

Council Minutes: December 2025

Plymouth Congregational Church – United Church of Christ

Tuesday, December 16, 2025

1. Call to Order – Rich Bireta, Moderator

Rich 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

David Treviño – At Large Member

Annamarie Hill – At Large Member

Jeff Eriksen – At Large Member

Voting Members Not Present:

Norine Spears – At Large Member

Jeanne Fridell – 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

Valerie McGhee, PMC Member

Doni Mooberry Slough, PMC Member

Mark Osborn, Plymouth Member

John Burch, Plymouth Member

Brittani Anderson, Plymouth Business Manager

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

Valerie led attendees in prayer.

3. Consent Agenda

3.1 Approve Agenda

- 3.2 Approve Minutes from November Council Meeting
- 3.3 Receive Financial Reports

Doug moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Jeff seconded; motion carried unanimously.

4. Church Treasurer's Report – Stephen Carttar, Treasurer

4.1 Financial Update

Through November we are 92% of the way through the year; have received 88% of projected annual income and spent 89% of our projected annual expenses.

Stephen said November expenses were \$33,000 greater than revenue. Katy said a reminder of remaining 2025 pledges has been mailed. Budget requests from boards/committees for 2026 totaled \$1 million and as of today \$858,000 has been committed, but there are still several pledging units that haven't yet responded.

5. New Business I

5.1 Harvest Home Dinner Naming – Mark Osborn

Mark provided a brief history of the Thanksgiving holiday, noting that it is celebrated by 93% of the American population and isn't limited to Christians. He said he felt Council or the congregation should have the opportunity to determine whether Plymouth celebrates Thanksgiving or Harvest Home each year.

5.2 Contract for replacement water chiller – David Miller and Doug Eason

Doug said that David Miller led an effort to solicit three additional bids for the chiller replacement which was initially estimated in November to be \$177,000. Based on those proposals, the Facilities Committee recommends approval of a contract with McElroy's for \$98,579 which includes removal, replacement, platforms, sound blankets and installation.

The project should be eligible for a 40% KS Historical Building Tax Credit. Funding would come from remaining 2025 Stewardship Endowment funds of \$34,782.55; a 2026 allocation of \$36,585.37 and prior available tax credits of \$23,496.63. If a tax credit isn't received upon completion, the remaining \$3,714.45 would be taken from the 2026 Maintenance and Repair Budget.

Doug then moved to approve McElroy's proposal to replace the chiller at a total cost of \$98,5789; Jenny seconded.

Stephen suggested that with approximately \$400,000 in reserves available for a project like this they might want to access those funds. Doug said there isn't another facility project that requires funding at this time and he wants to exhaust available operating funds, saving reserves for unexpected expenses, adding that both an air conditioner and boiler will need

replacement at some point. In order to have the equipment available for April installation action needs to be taken tonight.

David Treviño asked if a 54-ton chiller would provide the same amount of cooling capacity as a 60-ton unit. David Miller responded that based on past usage, the current chiller has never been unable to provide sufficient cooling, suggesting a larger unit isn't needed. David Treviño then asked about the significant pricing differences between McElroy's and the other contractors. David Miller said the basic difference is that McElroy's is a construction contractor, and the others are service contractors. In addition, McElroy's can procure the chiller more quickly - eight vs twelve weeks delivery.

Doug said the unit is under full parts and labor warranty for the first year, but P1 will provide maintenance.

Rich asked who would work on the historical tax credits. Doug said he'll work with Liz Smith. Rich then thanked Dave Miller for his work on securing bids.

There being no further discussion, the motion carried unanimously.

6. Old Business

6.1 Project Management Committee Update – Terry Schmidt

Terry distributed a schematic with accompanying renderings reflecting overhead, balcony and floor views of PMC's recommended option to date, saying the PMC doesn't have a full set of recommendations yet, but wants to concentrate on the chancel tonight.

Doug said the platform height is 28", which is the exact height of the last temporary platform in the sanctuary. Access is by ramp, which may require some pews to be moved on the left side. On the right side, there is no change to egress. The question now is how deep the chancel should be.

Valerie said discussion has included how best to accommodate major works, so that the choir is close enough to hear instrumentalists. They also want to make sure bell choirs have adequate space.

Judy said the challenge is making the chancel accessible. ADA requirements will require the ramp on the south side to be longer, with two narrow wood railings, stained to match the woodwork. Lifts were explored, but they're expensive and noisy. Valerie McGhee said they want people to be able to easily access the chancel regardless of whether they have mobility issues.

David Treviño asked if sight lines will change if the chancel depth is reduced and the lectern moved back. Yes, but the change in depth shouldn't be significant. Judy said sightlines are very complicated. Steve added that sightlines change, depending on whether from the floor or in the balcony.

Terry said the committee has tried to incorporate concerns regarding flexibility, accessibility, sightlines and acoustics, but not everything can be accommodated. It's up to Council to determine whether to move forward or go back and work some more.

John Burch asked if the renderings are exact measurements. Yes, they are exact measurements. Annamarie asked if the communion table will be moved on communion Sundays. Valerie said the table is on casters, so it can be easily moved. She also said the Deacons are willing to work on how best to provide communion, perhaps serving communion to congregants in the pews.

Steve asked what are we presenting this evening? Terry said the objective is to move forward. If Council accepts this version of the design, the PMC still must bring a final design for consideration. How long will it take for the PMC to report back to Council? Terry said they could be discussing next week, as a meeting is scheduled.

Doug then moved that Council accept the recommendation from the PMC to accept Option A subject to the ability to (1) reduce the size of the chancel in a way that still accommodates/preserves flexibility and is aesthetically acceptable, and (2) is demonstrated to be something that can be accommodated with the money we have currently, the pledges we have outstanding, and the best projection we can generate regarding the amount we are likely to receive from tax credits unless additional donations are received that make the budget neutral or positive. Jeff seconded.

Rich said if we accept this recommendation, it is not authorization to move forward with construction.

Jeff asked about the timeline to come back to the Council and congregation. Terry wants this to be Council's approval to take to congregation.

Sonia asked if the schematics are ready to present to the congregation. No, Terry thinks this is affirmation to finish the PMC's work and come back to Council. David Treviño extended his gratitude for the work PMC has put into this work but is concerned about the cost and funding. He is especially concerned about the cost of organ maintenance in the future. He wants to support the efforts that have been made but didn't envision a new chancel when the organ was purchased. Judy said Plymouth has many legacies and the organ is only one of them. Based on Schoenstein's information on how the organ will be built, the expectation is the organ will last 75 years.

Steve said this is a vision of where we can go if we want to make a change, creating a path forward that meets as many goals as possible. And there will be a meeting to make the decision.

Rich said Council will meet on January 7 to work on the 2026 budget. Congregant information sessions can be scheduled to discuss the proposed sanctuary revisions in early January. A called congregational meeting can be held in the sanctuary on January 25, following the 9:30 service and moved to the Mayflower Room prior to the 11:30 service to finish. The meeting agenda will be simple with voting by written ballot.

Caroline asked if the congregation votes no, there won't be an accessible chancel? That's correct, there will not be a ramp. A lift is noisy, but the noise could possibly be muted with music or by timing usage of the lift.

There being no further discussion, Council voted by voice: Jeff – yes; Stephen – yes; Sonia – yes; Ann Marie – yes; Jenny – yes; Doug – yes. David – yes. Moderator – yes. Motion passed unanimously.

John Burch asked that Council consider pausing construction from April 2026 to April 2027, which would allow the pastor time to minister to the congregation, which he feels is in danger of fracture. He said Council is writing history and needs to be aware of the unresolved risks of funding and the congregation's emotional concerns. (Please see attached file for his written comments.)

Rich thanked John for his comments and said Council will take into consideration John's recommendation to defer construction to 2027. Valerie also thanked John for his comments and concerns regarding the congregation.

Jenny said the outcome of the vote should feel more like consensus and less like majority rule. Steve added there is a lot of emotion and concerns around this project that need to be addressed.

7. New Business

- 7.1 The Open and Affirming Committee has requested that the proposed statement be issued in the name of the church.

Rich said the statement would be published in the Lawrence Times and perhaps other publications, in anticipation of legislation being introduced regarding transgender youth. The process for approval was followed pursuant to guidelines. Eleven comments were received from congregants regarding the proposed language. Ten were positive; one was neutral.

Jenny moved that Council approve the proposed statement by Open and Affirming Committee; Doug seconded; motion carried unanimously.

- 7.2 Budget Hearing w/Facilities Committee – Doug Eason

Doug reported that the only capital improvement project for 2026 is the replacement of the water chiller, which was discussed previously.

7.3 Budget Hearing w/Plymouth Staff – Brittani Anderson, Business Manager

Brittani reviewed the proposed 2026 operating expenses, concentrating on items that were significantly higher than in 2025, including:

- Yearly Building Contracts (\$4,000) - the one-year P1 Contract, which has not changed in 3 years, accounts for most of the increase.
- Building Supplies & Equipment (\$500) -With an in-house custodian, custodial supplies are now purchased by Plymouth.
- IT – (\$5,500) - We are now outsourcing IT support (Rich said that prior IT functionality was minimal; the system is now much more robust).

7.4 Pastors' Housing Allowances for 2026

Rich explained that for federal tax purposes, clergy can have a portion of their salary designated as housing allowance. Plymouth is not responsible for determining the amount designated.

Stephen moved that \$36,000 of the Senior Pastor's 2026 salary, \$36,000 of the Associate Pastor's 2026 salary and \$13,377 of the Pastor of Care and Welcome's 2026 salary be designated to be paid to them as housing allowances; Doug seconded; motion carried unanimously.

7.5 Renewal of P1 contract for facilities maintenance – Doug Eason

Doug said P1 has provided this service for several years, but the committee recently found other firms may be available to provide a similar service. Because services are needed beginning January 1, they want to extend the agreement for one year while pursuing other possibilities. P1 hasn't increased fees in three years. The proposed agreement is about 15% higher or 5% per year. We have a good relationship with them but want to perform proper diligence before entering a multi-year contract.

Doug moved that we approve the 1-year agreement with P1; Stephen seconded.

David Treviño asked how often services are provided. Doug said there are four scheduled maintenances each year and the company is on-call with preferential treatment because of the contract. Payment is made monthly.

There being no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.

7.6 Agenda for Called Congregational Meeting

Referenced in PMC update.

7.7 Investment of Petefish bequest – Stephen Carttar

Stephen said Plymouth received a bequest without restrictions from the Howard & Martha Petefish Trust, which has been invested and earning interest in Account 3801250 – the Council Restricted Fund. The Finance Committee recommends transferring the gift to United Church Funds.

Stephen then moved that the Petefish funds of \$39,851.50 be transferred to United Church Funds; Doug seconded, adding that the transfer would be quasi-endowed, so it can be used. Motion carried unanimously.

8. Open Forum

Doug explained that pipes extending downward in the Mayflower ceiling are where new lighting will be installed.

9. Moderator's Report – Rich Bireta

Rich said it's been a busy November and December, and welcomed Valerie back. He then said two items brought up during the meeting require Council's attention – the name of the congregational meal in November (Thanksgiving - Harvest Home) and consideration of delaying sanctuary construction.

Sonia suggested that naming the November gathering be given to the Fellowship Committee for consideration. Rich said he would do so. Jeff said the timing of construction may resolve itself as we move towards a congregational meeting. Doug said the PMC is working as directed by Council and trying to deliver a finished product. If Council feels a pause is a good idea, there will be a meeting in January. Jenny said it's a potential pathway if we find it's needed, but it isn't an actionable item at this time.

10. Associate Pastor's Report – Rev. Caroline Lawson Dean, Associate Pastor

- Valerie's back!
- Working on Advent, Christmas Eve services, upcoming women's retreat.
- She expressed her thanks for lay leaders and staff – two sabbaticals in one year requires lots of support.

11. Sr. Pastor's Report – Rev. Valerie Miller-Coleman, Senior Pastor

- Grateful for time for rest; better grounded; more tools for spiritual nourishment.
- A special thanks to Caroline.
- Working with Michael Brecke to have him continue working with Plymouth.

12. Important Future Dates:

Next Council Meeting: January 7, 2026 @ 6:30 pm

January 7, 2026, Budget Balancing Working Session w/Finance Committee
January 20, 2026, Regular January Meeting
Tentative – Council Retreat, February 2026

13. Adjournment and Lord's Prayer