

Special Council Meeting Minutes: January, 2026  
Plymouth Congregational Church – United Church of Christ  
Wednesday, January 7, 2026

1. Call to Order – Rich Bireta, Moderator

Rich Bireta called the meeting to order at 6:30.

*Voting Members Present:*

Rich Bireta – Moderator

Jenny O'Brien – Moderator Elect

Sonia Jordan – Immediate Past Moderator

Stephen Carttar – Treasurer

Doug Eason – At Large Member

Annamarie Hill – At Large Member

Jeff Eriksen – At Large Member

Jeanne Fridell – At Large Member

*Voting Members Not Present:*

David Treviño – At Large Member

*Ex Officio Members Present:*

Valerie Miller-Coleman – Senior Pastor

Caroline Lawson Dean – Associate Pastor

*Non-Voting Members Present:*

Larissa Long – Clerk

Katy Anderson – Deputy Treasurer

*Others Present:*

Terry Schmidt, PMC Chair

Steve Bradt, PMC Member

David Miller, PMC Member

Judy Burch, PMC Member

Liz Smith – Director of Operations

Melissa Praderio – Staff Accountant

Ron Johnson – Deacons

Devon Kim, Chair – Personnel

Kathy Bowen – Music & Fine Arts

John Burch, Plymouth Member

Harold Riehm, Plymouth Member

David Ambler, Plymouth Member

2. Invocation – Rev. Valerie Miller-Coleman, Senior Pastor

Valerie led attendees in prayer.

3. Motion to Adopt Agenda – Rich Bireta

Rich asked that the agenda reflecting the PMC report followed by the 2026 budget be approved.

*Stephen moved to approve the agenda as described; Doug seconded; motion carried unanimously.*

4. New Business

4.1 Project Management Committee (PMC) Report

4.1.1. Announcement - Rich

Rich referenced a letter received today from the Kansas Department of Revenue stating that the organ pipes will be considered as qualified expenses for KS Historical Building Tax Credits. Stephen said the credits would be about \$1,150,000, which is budgeted. However, clarification regarding what is considered part of the organ pipes is needed. Regardless, this is very good news.

4.1.2. PMC Report – Terry

Terry expressed his deep appreciation for the committee members and the time and effort they've given to the process. Currently the committee is spending most of its time working with E. F. Keebler Rendering Services for Organ Builders. He then read from his written report (attached).

Rich then asked for questions/comments about the PMC's report. John Burch asked what the difference is between approve and accept, as both are used in the report. Terry said the intent was not to be confusing. Rich asked if the Chancel design is final or will there be additional changes contemplated? If so, what would they include? Terry said the design presented tonight doesn't mean there couldn't be changes, but this is what they are proposing. Stephen said whether accepted or approved, it will be whatever Council's motion states.

Ron asked how the PMC come up with this design? Terry said they attempted and feel successful in following guidelines that would provide accessibility, flexibility and be esthetically pleasing.

Norine thanked the PMC for their efforts, but her concern with the Chancel design was for Music and Fine Arts programming. Terry said flexibility and accessibility were the key issues – how to make an enlarged area work for everyone.

Stephen then provided the Goals & Objectives:

1. – Per the Enter-In Appeal the work includes:

- Complete restoration of the organ
- Expanding the Chancel to the width of sanctuary; 3 or more steps up with ramps on each side and retaining all historic wood for a similar look and feel
- Lowering of the choir loft to the new Chancel level allowing for expansion and accessibility
- Moving the organ console to the Chancel
- Addressing HVAC issues
- Addressing hearing and lighting issues
- New flooring
- Refurbishing and cleaning of the stained glass

2. – Per Clark & Huesemann 2025 01 07 Projected during meeting

- Chancel flexibility
- Chancel capacity
- Universal accessibility
- Sightlines – standing & seated
- Acoustic performance
- Historic appropriateness
- SHIPO Tax Credits

3. – Survey – August 2025

- Improve accessibility to the Chancel and choir loft,
- Improve sight lines from the sanctuary to the Chancel and choir loft,
- Improve acoustics within the sanctuary,
- Improve flexibility of the Chancel, and
- Maintain historical integrity

Jenny asked where do HVAC and lighting fit in? Dave Miller said removal of the HVAC and heating units are part of the sanctuary. New units on the sides of the sanctuary are for heating only radiators. The air handling blower unit is being modified to be quieter as part of the organ project.

Ron said it's difficult to see how the integrity of the Chancel area is preserved if it runs to the walls. Judy said some PMC members would agree with him as they expressed concerns about preserving the spiritual feelings of the Chancel.

#### 4.1.3. Process/Agenda for called meeting (Rich)

Rich said a valid petition has been received asking for a Called Congregational Meeting to discuss and vote on the proposed Chancel modification. If Council approves or accepts the PMC recommendation today, education sessions could be held on January 14, 18 and 21; with the Called Congregation Meeting held on January 25 between services. Voting would be by written ballot; counted by three individuals- a petitioner's designee; an at-large Council member and a Plymouth member.

#### 4.1.4. Comments from members

Steve expressed his concern about holding the meeting between services. He also felt the timeline wasn't sufficient to address all issues that need to be addressed and would rather see a well thought out process at a later date. Rich said he had been given much advice this year regarding the best time for a meeting. Much of the advice received was in contradiction to other advice received.

John feels it's premature to have a called meeting now as he doesn't believe the congregation is well informed about the project.

Steve read quotes about architecture design and process, acknowledging it's a complicated project, but feels clarity is missing. He would ask Council to consider a motion postponing moving forward at this time. Steve's written statement is attached. Jeanne asked him what that would look like and whether the delay would be for a specific amount of time or until a specific set of milestones had been achieved. He said it would be based on achieving milestones including having the PMC put some outstanding "pieces" together and educating the congregation so they understand the project. Annamarie asked him for an example of something that has changed. He said cost estimates have changed over the past weeks and if costs must be reduced, what changes would be included. Judy said it will be expensive to lower the choir loft 10".

Rich said if we elect to move forward tonight and at the called meeting, it does not mean that Council approves the start of construction. Approval will still be required from the State Historic Preservation Office and Council. Annamarie

asked how much more information does the congregation need. What's the criteria for stopping? Unknown issues in an old building will always be a problem.

Terry said there's no way to guarantee changes won't be needed. Annamarie said we could debate this for the next 10 years. Doug said we should wait until budget concerns are addressed or to the extent we can project them. Stephen said the process matters, even more so than the dollars and feels the congregation hasn't been involved, although Terry was always available to provide information.

Ron said if the Chancel isn't changed, you'll save \$300,000. Sonia asked Stephen and Steve, how long would we postpone the called meeting? Is it based on metrics? Steve said it's a conditional, not time-based goal. Stephen said it wasn't date sensitive, but conceptual - a consensus from the PMC, Council and the congregation.

Dave said he doesn't think the money is a problem at this time. We've covered everything we were asked to provide. In his opinion, we can do it. Devon said she'd be happy to raise more money!

Harold Rheim thanked the PMC for its' work, but said the photo isn't historically pleasing and he has grave reservations about holding the meeting between services.

Jenny said three components of a difficult decision are - (1) the facts which are straightforward; (2) our feelings about changes, cost, beauty, history, etc.; and (3) the question of identity. Does a change to the sanctuary change who we are as a people? Moving ahead with the Chancel vote meeting would allow us to gauge the "temperature" of the congregation on this critical issue.

John, referencing his comments during the December meeting, said he has met with Valerie and both agree the project will have great impact on the congregation in the future. He suggests setting a schedule to create a unified vision for the sanctuary going forward. He doesn't feel the PMC's proposal should be approved, but suggests holding the called meeting to inform, discuss and solicit information from the congregation regarding the proposal. He also suggested (1) the creation of a communications committee which could work with Susan McCarthy to create opportunities for displaying historical building changes; and (2) hiring a project management consultant. John's written statement is attached.

Judy, in response to Jenny's comments regarding a built environment, expressed her concern that people might feel their feelings were trivialized if asked how they feel about the proposed design. Jenny said it's a way to find how congregants feel about the sanctuary and historical aspects of the area.

Norine asked Steve what are the milestones we're on? Steve said the PMC worked toward a start date of April, but he doesn't feel we're ready to start. He doesn't think a delay will necessarily prevent completion – rather it's just a pause on starting until we have answers. Norine said historical change requires congregation support and feels more time is needed to provide information and receive input from the congregation.

Sonia said she's not in favor of an "amorphous" pause. Jeff agreed, saying a pause is his concern. We have a process in place for the congregation to tell Council and the PMC how they feel. We have a design and know there will be changes but believe we can get to budget neutral.

Jeanne asked if opportunities for meetings with E. F. Keebler could be scheduled before the called meeting. Terry thinks the designer would be willing to participate in such a meeting, if his schedule accommodates. If Council wants, he'll reach out. He then said the called meeting is to determine whether the Chancel should be changed and the PMC needs an answer to move forward. It's either yes or no.

#### 4.1.5. Floor open for motions

Rich read the motion Steve brought for Council's consideration:

*To defer setting any start date for Project Enter-In until a general design concept for all portions of the project has been approved by Council and, as necessary, by the congregation; the project as designed and approved appears to fit within our funding sources; the scheduling of the major components has been evaluated to minimize disruption and maximize the efficiency of the construction project.*

*Norine moved to approve the motion Steve brought forward; Stephen seconded.*

Sonia confirmed the motion is for the start date. Rich said the petition is for the congregation to vote on the chancel.

At 8:30 pm. Rich called for a ten-minute recess. Meeting reconvened at 8:45 pm.

Jeff said he appreciated Norine's motion but doesn't feel it addresses the main issue at hand.

There being no further discussion, Council voted by voice: Jenny – no; Sonia – no; Stephen – Yes; Doug – no; Annamarie – no; Jeff – no; Norine – yes; Jeanne – no; Rich – no. Motion does not carry.

Jenny moved to receive and approve casework design as presented by the PMC this evening and move forward as required by the petition. Doug seconded.

There being no further discussion, Council voted by voice: Jenny – yes; Sonia – yes; Stephen – no; Doug – yes; Annamarie – yes; Jeff – yes; Norine – no; Jeanne – yes; Rich - yes. Motion carried.

Sonia moved to accept the Chancel design as presented by PMC and move forward as required by the petition for a Called Congregational Meeting. Jeff seconded.

There being no further discussion, Council voted by voice: Jenny – yes; Sonia – yes; Stephen – yes; Annamarie – yes; Jeff – yes; Norine – yes; Jeanne – yes; Rich - yes. Motion carried.

Jeff suggested holding the meeting within the next 30-60 days, but how much time is needed to educate the congregation? Valerie said Council needs to make that decision, but she'll make sure meeting facilities are available.

Jeff moved that we schedule a Called Congregational Meeting for purposes of presenting Chancel design as accepted by Council for discussion and vote on February 22. Doug seconded.

Norine moved to amend the motion to include working with an education committee to provide guidance, milestones and setting a meeting date within the next four months. Jeff didn't accept the amendment.

Doug said we need to make sure educational opportunities are scheduled, adding it might be beneficial to see if additional funds could be raised prior to the meeting.

*There being no further discussion, Council voted by voice: Jenny – yes; Sonia – yes; Stephen – no; Annamarie – yes; Jeff – yes; Norine – no; Jeanne yes; Rich - yes.*  
*Motion carried.*

#### 4.2 Budget

##### 4.2.1. Meeting between services Sunday, January 11

Rich said Council passes a budget today which will be shared with the congregation on January 11. Council will adjust the budget as needed on January 20 based on feedback received January 11th. The budget that Council approves that evening will be in the annual report and voted on by the congregation on February 2.

Stephen said 2026 projected revenue of \$886,000 is \$120,000 less than required to support the proposed 2026 budget. Although pledged income is flat, we are experiencing growth in contributions – no pledge. He then reviewed adjustments proposed by the Finance Committee, which include reductions in interest income (\$5,000), and operating expenses - OWCM (\$7,500), Annual Appeal (\$6,000). He said reserve funds of \$69,763 are being utilized to help offset the imbalance.

Rich asked about personnel expenses which are 62% of the budget. Stephen said Valerie offered to reduce her salary by \$8,000 which was accepted by the Personnel Committee. All personnel except a new chorister position are funded.

Rich then asked if we're meeting operating reserve requirements. Yes, we have \$387,813 which is above the above minimum requirement of \$328,000.

Doug voiced his objection to putting tax credits in the operating budget, as they were approved by Council for the chiller, but Stephen felt strongly that reserve funds were for that type of expense.

Stephen said he agrees that current accounting for the budget isn't sustainable, but the Finance Committee feels they have the next year to work on making future adjustments. Valerie said she will work with Jenny and Katy to strategically increase revenue, adding that we are experiencing growth in younger members as well as an influx of various demographics. The Enter In campaign, has effectively doubled the giving of the congregation. Melissa said the Christmas Eve offering was over \$11,000 and comments written on the giving envelopes reflected pure, joyful giving.

Stephen moved to have Council accept the Financial Committee's proposed budget. Jenny seconded.

Rich said we are again using one-time funds but are including the transfers in the January 11 budget presentation, not waiting until the annual meeting to reflect that information as happened in 2025. Sonia agreed that talking to the congregation about transfers will alleviate some problems that came up last year.

Norine reminded Council of her concern regarding our current pay scale for child-care and wants to continue the discussion in 2026. Devon said she's put it on the 2026 Personnel agenda.

*Motion carried with seven in favor; one opposed.*

5. Adjournment and Lord's Prayer  
Meeting adjourned at 10:25 pm.