

PROPOSAL #7 : Amendment to Voting Procedures at Congregational Meetings (Manual B.5.6)

Origin: Lakeshore United Church Council, Lakeshore United Church, Goderich Ontario

1. The Issue

We believe God is calling us to request that General Council make amendments to voting procedures at Congregational Meetings that would allow for exceptions from the general rule in certain circumstances: e.g. considering to become an Affirming congregation; approving a Living Faith Story.

Why is this issue important?

We decided to become an Affirming Congregation in October 2023 at a duly-called congregational meeting. There were a number of members who were not able to be present in person on the day of the meeting. Some were away from the community; some adults and youth had to be at work; others had health issues; several members in long-term care facilities or their own homes have mobility issues. Offering the chance to be present through online technology might have been considered; however, not all our members are familiar with using such technology, some have no devices. All of these persons matter to us and all of them are part of God's family who share community in our congregation. (There is also an assumption that the technology option is available to all; however, because of geography or economics that is not true in our nation, most commonly in more remote rural areas. Using such technology during congregational meetings can be problematic when voting on motions is by secret ballot. How do online participants keep their votes a secret?)

The process for becoming an Affirming Congregation requires several months or more of preparation, study, education, opportunities for discussion. We did this for a year and a half. When our Affirming Team had drafted the "Vision Statement" we were inviting the congregation to approve, it was circulated in print and by email to everyone. There were also three final Talking Circle opportunities prior to the meeting to engage in discussion and conversation. Our Affirming Team realized a number of members would not be able to be present at the called meeting, and did offer advance polling. Then, we discovered that was not allowed. We counted those votes but did not record them in the final reported totals sent on to Affirm United.

The United Church has been intent on being an inclusive church. As a denomination that celebrates unity in diversity, she includes the mantra from Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17 on her official crest "That All May Be One". That same prayerful desire is expressed in Psalm 132:1: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (NRSV). The intent to be inclusive is woven into our "Song of Faith" (2006):

“In and with God, we can direct our lives toward right relationship with each other and with God. We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life. We can grow in wisdom and compassion. We can recognize all people as kin.”

“He (Jesus) crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender. He preached and practised unconditional love—love of God, love of neighbour, love of friend, love of enemy—and he commanded his followers to love one another as he had loved them.”

The requirements for voting at Congregational Meetings (Manual B.5.6) meant leaving a number of participants in our community of faith feeling alienated and excluded. Some felt hurt. Some were disgruntled. We believe that the policy in this instance is unjust.

2. How might the General Council or the General Council Executive respond to this issue?

If this proposal is approved by Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council at its General meeting and forwarded with concurrence, the Church Council of Lakeshore United Church Goderich requests **that Manual Section B.5.6 be amended to allow for voting by proxy, advance poll, ballots collected by congregational visitors, etc., at Congregational Meetings where the issue to be decided has had a sufficient amount of discussion and conversation ahead of time so that members not able to be present at the time of the meeting can have a vote that will be counted.** The Holy Spirit has also been present with them in those previous discussions. The exceptions to the general rule for voting procedures would only be allowed in matters that can meet the criteria of sufficient discussion and conversation previous to the time of meeting. Decisions such as becoming an Affirming Congregation, approving a Living Faith Story would be two examples of such matters.

3. What will be the impact?

With regard to the Strategic Plan such amendments would assist with the objectives to Embolden Justice and Strengthen Invitation.

The costs would be Staff time and printing costs to make the Manual revisions. But, as there are always revisions to the Manual arising out of meetings of General Council, we suspect there are budget allowances already made for those possibilities.

Communities of faith will be impacted in ways that promote harmony and not upset. The same might be possible for Regional Council representatives in certain allowable instances.

Risk management issues would revolve around defining and substantiating “sufficient”.

4. How does this proposal help us live into the commitments on equity?

This proposal is all about ensuring equity of access and voice.

5. Comments by Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council ...