

Council Meeting Minutes
January 20th, 2026
Plymouth Congregational Church

Voting Council Members Present:

Rich Bireta, Moderator
Jenny O'Brien, Moderator Elect
Sonia Jordan, Immediate Past Moderator
Stephen Carttar, Treasurer
Jeanne Fridell, At-Large Member
Norine Spears, At-Large Member
Jeff Eriksen, At-Large Member
Annamarie Hill, At-Large Member
David Treviño, At-Large Member
Doug Eason, At-Large Member

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Valerie Miller Coleman, Senior Pastor
Caroline Lawson Dean, Associate Pastor

Non-Voting Members Present:

Katy Anderson, Deputy Treasurer

Non-Voting Members Not Present:

Larissa Long, Clerk

Others Present:

Mark Osborn, Plymouth Congregant
John Burch, Plymouth Congregant
Ron Johnson, Plymouth Congregant

1. Call to Order – Rich Bireta, Moderator
Rich called the meeting to order at 6:32 pm.
2. Invocation – Rev. Valerie Miller-Colemen, Senior Pastor
Valerie led the council attendees in opening prayer.
3. Consent Agenda
 - a. Approve Agenda
 - i. Rich Bireta added two items to the New Business section of the agenda: discussion of Head Start playground and cameras by church entrances, both from the Facilities Committee.
 - b. Approve Minutes from January 7th Council Meeting
 - c. Receive Financial Reports

Rich Bireta motioned to approve the consent agenda. Seconded by Jeff Eriksen. Motion passed unanimously.

4. Church Treasurer's Report – Stephen Carttar, Treasurer
 - a. Financial Update

Stephen Carttar provided a financial update for the council. Through November we are 100% of the way through the year, we have received 97.7% of our projected annual income and have spent 97.5% of our projected annual expenses.

5. Old Business

- a. Project Management Committee Update – Rich Bireta, Moderator

Rich Bireta gave a PMC update in place of Terry Schmidt. Eric Keebler, who did the casework design for the organ, will do an education session this upcoming Sunday. There is also a series of planned educational sessions regarding the organ and sanctuary remodel project, including a soup and share and a session on the history of changes to the sanctuary.

- b. Thanksgiving Dinner / Harvest Home Naming—Rich Bireta, Moderator

The naming of the Thanksgiving/Harvest Home Dinner was brought to the December council meeting, and Sonia Jordan recommended moving discernment to the Fellowship Board, but there was not time for discussion. Council members shared their opinions on the recommendation.

Council members agreed with the decision to send to Fellowship with Norine Spears recommending it go to Service and Justice as well. There was a larger discussion with understanding how and by who these decisions are made. This is identified as an item to tackle in 2026.

Mark Osborn addressed the council on the topic with his comments included in the council packet.

Jeff Eriksen motioned to move the topic to the Service and Justice Board and the Fellowship Board and have them return to council with a recommendation.

Discussion:

Annamarie Hill questioned where the motion implies that council has the final say in the name. Yes. Follow-up question about how Service and Justice and Fellowship will work together, with the answer being however they want to address it.

Sonia Jordan said she envisioned it working similar to how the communion decision was made, and Jenny O'Brien commented that considering it involves two boards, it is probably best to return to council. David Treviño confirmed via the Policy Handbook that the program naming requires council approval. Valerie Miller-Colemen requested parameters be established around what is considered a program.

With no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.

6. New Business

- a. Approval of Nominating Committee Ballot for Annual Meeting – Jenny O'Brien, Moderator Elect

Jenny O'Brien reviewed the nominating slate for the Boards. She is still finalizing a few names, but most are assigned and people have accepted. Jeff Eriksen's length of time

needs to be revised to one-year.

Jenny O'Brien moved to approve the slate of the nominating committee ballot and forward to the congregational meeting for the approval. Annamarie Hill seconded.

Discussion:

Stephen Carttar asked about the length of time for the Membership Board members, and Jenny O'Brien replied there is an issue, but it will be resolved by the board members at their first meeting.

With no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.

- b. Approval of Council Appointments to Standing Committees – Jenny O'Brien, Moderator Elect

Jenny O'Brien reviewed the council committee appointees. There are a few open positions, but most are full.

Jenny O'Brien moved the council approve the slate of committee members. Stephen Carttar seconded. No discussion. Motion passed unanimously.

- c. Agenda for Called Congregational Meeting – Jenny O'Brien, Moderator Elect
(This item was accidentally skipped. It was returned to following the attendance discussion.)

Jenny O'Brien, who will be Moderator when the called congregational meeting occurs, is responsible for setting the agenda. She presented a draft copy of the agenda, including potential times and locations.

She reviewed that there are two major goals for the meeting: a trustworthy process regardless of the outcome and a clear path forward for the re-modeling of the chancel. For a trustworthy process, she will aim to avoid perceptions of favoritism, abide by the governance structure, and assure everyone feels heard. Written norms and guidelines for the meeting will be developed. For a clear path forward, there will be a voting guide that includes background/context and clearly lays out what a Yes vote and a No vote means.

John Burch asked whether the moderator sets the agenda, even though the meeting came because of a petition. Rich Bireta replied yes. John Burch asked about crafting a motion that reflected the petition, and Rich Bireta replied this question would be discussed during the motion discussion. John Burch asked whether the question can be called at any time. Rich Bireta answered that the moderator team will work with the Parliamentarian (identified to be Mark Simpson) so that it is in accordance with our by-laws and Robert's Rules of Order. To call the question is a formal action to end discussion and will lead to a vote, which requires a 2/3 majority vote.

Ron Johnson asked if vote for the calling the question (not the chancel vote) is a written ballot and Jenny O'Brien replied it is an oral vote.

Norine Spears commented that she likes the idea of a combined service, because it removes the time boundary and allows people to feel like there was a full discussion. Moving to the Mayflower room has the potential to lose people.

Caroline Lawson Dean recommended including families, parents, and childcare in the planning efforts. Is there an end time that can be clearly communicated, so that families

and all people can commit to attending and not miss the vote.

Jenny O'Brien presented the draft motion, which was drafted in conjunction with the Project Management Committee.

John Burch asked if it was the same as what was circulated earlier. Jenny O'Brien replied that it was very similar with the addition of something forgotten and edits for clarity.

Jeff Eriksen asked whether we need to add clarification about what is out of scope for the vote, for example, the organ or the case work. Jenny O'Brien replied affirmatively, and that it is included in the background section.

Caroline Lawson Dean added that is important to note that this is not a vote to start construction. Jenny O'Brien confirmed this information will be included in the background/clarification section.

Valerie Miller-Coleman said the first bullet regarding details for the chancel needs some work to put parameters around what is a detail. Doug Eason recommends the wording of "evaluate options" to make the existing chancel ADA accessible.

Stephen Carttar commented that the document goes a long way to answering questions, but he has a few more. Who makes the motion? Jenny O'Brien replied this is to be determined. Stephen Carttar emphasized that it needs to be clear this is a one and done vote. It is for the chancel only. It is a simple majority. Is there a plan to publicize the document two weeks early? Jenny O'Brien confirmed yes.

Jeanne Fridell loves the idea of the voter guide and getting it out ahead of time. Could it be available even earlier, like at the 1/25/2026 meeting? Jenny O'Brien replied that she could not make any promises, but she would really like to have a finalized document completed and reviewed by council prior to circulation. This could be done via email if needed.

Stephen Carttar asked if the renderings will be a part of the voter guide for review and Jenny O'Brien confirmed that yes it would be. Stephen Carttar asked if the drafted voter guide would be published as part of the council packet on the website. Rich Bireta replied that publishing draft things in the past has not gone well.

Ron Johnson asked whether a schematic with the new organ and woodworking, but with the existing chancel can be made available as well. Rich Bireta indicated the recommendation will be taken under consideration.

John Burch said that the clarity of the vote is important in a critical congregational vote, and he believes there is not clarity in the current draft. For example, there may be too much extra commentary under the No vote section, which may be confusing. Rich Bireta replied that we are bound by our by-laws to address the language in the petition, and the motion is drafted to reflect that and it is specific to the chancel design. Jenny O'Brien added that the language is written to meet the goal of a clear path forward. Doug Eason clarified that within the extra language, it does not clearly say that the chancel will essentially stay the same. The PMC is charged with looking at ADA accessibility and likely the PMC will continue to look at options. John Burch confirmed that yes that is what he is saying. The intent of the petition is changing the chancel. Rich Bireta commented that in his experience it will be insufficient to not include the extra language, because people will want to know what is meant by a No vote. This has been

a frequent question already.

Jenny O'Brien said the final point is that the budget reallocations will be decided by council and the PMC in the event of a No vote.

d. Mayflower Room Update, Doug Eason—Council At-Large Member and Facilities Chair

We are currently updating the AV in the Mayflower room, and we are very close to completion. If all goes well we will be able to use it this Sunday. Rich Bireta asked if this will help council communication, and Doug Eason responded we will have better microphone options. When will it be done? Sunday with another week for full completion.

e. Budget for Inclusion in Annual Report—Stephen Carttar, Treasurer

Stephen Carttar, Treasurer, gave an overview of the budget process, including that there was a positive budget meeting with the congregation.

Stephen Carttar moved that council accept the budget for inclusion in the annual report. Seconded by Jeff Eriksen.

Discussion:

Rich Bireta said there was a question from a congregant about whether a plan currently exists getting expenses in line with income for 2027, and he gave the wrong answer and wishes it corrected for the record. There is not currently a plan in place but this work item is a high priority item for this coming year.

Doug Eason asked which revenue items will automatically move over and can tax credits be utilized last. Katy Anderson answered that last year it worked well to hold and not automatically transfer and that was a good approach. That said, the tax credit line item is new and we will have to work around it all year. Valerie Miller-Coleman added that tax credits go in an activity fund after sale. Doug is concerned about utilizing tax credits immediately with the impact on the Facilities committee. Stephen Carttar indicated that he would lean towards an immediate transfer of PPP in January. After that, we are striving for a functional operating year on yearly earnings, and then we can pull in towards the end of the year as needed with tax credits being last. Rich Bireta has signed off on the sale of \$52,000 tax credits with proceeds around \$48,000, which will go into an activity fund.

Norine Spears likes being hyper-focused on a plan for revenue. Is there a current plan for this? Rich Bireta replied that the bulk of the work will be completed by the Finance Committee and brought to council. The focus will be on both raising revenue, and controlling or cutting expenses.

Valerie Miller-Coleman questioned whether there is value in assigning a council member to the Annual Appeal and Fundraising Committee. Council agreed on the value, but tabled the discussion since there was a current motion open.

Doug Eason reminded council of the value in setting goals for the upcoming year, specifically around membership and engagement. It is important to understand new members. Be thoughtful around whether we need to revisit how we have been doing the budget. We need to be honest with the congregation from the beginning. For example, if we are flat with pledges, here are the types of decisions that will have to be made.

With no further discussion, Rich Bireta called for a roll call vote.

Jeanne Fridell – Yes

Jeff Eriksen – Yes

Annamarie Hill – Yes

Stephen Carttar – Yes

Sonia Jordan – Yes

Jenny O'Brien – Yes

Norine Spears – Yes

Doug Eason – Abstains

David Treviño – Yes

Rich Bireta as Moderator did not vote, as the vote tally did not require it.

Motion passed 8-0 with one abstention.

Jenny O'Brien moved that council add an ex-officio member to the Annual Appeal and Fundraising Committee and we appoint Jeff Eriksen to the position for one year. Norine Spears seconded.

Discussion:

Sonia Jordan questioned whether this position was for one year only or a permanent year-to-year position. It is a one-year position at this time to assist with the plan for the budgeting process.

With no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.

- f. Website Update – Valerie Miller-Coleman, Senior Pastor

There are a lot of functional and organizational issues with the current website.

Communications staff have been working on a different platform to build a new website for us. It is nearly done and just needs polished.

Rich Bireta commented that the website is the front door for people searching for a church, and it also needs to be a repository for things like council minutes. News and events is the third thing that he thinks is important. Valerie Miller-Coleman replied that there is a tension around news and events, because it can become a challenge to keep everything updated.

Norine Spears would like to see the stats and the traffic for the website.

David Treviño asked about the color scheme and Valerie Miller-Coleman replied that it will change seasonally.

- g. Church Attendance – Valerie Miller-Coleman, Senior Pastor

We track attendance every week, both in-person and online. We stopped tracking from Facebook, because the numbers were not as trustworthy as YouTube. Additionally, we only track one device on YouTube (even if more people are watching) that engages for a set period of time.

In 2025, we ended the year at 375 on average, excluding high traffic Sundays. If you add in high traffic Sundays, the numbers are much higher. For example, we had between 800-900 on Christmas Eve. The overall number has stayed about the same, but the balance within the number has shifted from on-line to more in-person. The numbers are down from 2024, but the overall number of members present in person is higher.

Rich Bireta asked for a regular report on attendance numbers, and Valerie Miller-Coleman indicated that would be easy to integrate. Doug Eason commented that once the methodology is stable, we can look at trend data.

h. Head Start Playground Equipment and Ground Cover – Doug Eason, At-Large Council Member and Facilities Charge

Head Start has a plan to remodel the playground, which is currently designed for an older age group. They want to make it more appropriate to a little kid age group. Head Start paid for the previous equipment. They will pay for the new equipment, and they are proposing to pay for the re-paving of the surface as well.

Rich Bireta asked if there was a specific plan, and Doug confirmed that there is and he will forward it along. Rich Bireta is hesitant to cede authority to Head Start without some oversight. He would like a layout to come to council for approval. Doug Eason confirmed he will bring the layout for next month's council meeting.

There was a general discussion around liability, insurance, and our MOU. Doug Eason and Valerie Miller-Coleman will pull our MOU and insurance to address the questions at the next meeting.

i. Survey of Council's interest in additional cameras at the doors of the church – Doug Eason, At-Large Council Member and Facilities Charge

The Facilities Committee has asked whether council is open to evaluating the placement of cameras at the entrance. It would allow staff to remotely check security of the building.

David Treviño indicated that this is something we could use the Non-Profit Security Grant money for. Sonia Jordan will talk with staff and Doug Eason about potentially submitting this grant.

Yes, the council is open to evaluation.

j. Changes to Fiscal Policies – Stephen Carttar, Treasurer

Stephen Carttar presented five recommendations to the Policy Book (included in the council packet). Four out of the five recommendations reflect current practices and need formalized. The additional one is regarding tracking of professional services as volunteer in-kind services, which is a best practice.

Stephen Carttar motioned that we approved the five additions to the policy book. Doug Eason seconded. No discussion. Motion passed unanimously.

7. Open Forum

Meetings of the Church Council are open to all Plymouth members. This open forum allows any church member to address the Council regarding Plymouth Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, programs, plans, or policies.

Ron Johnson addressed the council asking attendees to reflect on the first time they came into Plymouth and how the instant visual of the chancel with the cross made them feel. He feels strongly that the proposed change would change the feel of the sanctuary drastically and forever. It is his passion right now.

John Burch returned to the idea of the postponement of the project by one year, because he

feels there is a risk of a fracture and need for ministry. He appreciates the work by Jenny O'Brien on the agenda, and his question is where are we with the timeline? A one year delay may not work, but can there be any delay? He wants to build consensus.

Rich Bireta thanked John for his comment and question. He said we do not know construction start time. We initially believed we could fit the construction in between Easter and Christmas, and along the way, this timeline turned into fact, when it is just convenience and not fact. This presumes a Yes vote passes, which is not a given. If it does there is a lot to do with the contractors, plus finalizing a budget to pay for it. It is an unanswerable question due to too many uncertainties and unknowns at this point in time.

John Burch raised the issue of communication, pointing to the Generis report from the Enter In campaign that indicates we can raise the funds, if we communicate really well. Not everything from that list has been done. He feels like there is still a lot of people that don't know everything that needs to be known. It's really important that the PMC communicate well and on a regular basis with the congregation, which will be absolutely critical.

Rich Bireta indicated that a copy of the Generis report was available at the PMC meeting, and there are good lessons to learn from it.

8. Moderator's Report – Rich Bireta

Each council member shared their reflections on the past year to include a positive, a disappointment, and a gratitude.

9. Associate Pastor's Report - Rev. Caroline Lawson Dean, Associate Pastor

Planning for Plymouth Academy is in full swing. There will be a lot of classes and activities during the Lenten season.

Gratitude to Stephen Carttar and Sonia Jordan as this is their last council meeting.

10. Senior Pastor's Report - Rev. Valerie Miller-Coleman, Senior Pastor

Join us for Lent at Plymouth, which will be a holy season.

11. Important Future Dates:

February 1, 2026 - Annual Meeting

January 20, 2026, Regular January Meeting

(tentative) Council Retreat February 2026

12. Adjournment and Lord's Prayer

Doug motioned to move to adjourn with the Lord's prayer. Norine seconded. No discussion. Motion passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 9:30 p.m. Meeting minutes respectfully submitted by Sonia Jordan, Immediate Past Moderator.