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Faithful Transitions Blog: Votes and Voters

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As a cautionary anecdote, we wanted to make people aware of the case of Zion United Lutheran Church in Clear Lake, Iowa. On Dec. 13, 2009, Zion United Lutheran Church held a specially called meeting of members and took a vote to terminate its relationship with the ELCA. As reported by the congregation, and by the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* and other news organizations, members of Zion voted 238-119 to leave the ELCA -- exactly two-thirds of those whose votes were counted.

According an ELCA Press Release, "The Rev. Steven L. Ullestad, bishop of the Northeastern Iowa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), has declared that a Clear Lake, Iowa, congregation's initial vote to leave the denomination did not achieve the required two-thirds vote, even though congregational leaders believed the widely reported vote was successful" (read the story [HERE](#)).

The Bishop is including in his percentage calculation those who were counted as attending the meeting, but apparently did not submit a vote. (It was not clear from the story where his total count came from.) The ELCA Model Constitution does, however, specify that the votes required to leave the ELCA is "2/3 of the **voting members present**."

For those planning to take votes at upcoming meetings, there are different ways you might want to exercise care in this regard:

1) Below, on this website, I have offered the suggestion that voting members be registered by signing in at the meeting. (That is still my personal inclination, for purposes of officially establishing a quorum, and for passing out ballot sheets.) However, if you do make an initial count, you should inform registered voters that any abstention (or failure to submit a ballot) is effectively a NO vote.

2) Other respected advisors have suggested that it would be better to take no initial count, but rather let the total ballots submitted serve as the count of voting members. In such a case, I would advise that this counting procedure be recognized and adopted at the meeting itself, so there is no question about how the total count was established.

In any case, it is important to be aware of the actual language found in your congregation's constitution, and not make any assumptions.

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