

Classis Meetings: Fall 2020

A Summary of Learning, Experiences, and Advice
from Classis meetings during the season of COVID

Ways Classes Met in Fall 2020

- **In person**, much like normal
- **In person**, but pared down agenda, etc.
- **Hybrid**: some in person, others joining by video
- **Multi-site**: delegates from each church joining together in groups at their church, or other small groups getting together
- **Virtual**: everyone joining by video individually
- **Virtual**: over more than one meeting (one meeting leaning towards the "network of support" side of classis, with sharing, praying together, etc. A second meeting leaning towards the "business" side of classis).
- **Not at all**: CIC just handled some key items

Some Key Learning by meeting type

Cancelled Meeting

- Sometimes there isn't much on the agenda of the classis meeting, in which case it could be fine to simply cancel it and allow CIC to handle it.
- A classis that did this communicated by email to all the churches to share transparently what the CIC decided.

In Person

- There were different ways this looked. In some cases, people were distanced, attendance was limited, and no food, etc. was served. In other places, it seemed very much like a regular classis meeting.
- **Loss:** The choice to meet in person may have affected participation (but it's hard to know more precisely how). Some may not have come if they felt the meeting should not have been held as it was, while perhaps others may have been present that would not have participated had the meeting happened by video. In other words, no matter how meetings happened in Fall 2020, there was certainly some loss.
- **Connection:** For those that did meet in person, some described it as feeling like a bit of a reprieve--particularly if their church had not been meeting in person. If meeting in person is safe, allowed, and generally accepted, choosing to meet together felt relationally rich. This is perhaps particularly true for pastors.

Hybrid (in person + joining by video)

- **Energy:** Recognize that where most people are at, that is where the energy will be (eg. if most are virtual, the in-person will feel more left out)
- **Hospitality:** While it feels more efficient and hospitable, hybrid is probably actually the least efficient and least hospitable way to meet. People feel disconnected, voting is an extra challenge, etc. Multiple people who have been in hybrid meetings have suggested to do virtual or do in person, but don't try to do both at the same time.
- **Scheduling:** those involved in planning hybrid meetings say it is basically like planning two meetings at the same time.
- **Use Strategically:** most that did hybrid seemed to do it as a concession. They preferred to meet in person but had video option as an alternative. If it's mostly a concession or preference, this is the most complicated way to host classis with the least benefit. However, there was at least one classis that met hybrid because of two examinations welcoming churches/pastors to the CRC. They wanted to build relationships. They hosted the meeting over two days in the two new churches to foster relationship. This seemed to be worth it. **Lesson: use hybrid only if it is for a strategic reason, not as a concession.**

Multi-Site (groups gathered, linked by video)

- **Voting:** it proved to be a challenge to count the voting when multiple people are all sharing one device.
- **Devices:** if multiple people are meeting in the same room in order to be with one another, ***consider (or, require) each person to be on their own device.*** That will allow them to be able to chat with one another, see each other over breaks, but also keeps the video meeting a level playing field and better participation (being able to see everyone, and especially for voting using the Polling feature, for example).
- **Not for Everyone:** Just because your classis pushes for multi-site doesn't mean everyone will want to show up somewhere to participate. Expect to end up doing a combination of multi-site *and* individual people connecting from their homes.

By Video Only

- (see the following section for much more detailed notes)
- **Reports:** Pre-recorded reports from ministries. For some classes, these were shared with the churches prior to the meeting, which probably got higher view rates as well (not just delegates).
- **Dedicated IT:** Cannot say this strongly enough: have a dedicated IT person (or two). The chair/clerk should *not* be handling this.
- **Identification:** putting a letter in front of name (D-delegate, V-visitor, SD-Synodical Deputy, etc.) allows for quicker/easier sort.

General Advice for Classis by **VIDEO**

BEFORE the classis meeting

- **Test:** ALL equipment ahead of time, including computers, cameras, wifi, software, etc. of ALL people involved in facilitating the meeting.
- **Practice:** Get to know the flow of the agenda. Meeting by video leaves almost no room for figuring things out on the fly, especially things you could know ahead of time.
- **Plan:** Plan how you will move people around during the meeting, such as Synodical Deputies when they need to confer separately. Will they go to a breakout room? Etc. One classis had a “Zoom tasks” in the agenda for leaders that listed every move.
- **Guests:** It is easy to simply not invite guests to the meeting to make is simpler, but that is not sustainable long term. Make a plan for it.
- **Chair:** If you are the chair of a hybrid meeting, imagine you will be joining by video and plan accordingly so that you can participate fully. In most cases, video participants end up second-class participants.
- **Agenda Order:** Consider putting the most important agenda items near the beginning. People will fade if it’s a long meeting.
- **Length:** best to keep the meeting to 3hr or less. If it’s longer, meeting over two days was an effective option (eg. two 3hr evenings)
- **Tech Person:** have a person or two who is dedicated to *just* the tech. Not the clerk, not the chair. “***This is imperative***” said one clerk, and everyone agreed with her.

DURING the classis meeting

- **Opening:** the opening devotions, welcome, tech hospitality, etc. made a difference for setting the tone of the meeting.
- **Motions:** Always screen-share a slide/doc, or write in the chat box, motions written out so that people know exactly what they're voting on (good practice for in person as well).
- **Breaks:** Make sure to schedule enough breaks. People need time to get up and move around regularly. They get this naturally in person while the meeting continues, but not as much by video.
- **Voting:** For voting, the best option out there right now is the Zoom polling. *Do a practice vote with the delegates early in the meeting.*
- **Attendance/Covenant of Officebearers:**
 - One classis sends a blank copy of Covenant and asks the church to submit it with the credentials if it needs to be signed.
 - Slide deck (key person: Lesli van Milligen) where people can fill in their own "registration" as they enter.
- **Command Post:** those leading the classis meeting met in one church to lead from there for a full-virtual meeting. Very effective.

AFTER the classis meeting

- **Learn:** Especially if video is new to you, don't lose the chance to learn from it. Schedule a debrief with those involved, perhaps do a feedback form from participants, etc.
- **Reports:** if your classis had pre-recorded reports from ministries, consider sending them all out to the churches
- **Recordings:** we recommend deleting all recordings after they have served their purpose, especially any recordings of executive session. The only official record of the meeting is the written minutes. Delete meeting recording and candidate examination recordings.

Other observations about Meeting by Video

- **Accessibility:** some classes had more deacons than ever attend as delegates, probably because it was more accessible.
- **Efficiency:** video engagement is, by design, much more efficient because most of our normal in-person relational space is cut out. Efficiency, though, can make us more callous (or seem more callous) for some of the difficult items.
- **What is Classis for?** Meeting by video or in other ways is forcing the question for many: what is classis for? And how does that purpose have room to breathe in whatever way you meet.
- **Breakout Rooms:** make sure you know how and when to use them. They were key to managing executive sessions, but can also be very effective for *relationship building* (during devotional time, smaller group discussions around larger topics, for discernment during for voting, etc.). Breakout rooms are one of the few relational spaces that people joining by video will experience. Use them.
- **How Many Delegates?** Some classes restricted delegate counts (eg. 2/church) to make it feel more manageable. But the difference between, say, 50 delegates and 75 will not change anything about how the meeting will operate. Limiting participation (delegates/guests) is probably unnecessary.

Key Learning by Classis Lens

Spiritually Discerning Community

- **Voting:** can be a challenge depending on how you meet.
 - For many Fall 2020 meetings, the votes were not very contentious. But if there is a challenging vote, a much clearer and stronger voting method needs to be in place for the voting to feel trustworthy (i.e. no holding up fingers or shifting to only negative votes)
 - Yes/No/Abstain/Visitor - lets you track that ALL people voted.
- **Voices:** In a hybrid meeting, the people joining remotely will probably feel less “part of it” which could impact the overall ability to feel like it’s a collective decision.
- **Frequency:** moving forward, how often might a classis meet, and with how much of an agenda each time? What would serve best for good discerning discussions?
- **Consent Agenda:** Some grouped items together that CIC handled and just approved the work of CIC. Advice: give people a short time to re-read the whole package they are voting on (5min) and format to make the specific items they are approving abundantly clear.

Network of Support & Accountability

- **Community:** One of the things quickly lost when meeting by video is the serendipitous relational space that being together creates. Some classis did intentionally do things to have intentional sharing/prayer/support time as part of their meeting. Very well received (use breakout rooms)
- **Translation:** Zoom has a [live translation feature](#). Not only does this support inclusion and engagement as a network, but also could strengthen the classis as a spiritually discerning community. Note that there are some restrictions on which types of Zoom accounts this is available for.
- **Challenging Topics:** if going through Article 17 or other potentially painful scenarios, some classes had someone go to the person's house to be with them during the meeting so they would not be alone. For the churches too, we don't realize how much the before/after decision time is important for community.

Collective Calling

- **Reports:** figuring out how to handle reports from ministries that the classis supports will be important. Also recognize that for some ministries, classis meetings are an opportunity to build *relationships* with delegates from the churches. Are there other ways to cultivate these relationships when not physically present?
- **Supported Ministries:** in some classes, reporting from supported ministries was usually done in person orally; by including a written or pre-recorded report to be shared in advance, engagement was higher.

Bridge to Denomination

- **Denominational Ministries:** many denominational ministries connect with churches at classis, or come to meetings to learn more about what's going on. How might these relationships be intentionally supported in a video environment?
- **Examinations:** candidate examination is a big part of a lot of classis meetings. This could be a whole topic itself, so in brief...
 - Not everyone will watch pre-recorded video, so just be aware of that limitation
 - Consider deleting all examination recordings immediately following exam. The recording is for the exam, not for a permanent record of the candidate's performance at the exam.
 - Consider having a member of the CMLT or some other classis representative join the candidate in person wherever they are joining from if the classis meeting is held by video.

Other

Links to Documents Discussed

- **Agenda with Zoom Tasks:** a sample of a classis meeting agenda with specific Zoom tasks listed. [Click Link](#).
- **Introduce Yourself:** a Google doc sample that could be used at the beginning of a meeting. Give everyone edit access and put the link in the chat. It can be a way to have people sign in and start to build community with prayer requests, etc. For either option, you will need to make your own copy (*File -> Make a Copy*)
 - Option 1: [Google Slides](#)
 - Option 2: [Google Doc](#)
- **Be Prepared:** a document created for helping people get acquainted with Zoom. [Click Link](#)
- **More Ideas:** I've been recording the specific feedback given from various classes, along with other helpful information. Here is a [direct link](#) to the Shared online folder.