

Official Meetings at UUCN

Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua

This document is intended to be a basic, informal introduction to the policies and procedures that govern congregational meetings at UUCN. It encompasses key points from our bylaws and a basic introduction to parliamentary procedure. References to our bylaws will be noted in brackets (“[]”) while references to Robert’s Rules of Order will be indicated by “(RRO)”, although specific references to that text will not be made.

As noted above, our meetings are conducted in accordance with parliamentary procedure, specifically those defined in *Robert’s Rules of Order* [5.7.1]. The point, of course, is for there to be some broad agreement on a way of conducting meetings that avoids chaos and attempts to balance the needs of individuals and groups. As one might imagine, *Robert’s Rules of Order* is hundreds of pages of deliberate detail. As a congenial group of like-minded folks we generally conduct our meetings in the spirit of RRO, unless the situation demands more precision.

A quorum, or the minimum number of members who must be present for a meeting to be legally binding, is defined in our bylaws as twenty percent (20%) of our membership [5.5].¹

The President presides at (i.e. leads) the meeting, serving as Chair or Presiding Officer [6.2]. The Chair cannot make motions before the meeting without stepping down temporarily and handing the chair to someone else until the motion is voted on (RRO). The presiding officer does not vote except to break a tie (RRO).

Votes require a simple majority of members present (RRO) with four exceptions, three of which are noted in our bylaws:

- *Calling the Question* – Requires a two-thirds vote (RRO). A more detailed description of this step is provided below.
- *Calling a Minister* – Requires a ninety percent vote along with additional stipulations [9.3].
- *Bylaws Amendments* – Requires a two-thirds vote along with additional stipulations [13.1].
- *Dissolution of the Congregation* – Requires a three-fourths vote along with additional stipulations [14.1].

When we consider changes to our bylaws, it should be noted that any proposed amendments must be presented in advance [13.1]. Those proposed amendments may be approved or rejected, but changes from the floor or new amendments are considered out of order at the meeting.

Votes are typically cast by a show of hands. If there is any doubt, the hands can be counted or we will turn to paper ballots (RRO).

¹ One exception is any vote to dissolve the congregation, which requires a quorum of 50% of members and that the meeting be specifically called for that purpose.

Members may speak (i.e. address the assembly) when recognized by the chair. Only members of the congregation may make motions or speak to motions unless given permission by the meeting (RRO). Speakers should state their name for the record when they begin.

The typical flow of a sub-segment of the meeting (making a motion) goes as follows (RRO). This is the basic parliamentary process.

- *Motion* – A motion is made to accept a report or approve some action. The proper form is, “I move...”
- *Second* – Motions require a second to prevent the tyranny of one.
- *Discussion* – The merits of the motion are debated. Traditionally the maker of the motion is allowed to speak first in favor of their motion. Anyone who wishes to speak for or against the motion is allowed to speak before someone may speak a second time.
- *Vote* – When discussion ends, a vote is held.

As you can imagine, the above process can get a bit more intricate. We’ll review two other common activities: amendments and calling the question. (RRO) All three of these main activities (motions, amendments, and calling the question) can be nested in seemingly confusing ways, but it’s not as tricky as it may seem. It may be helpful to think of amendments and calling the question as stacked plates. Each new activity stacks on TOP of the previous one and must be resolved before you can return to the underlying plate.

Amendments are treated the same way as making a motion, but they are stacked on top of the original motion and must be voted on BEFORE the original motion can be voted on.

- *Motion* – A motion is made.
- *Second* – Motions require a second.
- *Discussion* – The merits of the motion are debated.
 - *Amendment* – An amendment is offered.
 - *Second* – Like any motion, the amendment requires a second.
 - *Discussion of the Amendment* – A discussion of the amendment ensues. Note that discussion should be limited to the amendment.
 - *Vote* – This is a vote on the amendment only. A “yes” vote incorporates the amendment into the broader motion.
- *Discussion* – The discussion of the original motion (as amended if so voted) is resumed.
- *Vote* – When discussion ends, a vote is held.

Calling the Question is an attempt to end the discussion and advance to a vote. It is generally considered bad form to call the question too early in a discussion. However, if debate is dragging on, folks are beginning to repeat themselves, and/or the mood of the body seems clear, it can be appropriate to call the question.

- *Motion* – A motion is made.
- *Second* – Motions require a second.
- *Discussion* – The merits of the motion are debated.
 - *Call the Question* – “I call the question.”

- *Second* – Requires a second.
- *Vote* – There is no discussion and, if seconded, a vote is immediately made. Calling the question requires a two-thirds vote to pass. A “yes” vote means that the discussion phase of the original motion is terminated and we must immediately vote. A “no” vote returns us to the discussion on the original vote.
- *Discussion* – If calling the question failed, the discussion of the original motion is resumed.
- *Vote* – When discussion ends or if calling the question was successful, a vote is held.

There are three other parts of parliamentary procedures that occur often enough during meetings that are worth reviewing. These actions (technically incidental motions) may be taken at any time, except during votes. They do not require seconds and there is no debate. They are in order even when another person has the floor and must be resolved before business continues.

- *Point of Order* – If a member believes that the rules of the meeting have been broken. The motion requires the chair to make a ruling or, alternatively, the chair may submit the motion to the assembly for a vote. Points of order must be raised at the time the rule is broken or it will be considered too late, except when our bylaws or applicable law may have been violated.
- *Request for Information* (formerly *Point of Information*) – A member may ask a question of the chair or of someone else through the chair for information relevant to the business at hand. This is typically a clarifying question on a point of fact that someone else may know. For example, folks may be speculating about a budget number during debate that a question to the minister or treasurer could resolve.
- *Parliamentary Inquiry* – A member may ask a question concerning the rules of parliamentary procedure.

Finally, a parliamentarian can be selected by the presiding officer to assist said officer in navigating the thorny wicket of parliamentary procedure [5.7.2].