

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ Called Congregational Meeting Minutes
Sunday, February 22, 2026

1. **Opening Remarks – Jenny O’Brien, Moderator**

Before calling the meeting to order, Jenny offered thanks to Mark Simpson for serving as parliamentarian, Caroline Rothnie, for serving as clerk, Terry Schmidt and the Project Management Committee, and the congregation in attendance.

She said that we are here today to learn about the project, listen to one another, decide how to move forward, and act according to the decision. We are only deciding between the two options for the chancel, and the vote will not be an authorization to begin construction. That will fall to the PMC and council.

She laid out the agenda for the meeting: Pros and cons of both options, clarifying questions for the PMC, a motion to move forward with the vote, discussion and advocacy, followed by a vote. Ballots will be counted by 3 vote counters, and then the vote will be announced.

2. **Call to order – Jenny O’Brien, Moderator**

Jenny called the meeting to order at 10:47. Mark Simpson, Parliamentarian, said that a quorum was present.

3. **Invocation - Valerie Miller-Coleman, Sr. Pastor**

Valerie led attendees in prayer.

4. **Introductory remarks - Jenny O’Brien, Moderator**

Jenny recognized Rich Bireta to read aloud the two options.

5. **Presentation of the two design options - Rich Bireta, Immediate Past Moderator**

Expanded Chancel:The chancel of Plymouth Congregational Church will be remodeled to include an ADA-accessible, single-level design approximately 2’4” above the height of the sanctuary floor and extending the majority of the width of the sanctuary. Access to the chancel will be from steps in front and a ramp on the south side and steps on the north side. Both the northwest and southwest doors will provide access to the back hallway. Both sets of stairs to the choir loft remain functional.

Adapted Chancel: Structural modifications to the existing chancel will not be part of the Enter In Sanctuary and Organ Project except for modifications needed to make the chancel ADA accessible. Council will determine how to reallocate the budget for the remaining project elements. The Project Management Committee may plan non-structural alterations to improve acoustics and achieve other benefits identified in the project.

6. **Advantages and disadvantages of each design - Project Management Committee (PMC) Members**

Jenny recognized Doni Mooberry Slough to present the advantages and disadvantages of the two options.

Doni stated that she was not advocating for either option, but was there to describe options and tradeoffs clearly. She defined the terms she would be using: sanctuary (whole room), organ (the organ and choir loft behind her,) and the chancel (the raised area where she was standing). She stated that all discussion today is about the chancel. We are choosing between two options that both involve trade-offs.

The existing chancel has limited accessibility. It is difficult for people with mobility challenges to access the chancel, sightlines are uneven, the central platform segments the space in two sides. But this design carries historical and spiritual meaning to many congregants. How do we respond to the accessibility and sightline challenges while honoring the character of the space?

Doni moved on to describe the two options.

The Expanded design lowers the main platform 7 inches (one step) and makes it ~3 times wider.. Creates one level, with ramp and handrails on the south side and an aisle on the North side. The usable square footage remains approximately the same. What changes is not the whole use area, but what is usable on each side. Everyone will have access to the whole platform. The effect on sightlines is mixed. The side platforms are elevated roughly 28 inches, which may improve visibility to some performers. Balcony sightlines and some center pews will have increased difficulty with sightlines because of the lower platform. For programming, the single level may allow for more flexibility of movement but may not be adequate for major musical works. From the historic perspective, the design alters the spatial arrangements of the chancel. The cost difference is substantial. The cost of the expanded design is 299,000. The net difference is 180,000 (after calculating tax credit.)

Adapted: The adapted option retains the existing footprint and general proportions while integrating the new organ casework. There is not a finalized solution for accessibility. One option is a lift, with an estimated cost of \$60,000. Sightlines, programming flexibility, and historical significance remain unchanged. The gross savings 299,000, 180,000 net. If lift is installed, 120,000 net savings compared to expanded.

Core tradeoff: The expanded chancel prioritizes access, changes appearance, costs more. Adapted retains character, costs less, doesn't address accessibility.

Both approaches arise from sincere commitment to Plymouth.

The PMC did not reach consensus in its views of the design. This reflects that reasonable people can weigh the pros and cons and arrive at different conclusions.

7. **Question and Answer:**

Jenny thanked Doni and opened the floor for clarifying questions for the PMC.

Geraldo Sousa asked about the timeline for each design

Terry responded that for the expanded option, construction would ideally begin in April '26. For the adapted option, the PMC would have to go back to the drawing board, probably adding 4 to 6 weeks of new drawings and specifications work before receiving bids.

Geraldo asked when construction will start, noting that the organ would not be ready until 2028.

Doug Eason said that the organ process will begin in November, so some time this year the organ will not be functional. Our target is to try to be back in the sanctuary by Christmas. For either option, six months is the target.

Don Low asked what the problems are with leaving the chancel the way it is and deciding later to do something else..

Terry said that accessibility is the main issue. PMC has spent energy on the new design, and will need to look at all the options for the adapted chancel if that is what is voted through. Either way, there will be sound improvements, no carpeting. He said the PMC has some work to do.

John Lord said that he believes Sunday worship is the lifeblood of Plymouth. He worries that the longer we worship in the Mayflower room, the less connected we will feel. He noted that the contract only covers 24 architect visits. The longer construction takes, the more likely we are to need more visits than the contract accounts for. He wants to know if there are incentives to completing the work quickly and minimizing our time in the Mayflower room.

Terry said the PMC has not spent much time talking about what happens if it takes too long. They have had preliminary discussions with the general contractor that have suggested that it would be done in time, but nothing can be guaranteed. The architects know we have a deep commitment to returning to the sanctuary, and have the target for Christmas, but there is no guarantee that there will not be extra visits.

Alex Bertuccio asked if cost difference estimates include maintenance to the lift over time.

Doni said that all estimates were done in today's dollars. The budget will need to address maintenance.

Sarah Kaufman thanked the committee for the sample platform. She asked if there were any discussions about safety for kids or musicians.

Doug said that railings will cover the back corners and there will be railings on both sides of ramps. The front of the platform will be a bit exposed. By code, we don't need railings, but we could put in railings that could be removed later, or do the reverse and start with no railings and be able to add them later. PMC needs to evaluate this.

Ian Wood said he thought the first rendering showed a full-width chancel, before the PMC had been formed. He thinks a lot of the frustration over the design is centered around the fact that the design was for a full-width chancel before we knew if the congregation wanted that. When the PMC was voted in, was there a discussion as to whether the design should be this way?

Terry said that PMC was formed by council, acting on the recommendation from the Enter In visioning group. There were some assumptions from the beginning. The PMC spent time with architects who were involved in the visioning group, reprioritizing what they thought they were charged to do, and coming up with immediate goals which fit the categories the council had given. They were clear on some things: accessibility, historical significance, cost. All these concepts came up repeatedly. While they did not agree on everything, they were attempting to follow through on what they had been tasked to do.

Tony Kim asked how the lift will operate.

Doni said it might not be a lift, it might be a ramp. All they have done is look at cost, noise mitigation, etc.

Tony followed up, asking how important it is to know the options.

Doni said that is why they would need 4-6 weeks to look at all the options.

Tony said he was asking because if there are no other options for ADA, where does that leave us? He wanted to know why we are voting if we have not decided.

Judy Burch said that a member had looked into a lift that turns into stairs, at a cost of \$65,000, but the concern is sound mitigation.

Steve Bradt said that if the concern is about the unknown factor, or that accessibility will be decided not to be important, it will definitely be considered going forward. One item written into the item being voted on is accessibility.

Linsey Moddelmog said she is in favor of a permanent ramp that all could use, because that allows dignity and doesn't call attention. She has experience with lifts that are difficult to use and thinks that people will avoid it.

Val McGhee said that is likely correct, more people would use a ramp. We have to recognize the height of the chancel (existing) and the fact that a ramp would need to go out so much further because of the height.

Bob Gent said we are not here to decide on lift/ramp options. He wants to know if we will be able to do other work in the sanctuary while the chancel work is going on.

Doug said we will be expanding the choir loft, removing radiators and replacing with smaller ones, working through the acoustician study, carpet will be removed, sound system changes, floors might be redone. The chancel floor will be wood.

Dana Dole asked if the base of the chancel (which is original) will be destroyed and taken out if we go with the expanded chancel.

Valerie said that the expanded version comes forward, so the woodwork would be preserved underneath. It wouldn't be visible but could be restored by future generations.

Terry said there are many questions about wood. We are retaining as much as possible.

Jackie Lord said we heard about cost savings, not about time difference. Is there a difference?

Terry said he has not heard anything that changes the time schedule. More money would be spent coming up with finding a workable design. Should all fit in 6 months, but the start could be later with the adapted chancel.

Keeli Nelson asked if the architects have been asked to do a feasibility study about a ramp vs. a lift?

Terry said no, but they could.

Andy Fry says he sits in the balcony. If you don't sit in the first few rows, you can't see a lot. With current sightlines, you can see the pulpit and lectern, nothing else. And there are 300+ balcony seats. From the back, you can only see the pastor's head. With the expanded chancel, you will have even less. But you would have the expanded stage area. He sees this as a furniture issue, not a design issue. A taller pulpit and lectern would add space.

Doug said the PMC talked about adding a step to raise lecterns to keep them the height they are today.

Terry said it's important to pay attention to the balcony. The question was addressed by the visioning group. It needs substantial changes. It did not fit into financial scope, but not because it wasn't talked about.

Jenny asked if there were any more questions and then introduced Doug to make the motion.

Move to direct the Project Management Committee to proceed with the Enter In Sanctuary and Organ Project according to which of the two chancel options receives the majority of votes today. - Doug Eason, Moderator Elect

Geraldo Sousa seconded.

John Nalbannion clarified that only members can vote.

Jenny thanked him and reminded everyone that only members can vote.

Jenny restated the motion and called for a vote.

Motion passed unanimously.

8. Discussion and Comments on the two choices - All

Jenny opened the discussion section, noting that we have a hard stop at noon. She asked people to state their name, said that disagreement is okay, and reminded people to extend grace to one another, and speak only for yourself.

Sarah Whitten noted the sightline issues for short people and wheelchair users, as well as for the balcony. She is most concerned about egress in and out in an emergency. With an expanded chancel, we would have to climb up the stage to get to the emergency exit. This is not accessible to some, and would be very difficult for all in a chaotic situation. She is concerned about the expanded chancel, and will vote for the adapted option.

Johannah Cox said she served on the organ committee, and is looking forward to the new organ. From a musicians perspective, we need a new organ, but the expanded design is not necessary and does not benefit the sacred space. Musicians and conductors need to be grounded. They could fall with the new stage. She will vote for the adapted chancel.

Cathy Barker said she is a former deacon and is concerned about communion. She has enjoyed serving and worries that having two more tables with the new design will be challenging. She wants to know if this has been considered.

Larry Rice said he leads Plymouth Strings. They sometimes play the prelude and postlude for 9:30 and special services. He was asked if they wanted to be on ground level or on stage. He would prefer ground level because they play at beginning and end, they would have to either get on and off the platform, or stay for the whole service. Either would be distracting and uncomfortable. As it is now, the group can comfortably take part in the service. Prefers adapted chancel option.

Jackie Lord said she has given thought and prayer to this. It should be a sacred space, not a performance space. She understands wanting to see musicians, but notes that we just heard the musicians don't want to be seen. Her Children have been acolytes and the adapted version will allow them to continue. She does not see the need for an expanded chancel.

Elise Higgins said that what makes Plymouth sacred is who it reaches out to and who it includes. That is Jesus's work, and more sacred than sightlines and the difficulty of change. She wants Plymouth to be a space where everyone is authentically welcomed, where whether you can walk doesn't determine whether you can lead worship. We are an open and affirming church, we have to be consistent. Our physical space should reflect our spiritual commitments. She supports the expanded chancel..

Devon Kim said that when we launched the Enter In campaign, the response was a joyful yes. There were 284 household pledges of trust in what Plymouth can become. For some, change feels like a heavy weight. We feel a responsibility to our past members. We cannot know the minds of past members, but we know their hearts through the covenant. When we say the words all are welcome here, does our space back that up? Now our space can feel exclusive, but Jesus broke down barriers and moved among people. The expanded design is about inclusion. Hearing and seeing more people, on the same level. It makes our worship as expansive as our welcome. She sees the beauty in both sides of this debate. She believes the better vote is the one that moves us forward.

Cynthia (Cindy) Reeves said that accessibility is near and dear to heart. Her mother had polio and became paraplegic, and Cindy and her siblings helped her navigate the world and learned what buildings could accommodate. How many stairs? How wide aisles? Could she get where she wanted to go without having to use a lift in front of everyone? She envisions a world where someone could be baptized in a wheelchair, and believes we could become welcoming to all people with mobility challenges. She wants the congregation to think of the future not the past, and trust that the people in charge will retain the beauty and history but where all are welcome.

Susan McCarthy said that Plymouth's 3 buildings are a combination of historic and modern. North church was renovated in the 1990's, South church was built in 2002. It is easier to change North and South because there is less history. The sanctuary is different. It is old, it is where we gather to worship, it is sacred and not easy to change. She thinks of our ancestors, women who wanted to bring beauty and culture, you can feel their imprint as well as that of John Haskell. She imagines that past members might feel right at home. Proud to see the window, the walnut pews, lovingly cared for. They would see the organ and be amazed at the size but they would still recognize elements of style of the original. The

chancel is a little larger, expanded in 1965, but largely the same. The question is: if the chancel was expanded, would they recognize it? The chancel fits the space of the historic sanctuary.

Scott Morgan said he was ecstatic to see this energy. He apologized for being moderator as the organ project began. Some were excited about the organ, others shocked by spending so much on a musical instrument. Through that process, he found that many were concerned about accessibility. When they first saw the design, it was clear that the chancel needed to be expanded to accommodate the ramp. The width of the chancel was to accommodate the ramp, not as a stage. He will vote for the expanded chancel. He thinks a lift is not acceptable. He said that when the organ project began, it started a coalition, and in a coalition, not everyone gets exactly what they want.

Annamarie Hill said she has only been a member since 2020, but is a member of council. She comes from a tradition that values liturgy highly. She is concerned when hears members refer to chancel space as stage and participants as performers. They are a part of the worship service, they are praying with us and for us. She has participated in all kinds of liturgies, from highly formal to informal. Whatever this space winds up being, it will be sacred, and will be the chancel, not a stage. She has concerns about hanging a banner that says we welcome all, but the chancel is not welcome to everyone.

Jenny thanked everyone, and said it was noon so time to stop.

She invited volunteers to come forward with the ballots.

9. Announce the results and next steps

Jenny announced that the votes had been counted. She said that “this is us deciding,” whatever the decision is we will move forward. But that doesn’t mean that there won’t be hurt feelings on either side. Wanted everyone to know that she is there for them. In addition to her email, she will be holding office hours. She wanted everyone to hold the results in their hearts, be prayerful and let it settle.

Rich announced the vote, and said that ballots were counted twice.

Expanded Chancel received 99 votes.

Adapted Chancel received 151 votes.

The PMC will move forward w/ adapted chancel.

10. Adjournment

Jenny adjourned the meeting.

11. Benediction

Valerie offered a benediction.