Council Minutes, August 2026

Plymouth Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Tuesday, August 25, 2026

1. **Call to Order** – Jenny O'Brien, Moderator

   Jenny called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM

   Voting Members Present:

   Jenny O'Brien – Moderator

   Doug Eason – Moderator-Elect

   Rich Bireta – Immediate Past Moderator

   Katy Anderson – Treasurer

   David Treviño – At-Large Member

   Annamarie Hill – At-Large Member

   Norine Spears – At-Large Member

   Jeff Eriksen – At-Large Member

   Jeanne Fridell – At-Large Member

   Voting Members Not Present

   Emily Sharp – At-Large Member

   Ex-Officio Members Present

   Valerie Miller-Coleman – Senior Pastor

   Caroline Lawson Dean – Associate Pastor

   Non-Voting Members Present

   Caroline Rothnie – Clerk

   Sonja Erickson – Deputy Treasurer

   Others Present

   Ian Wood, Head of Facilities Committee

   Devon Kim, Plymouth Member

   Stephen Carttar, Plymouth Member

   John Burch, Plymouth Member

   Margaret Kramar, Plymouth Member

   Ron Johnson, Plymouth Member

   Dean Kettle, Plymouth Member

   Judy Kettle, Plymouth Member

   Chris Collister, Plymouth Member

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

   Valerie led attendees in prayer.

3. **Consent Agenda**

3.1. Approve this agenda
3.2. Approve the minutes from the June Council meeting
3.3. Receive monthly financial reports

Doug moved to approve the agenda; Annamarie seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

4. **Church Treasurer's Report** – Katy Anderson, Treasurer

As of July 31, 2026, the Plymouth financial statements reflected:

- 58% of the way through 2026,
- 58% of budgeted revenue was recognized, and
- 58% of budgeted expenditures were disbursed.

There is currently a net surplus for the year of $5,630.

A designated endowment account has been opened in memory of Phyllis and Stan Rolfe, earmarked to help with special long-term maintenance needs and large purchases such as boilers, tuck-pointing the bricks, or a new organ (not yearly operations).

5. **Old Business**

5.1. **Update on the name for the Thanksgiving/Harvest Home Dinner** - *Caroline Lawson Dean, Associate Pastor.* Caroline reported that the Fellowship Board and the Service and Justice Board met to discuss congregational responses to the Fall meal name. They received 40 responses from the congregation – these were not votes but feedback. The group discussed the feedback through a framework of defining values. Based on that conversation, they decided to call the Fall meal Thanksgiving. Jenny asked Caroline to pass along appreciation to the group for their work.

5.2. **Enter In Project Update**- *Doug Eason, PMC Chair*

5.2.1. Project Matrix and Timeline review
Doug shared slides (attached) with milestone target dates, noting that we need to have a design decision tonight to be on track with the timeline.
Jeff asked when Council will need to weigh in again, saying that he doesn't think Council should micromanage. Doug said that much of the back and forth will be between the PMC and the architects and SHPO. If there's something that needs attention, they will let Council know.

5.2.2. Congregational feedback report and discussion of ramp design Options 1 and 2
Doug shared slides (attached) showing the two options and a summary of the congregational feedback for each.
Option 1 received lower scores from the congregation, averaging 2.66 stars. Option 2 received higher scores from the congregation, averaging just over 4 stars.

Jeff moved to approve Design Option 2 to provide accessibility to the chancel; Jeanne seconded.

David thanked Doug and said that this option was in line with what the congregation expressed at the called meeting.
Motion carried unanimously.

6. **New Business**

6.1. **Budget Preview** - Katy Anderson, Treasurer

Jenny opened with a pep talk, reminding people that last year in budget season, we had to scramble for a solution at the end of the year. The gap is projected to widen in the years to come, which is anxiety provoking. Council's task is to disappoint that anxiety by finding solutions that support the vision of a strong and thriving church.

6.1.1. 2027 Budget - preliminary estimates, highlights, assumptions

Katy said we have been getting questions about the budget. The budget will be shared at next month's meeting, but she wanted to provide a preview. She presented slides (attached).

- Slide 1 showed giving patterns over the past 4 years. Enter In has approximately doubled giving over the past two years. In terms of the operations budget, it has been consistent, but Enter In might put some pressure on those numbers.
- Slide 2 showed budget history. The 2026 budget was unusual because of one-time funds that were brought in to balance the budget. The total revenue includes PPP funds. We are right on track at this point in the year, but for each month going forward, we will have $10,000/month more expenses than revenue, so we will need to start turning to other funds.
- Slide 3: 2027 Budget Draft. At Doug's request, the draft includes a revenue estimate based on trends from prior years. With this estimate, we will have an $84,000 gap. Will we fill that by raising revenue? Cutting the budget? A combination? These are the questions we need to answer.
- $31,000 of the PPP reserves remain, and at the current rate, we would use it all this year.
- The change in budget for 2027 is $41,176. Much of this is personnel increases based on COLA. Valerie did not include herself in the COLA increases.
- Projecting outward from 2027 to 2031, if we continue business as usual, the gap will increase each year. If we can resolve the $84,000 gap this year, it will make future years easier. If we didn't change anything, these are the projections. But what this tells us is that we need to come up with a few new strategies to improve this.

6.1.2. Long-range budget outlook and strategy questions

Katy outlined the key budget considerations:

- Do we close the 2027 budget gap by increasing revenue or reducing expenses? What is the right balance between the two?
- When we distribute a draft budget to the congregation, do we show a funding gap or a proposed balanced budget? Council will need to review in September.
- Can we incorporate more funding for facilities maintenance (outside of Enter In)?
- Are staff costs at an appropriate level for growth? 63% of estimated expenses. (typical range is 40-60 %).

  Valerie explained that the staff cost range comes from Susan Beaumont, an expert on church growth in larger mainline congregations. For congregations like Plymouth, Beaumont estimates that the average range dedicated to personnel is 40-60%. She says you shouldn't aim for average, but if you are outside of it, you should know why.

Katy reported that the Fundraising and Finance committees are looking at addressing the budget. Fundraising is planning the Annual Appeal and considering other events. The Finance committee is looking at ways to trim the budget.

Jenny said we are not making decisions this evening, but the question of what options to explore is key. We can think of innovative solutions. Between now and the September meeting, she would like to meet with the finance committee to learn what we need to address first, and give them guidance.

Stephen Carttar gave high compliments to Katy. He wanted to mention conversations sparked by the giving letter and Valerie's message to the congregation. The finance committee made it clear last year that this was going to be a problem and a plan was needed. Last year, Council and congregation approved a balanced budget. We are in line with that budget, there are no surprises. But the way it was announced created the impression that something had happened to put us behind. He wanted to know what the plan is. People will be asking when the budget is presented.

Valerie thanked Stephen. She said the outlook for 2026 is that we will be $10,000 short per month if we don't tap into reserves. The finance committee decided to run the deficit to make clear how big it is, before tapping into the reserves. Stephen said that sounded reasonable, but the message to the congregation implied that this was unexpected. Katy said that Valerie was saying we can think of those funds as a backup plan.

Rich noted that this is the first discussion about the 2027 budget that Council has had. So there is not a plan now, but he asked that people reserve judgement until September. He said we've got to grow out of the budget deficit. It's a question of how long it will take to do that, as we grow the revenue to meet the expenses.

6.1.3. Personnel Budget Strategy

Valerie spoke about the personnel budget. She looks at lots of approaches to find what meets our needs and allows us to grow. Our staff budget percentage is just a bit above the average range, and COLA has been growing as inflation grows. That's a part of the context. 3.66% this year is what the formula Plymouth uses to determine COLA says. Over the last 5 years, there has been a radical restructure of administrative staff, including hiring a Masters- level accountant and a Director of Operations. We have added more specialization to the administrative staff, many of whom are part time. We have never had a more effective administrative team. Logistics are well in hand, and things are processed professionally in accordance with policies and procedures. She noted that almost 20% of our personnel budget is musicians. While that is high for a congregation like Plymouth's, it reflects our values. There are only 4 full-time staff members. We are running a lean operation in many regards, and we have a lot of specialists. The staff positions the congregation for growth. Jenny asked about the decision to use volunteers to staff the front desk. Valerie said that leverages the use of volunteers who have a gift for hospitality and are well known to the congregation while freeing up staff to do their work.

7. **Open Forum** – Margaret Kramar suggested a way to cut the budget would be to reduce administrative staff from 5 to 3. She feels that it is a problem to have people working remotely because they are inaccessible.

8. **Moderator's Report.** Jenny said that next month Ian Wood will give Council a deep dive into the HVAC systems maintenance needs. This is a capital issue, not an operations budget issue.

9. **Associate Pastor's Report**. Caroline said new member orientation will be held on Sunday, and she has received 20 RSVPs. New Member Sunday is 9/20. She is also working on neighborhood small table groups, where members will be able to get to know their neighbors more deeply, and the Plymouth Service Corps, which offers monthly hands-on projects with mission partners and opportunities for continued service.

10. **Senior Pastor's Report**. Valerie said that Caroline is her object lesson: everything that she just reported was possible because of the alignment created when Colton became full time, increasing the time CD could spend on faith formation. Half her time is focused on this now, and Michael Brecke is freed up to spend 20 hours a week on congregational care, while Caroline takes on membership duties.

11. **Executive Session - Sr. Pastor Review Report** - *Devon Kim, Personnel Committee Chair*
    At this time, visitors left and Devon presented the Senior Pastor Review Report to Council.

12. **Adjournment and Lord's Prayer** - 8:15

Important Future Dates:

Next Council Meeting: September 24, 2026 @ 6:30 pm – Mayflower Room

Sunday, October 18 – Budget Brunch
October 27 – Regular Council Meeting
November 17 – Regular Council Meeting
Sunday, December 13 – Congregational Budget Discussion
December 15 – Regular Council Meeting
January 26, 2027 – Regular Council Meeting