual meeting booklets now that you can post the PDF to your website, share it on your email newsletters, socialize it via social media and share the screen on Zoom or Google Meet!

## 7. Make and keep a record

Finally, take minutes of the meeting, record who is present, who is eligible to vote and how many votes were cast for such-and-such. Yes, treat this just like any other annual meeting, except that it'll most likely happen on a screen. Not only are these records essential to maintaining the integrity of the process and sharing the good news you've been hard at work on these many months, it'll also be a fascinating read someday for church historians! You can also record the Zoom or Google Meet session, and share that recording with those who were not able to join at the prescribed time, thus extending the work of the annual meeting to other families and households in your parish.

*The Rev. **Greg Syler** is the rector of Ascension, Lexington Park, and St. George's, Valley Lee – two congregations in the Diocese of Washington that share ministries and are learning to be more focused on mission in the quickly growing region known as southern Maryland. Greg's ministry as a 'shared' rector has a bit to do with cutting out operational inefficiency. One of his hopes is to help communities of faith find healthier, more ministry-first business models, but mostly he and the congregations are focused on spiritual renewal and strategic growth. Greg and his wife, Iman, have one daughter, Carter, and an energetic black lab, Phoebe. Greg blogs at "From the Rectory Porch."*

### Resources:

- [Selecting Leaders in our Churches](#) by Annette Buchanan, an ECF Vital Practices blog, November 23, 2016
- [Making Annual Meetings a Source of Renewal](#) by Richelle Thompson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, February 10, 2015
- [Virtual Community](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, March 9, 2017
- [Burned Out on Being "Connected"](#) by Ken Mosesian, an ECF Vital Practices blog, July 6, 2020

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**Suzanne Hall**

Yes, we are planning our annual meeing but you forgot a crital element: Achievign a quorum in a Zoom-weary world. We think there may need to be an element of enterainment.

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