TEMPORARY PROTOCOL FOR CONGREGTIONAL MEETINGS
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In response to several inquiries from parishes about congregational meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, and consistent with Governor Northam's Second Amended Executive Order No. 67 (September 3, 2020) and the Regathering Guidelines promulgated by the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia, the following advice is applicable:

Background: Our Diocesan Canons require action by a congregational meeting for several purposes, including vestry elections. Canon 11, Sections 1-8, which deals primarily with the election of vestry members, generally states the requirements for a congregational meeting, namely that (a) all adult communicants in good standing are entitled to vote, (b) voting in the election of vestry members shall be by ballot, in person, and (c) there shall be no voting by proxy (however, certain specified categories of individuals are permitted to submit an absentee ballot pursuant to the Canonically-mandated procedure).

Meeting Options:

1. **Delay** the congregational meeting until larger gatherings are permitted and feasible. Canon 11.2 allows the Vestry to move the meeting to a later date, and under Canon 11.3 Vestry members serve until their successors are elected and qualified. Canon 11.14 allows Vestries to fill vacancies on the Vestry until the next congregational meeting.

   Congregational meetings are an important link in the governance of Episcopal parishes. They are the forum in which congregants can express their views and concerns through electing the members of their church's vestry. That link needs to be preserved, so (a) a delay in an annual congregational meeting should not be extended (or permanent), and (b) communication by the vestry with the congregants should be more extensive during the delay.

   If your Annual Meeting is delayed beyond January 2021, your rector, priest-in-charge, or senior warden, should contact the Bishop's office via The Rev. Canon Mark Furlow at mfurlow@dioswva.org to determine whether or not your annual meeting shall be considered, "unduly delayed." An unduly delayed annual meeting will need to involve the Bishop for planned rescheduling.

2. **While maintaining social distancing and complying with other current guidance from the Governor and the Bishop on church assemblies**, **hold a congregational meeting in person**. To do this, it will be important that such a meeting be accessible to all adult communicants in good standing, and, if necessary and appropriate, reasonable accommodations should be made for all adult communicants in good standing to attend the meeting. Only qualified attendees at the meeting should be allowed to vote, with no proxy voting (and absentee ballots

only as expressly permitted by the terms of Canon 11.7). The setting may be indoors (subject to the Governor's restrictions and the Bishop's guidance) or outside, but all persons present must be able to hear each other speak during the meeting and any attendee can speak to the group, and voting must be by ballot by only persons attending the meeting (and permitted absentee ballots). Outside meetings are preferable pursuant to COVID-19 safety guidelines.

3. **Hold a virtual congregational meeting** in a form that complies with the provisions of Canon 11. The meeting must be conducted via a technology/meeting platform whereby all persons present to be able to hear each other speak. That requirement may be satisfied by use of a conference call or a video conference program like Zoom meetings, but *would not* be satisfied by an electronic format or program like YouTube or a webinar in which most participants can only hear a speaker but cannot speak themselves and be heard by the other attendees. (This is not to say that most participants cannot be muted by the host for portions of the meeting, such as presentations, but all participants cannot be muted by the host for discussions and debates.)

   As with option 2, the meeting will need to be accessible to all adult communicants in good standing and, if necessary and appropriate, reasonable accommodations would need to be made for all adult communicants in good standing to attend the virtual meeting. To ensure the validity of the meeting, parishes should utilize the diocesan virtual meeting checklist, which will be presented and discussed at a Zoom forum for parochial clergy and wardens held in November.

Questions and comments may be directed to:

The Rev. Canon Mark Furlow, Canon to the Ordinary & Chief Operating Officer
Phone: (859) 321-9244
E-mail: mfurlow@dioswva.org
or
Mark D. Loftis, Chancellor
Phone: (540) 983-7618
E-mail: loftis@woodsrogers.com

Transacting a parish meeting during the pandemic will be a learning process. Therefore, we encourage you to discuss your plans and experiences with us so we can help you improve or adjust your protocols as appropriate.

*These guidance materials are adapted from materials prepared for the Diocese of Virginia by its Chancellor, J. P. Causey, which are used with his permission.