



6.2 Making Decisions by Consensus Guidelines

Strengths of Consensus (“becoming of one mind”) Decision-Making

Consensus, a way of making decisions without voting, can enhance the participation of all members in General Council meetings, provide a collaborative and harmonious context for making decisions, and enable representatives to discern together the will of God (Eph. 5:17) for the church and for MWC.

- Coming to agreement through honest, respectful discussion is a widely understood and accepted procedure.
- It encourages consultation, exploration, questioning and prayerful reflection (not adversarial).
- It values and seeks to utilize the experience and perspective of all members.
- It seeks to hear, understand and respect all concerns and points of view.
- It encourages participation by all churches in shaping the decision.
- It facilitates churches learning from each other and deepening their communion with one another.

Steps in Coming to Consensus

These guidelines describe typical steps that are used in making decisions by consensus. Not every step may be appropriate for every meeting or decision but it will be helpful to follow these guidelines as closely as possible. Often one step merges with the next without a clear break in the flow of the meeting. Nonetheless, each step is part of the progression towards reaching consensus.

1. Information

- 1.1 **Presenting an issue:** Background information on why an issue is being raised, information that will help understand the issue, information that shows the range of possible perspectives and a proposed course of action are provided to GC members and are generally sent prior to the meeting.
- 1.2 **Clarification of the issue:** When an issue is introduced at a meeting, members of the Council are free to seek clarification, to ask questions on the issue and to seek information from differing viewpoints.

2. Deliberation

- 2.1 **Open discussion, deliberation:** Discussion of the various viewpoints and vigorous debate around different opinions are encouraged. At the conclusion of a speech or a period of discussion, those in general agreement will display orange cards while those in general disagreement display blue cards. If cards are not easily visible to all present, the chairperson advises the Council on the proportion of each being shown. As an indication of opinion that the Council should move on to the next step in the business procedures, members may display their orange and blue cards crossed, so the chairperson can see both together. This indication may be given both during and after speeches. These indications help avoid repetitious speeches, enable the chairperson to gauge the strength of feeling for various ideas, or indicate whether consensus is emerging.
- 2.2 **Developing proposals:** As open discussion proceeds, several specific proposals may emerge or general agreement with the initial proposal may be expressed. Small group work, either formally structured or through brief buzz groups with immediate neighbors, is often a fruitful way of drawing on individual insights to resolve the issue. Small group work enables participation of all members in the deliberations. If the issue is straightforward and the number of ideas for its possible resolution is small, the chairperson or any other member of the Council may summarize a firm proposal for discussion. However, it may be necessary to refer all the ideas to a Facilitation Group to draw together responses and to negotiate a firm proposal for the Council to consider.



3. Decision

3.1 Discussion of a specific proposal: In this step, various speakers speak to the benefits and disadvantages of the proposal. It is important to hear from those with enthusiasm for the proposal as well as from those indicating disquiet or disapproval. Members are encouraged to indicate their agreement or disagreement by use of the colored cards. Minor changes of wording may be agreed by the Council from time to time as viewpoints are heard and considered.

From time to time, the chairperson may check whether the Council is nearing consensus by summing up where it seems the Council is heading and asking: “What is your response to this proposal?” Colored card response will indicate whether more discussion is desired by the Council.

3.2 Checking for consensus: When the chairperson believes that consensus has been reached (to support or to not support), the Council is asked to affirm this. The chairperson states an understanding of the position reached and asks for an indication of agreement or disagreement (raised cards, voices or show of hands). Typical questions could be:

- “Do you believe we have consensus in support of this proposal?” or
- “Do you believe we have consensus to not support this proposal?”

If there is no strong response to this checking for consensus, discussion may continue to enable doubts and questions to be raised and further viewpoints to be shared. If there is unanimity to support or to not support the proposal, then consensus has been reached and the Council proceeds to the declaration of the consensus result (see paragraph 3.3).

However, there is a third possibility. After vigorous sharing of ideas, there may be strong but not unanimous support for the proposal. In order to estimate the strength of opinion, the chairperson may ask questions such as:

- “Who supports the proposal?”
- “Who does not support the proposal as your first option, but is prepared to accept it?”
- “Who is not prepared to accept the proposal?” If there is no response to this question, the chairperson may ask the Council:
- “Is further discussion needed?”
- “Are you prepared to have the issue declared resolved by consensus?”

If all agree that consensus has been reached the Council moves to step 3.3.

If some are still not able to accept the proposal the chairperson invites these people to share their misgivings directly with the whole Council and discussion can continue. Where a small number is unable to agree with the majority after a reasonable time, the Council may move on to the procedures outlined in paragraph 3.4. Skillful chairing is necessary here, to enable the Council to avoid undue delay.

There may be some who are uneasy about a proposed way forward, yet not able to verbalize their concerns. The prompting of the Spirit may be expressed in disquiet as much as in creative suggestions for wording a proposal. All people are worthy of respect as they indicate their position, and no one should feel pressured into agreeing with a position against their better judgment.

3.3 Declaration of consensus: On the affirmation of consensus, by whatever means is considered appropriate (cards, voices or show of hands), the chairperson declares the proposal resolved (either approved or disapproved) by consensus.



3.4 If objections persist: Sharing misgivings about the proposal may clarify concerns or result in minor changes that bring support or acceptance of the proposal. The Council may express its support or disapproval for any minor wording changes, and the process can proceed towards a declaration of consensus. If concerns expressed indicate that further discussion is required the process proceeds as indicated in paragraph 3.1. If objections or disagreements surface that affect the wording of the proposal in a major way it may be possible for an amended proposal to be considered by the Council (see paragraph 2.2), or a Facilitation Group may need to rework the proposal and bring it back to the Council. In this case, the process returns to the steps outlined in paragraph 2.2.

At this late stage in the process it is possible that a major consideration may be aired which was missed by everyone. Where the chairperson considers this to be the case, the process returns to the clarification of issues stage (paragraph 1.2), allowing development of the new point and appropriate discussion of the attendant issues.

3.5 Agreement - not unanimity: If (after careful attempts to work towards consensus) there is a small number who are unable to support or accept the majority position, the chairperson may ask:

- “Do those unable to support the proposal and not prepared to accept it, believe your point of view has been listened to, even though you don’t agree with the proposal and are not able to accept it?”
- “Do those who support or who are prepared to accept this proposal believe you have heard what the others of our Council are saying?”

If there is assurance that dissenting views have been both expressed and understood, the chairperson may ask for an indication of viewpoints on these two questions:

- “Are those who are in the minority on this proposal prepared to live with the majority view and allow the Council to record an agreement?”
- “Does the Council therefore wish to record agreement on this proposal?”

If no person indicates against these two questions, then agreement is recorded. If one or more indicates against either of the two questions, then the Council proceeds to the next step (paragraph 3.6).

3.6 Need for a decision now: If consensus on the issue is not reached the Council discusses by consensus procedures the need for a decision at this meeting. If there is no consensus after a reasonable length of time that a decision must be made at this meeting the chairperson implements the formal voting procedure (paragraph 3.7). If the Council does not agree that a decision is required at this meeting, there is opportunity for further work and the process may continue in accordance with the options in paragraph 3.8.

3.7 Decision by formal majority: If there is consensus that a decision is necessary now, or the chairperson implements the formal voting procedure, the Council moves immediately to final discussion of the proposal and decides the matter by formal majority vote.

3.8 Further possibilities: In any decision session where the Council has not reached consensus or agreement on a proposal, or where it has resolved that a final decision on a proposal is not needed at this meeting, options that may be considered include: a) referring the issue to the Executive Committee for determination; b) referring the issue back to the original party or to another special group for further consideration and later re-submission to the Council; or c) deciding that the matter be no longer considered.

In one of these ways, the issue is dealt with and is not left pending. Even a decision that the matter be no longer considered must indicate the reason for its lapsing, perhaps leaving the door open for further research and presentation, or closing the door firmly and stating the reasons for so doing.



Guidelines

6.0

In cases where consensus is difficult it is incumbent on those with concerns to work closely with those who initiate the issue to find creative ways of moving forward, not just exert veto power by refusing to cooperate.

Based on "A Manual for Meetings", The United Church in Australia Assembly, 2001, Callingwood, Australia, pp. 25-30.