

Consensus model for Decision Making

Consensus decision-making was adopted by the 1994 National Assembly as the norm for meeting procedure in all Councils of the Uniting Church (Congregation, Church Council, Presbytery, Synod, and Assembly).

In the introduction to the Manual for Meetings, the (then) General Secretary wrote:

Consensus:

*seeking a
common mind
about the wisest
way forward for
the Church.*

The Manual for Meetings provides the official standing orders and rules of debate for the Uniting Church in Australia....

The Manual is a very important development in the life of the Uniting Church. The Uniting Church believes that we hear the voice of God in the Councils of the Church. Church meetings that encourage community, and listening to one another in a spirit of openness and humility, are more likely to discern the will of God.

It is the hope and expectation of the Assembly that the process present in the Manual will enable us to give expression to Christian community as we work together...

I particularly commend the Manual for Meeting to those who have responsibility for chairing meeting of Councils of the Uniting Church.

Terence Corkin Assembly General Secretary April 2009

Why Consensus?

In Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union declares, we rely on ‘the gift of the Spirit in order that we may not lose the way.’ Good governance is needed in order to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Aware that the majority-vote decision making process resulted in conflict and adversarial relationships far more than it led to reconciliation or renewal, the Uniting Church adopted a different decision making technique called consensus. ‘Wherever possible in Councils of the Uniting Church in Australia, we seek to make our decisions using consensus procedures.’²⁰

The Basis of Union makes it clear that unity is expected not only in ecumenical endeavours but also in governance. Recognise these phrases from Paragraph 15? Responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them ... Christ may speak to the Church through any of its Councils ...

It is the task of every Council to wait upon God’s Word, and to obey God’s will in the matters allocated to its oversight ... Each Council is to heed the other Councils, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel.

Meeting procedures themselves can build Christian unity as we discover a way forward for the Church - together.

Reaching a decision by consensus allows for the insights of each member. The process ensures issues are fully aired and all members feel they have been adequately heard. Decisions are taken not simply because one more than 50% of members are in favour of a proposal, but because all agree to a way forward. Some may feel it is not necessarily their first option, but all can support it and commit themselves not to undermine the decision.

It is important to realise the consensus decision may be agreement on further processes for dealing with the situation – consensus does not imply every issue has a single resolution.

True consensus is not the same as unanimity – we must be careful to recognise that real consensus arises out of real community, and often only through real tension as

²⁰ Jill Tabart in <http://crosslight.org.au/2015/03/01/consensus-mean-uca>

people express their insights with passion and integrity, and yet with respect for really hearing others' points of view.

It is a prayerful process, seeking to discern God's will; hence meetings incorporate intentional community building including worshipping together. Decisions are made without voting through genuine listening dialogue, being respectful and empowering of all entitled to participate. We're not defending a particular point of view in order to triumph over others losing their argument; rather we're seeking together to discern God's way forward for the Church – waiting for that moment of grace in discovery together.

A proposal may progressively change during debate, as the meeting indicates warmth or coolness towards suggested variations. An outcome may be very different from what was previously anticipated, when openness to fresh insights and the Holy Spirit's guidance permeates a meeting.

Consensus decision-making requires an attitude of mind and heart, not just adherence to another set of standing orders and rules of debate.

Positive outcomes:	Stumbling blocks:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater openness to hearing different perspectives, not just defending a pre-determined position against all odds. • Greater and wider ownership of decisions • Greater confidence in participation, especially by those who previously felt disadvantaged by procedures • Indicator cards help to empower those for whom speaking in a meeting is daunting. • Strengthening Christian community as trust and respect are nurtured. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many UCA members have not yet read <i>A Manual for Meetings</i> after all these years. Some Councils persist with formal procedures (perhaps cosmetically modified) while declaring it 'consensus decision-making'. • A crowded agenda is not conducive to careful discernment when considering major issues. • Venues may need changing to enable participants to sit in small groups • Chairpersons carry a heavy responsibility. Careful training and meeting experience enable the best from consensus procedures. • Coloured indicator cards are not voting cards, but when used appropriately provide an avenue for expressing opinion which helps a meeting move towards a consensus outcome.

Did You Know?

Since the UCA took this dramatic step 21 years ago, our Manual for Meetings has been the model guiding changed procedures now adopted in the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Conference of Reformed Churches, and several members Churches of these ecumenical bodies across the world.

The Christian principles behind consensus decision-making are widely affirmed.

DISCUSSION

1. How can we sharpen our meeting practices so they model UCA values and maximise effective and relational decision making?
2. How might good governance help us more clearly discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

In Summary:

- As we meet we are seeking the will of God in every Council of the Church.
- We seek to discern God's will through the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- We are not just trying to make the most efficient or popular decision
- In doing these things we hold true to our value of unity and growing relationships and acknowledge that the Church is ultimately God's – not ours.
- We have a responsibility and a commitment to using the Consensus Model regardless of our personal feelings. It is something the Uniting Church has chosen and formally committed to using.

How Consensus works

Blue is the cold card – it is the card you hold up when you are unhappy with what is being said, or wish to oppose a proposal.

Orange is the warm card – it is the card you hold up when you are supportive of what is being said or you are in consensus with the proposal.

Yellow is the question card. It is the card you hold up when you want to clarify something or ask a question before voting. Only the NSW Synod uses the yellow card.

Many people have asked why we don't use red and green cards – like traffic lights. The cards are not yes or no cards – they are feeling cards indicating warmth or coolness; support or opposition to an idea or proposal. Orange and blue are also readily identifiable by many people who have colour blindness.

These cards enable us to express our thoughts and feelings as we move through the different phases of our consensus process.

Phases of Consensus

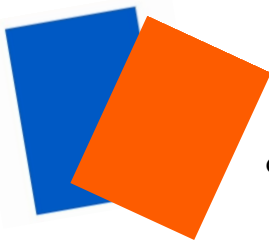
Information Session

- The topic for discussion is presented
- Questions of clarification are invited – it is vital that everyone fully understand the issue at hand.
- The card used here is usually yellow and allows the Chairperson to see how many people wish to ask questions overall, as well as identify specific people.

Deliberation Session

- The issue is freely talked about. The cards are very helpful in letting the Chairperson know how members are feeling. At the conclusion of a speech, cards indicate support or opposition to what was said. They are not a vote and can be changed according to your choice – but they do let the Chairperson know whether more time is needed for discussion or if everyone is already on Board with further discussion being unnecessary.

Should you have a question, hold your yellow card clearly up until the Chairperson acknowledges you – never ever hold your cards in a bunch – it is confusing for the people behind you and can give the wrong impression.



- Should you feel enough time has been spent and would like the process to move on, hold your orange and blue cards together. Be careful how you do this as it can be disconcerting to the Chairperson.
- Should you hold up your blue card, the Chairperson will invite you to speak to your opposition, giving you the chance to bring your wisdom to the meeting.
- From the discussion, several specific proposals may emerge. It may be that as small groups or as a large group the proposals are discussed and refined until one clear proposal emerges. Wording is important and this takes time – remember that at the same time you are forming good words for a proposal you are also building good relationships – patience is vital.
- In this phase, the cards allow the Chairperson to assess the mood of the room, as well as to judge the right time to move to decision making.

Decision Session

Discussion of Proposals

- The benefits and disadvantages of the proposal are sought. Members are encouraged to show their cards indicating their responses to each speaker. Minor changes to the wording of the proposal may occur. From time to time the Chairperson may ask for an indication of how people are feeling about the proposal.

Checking for Consensus

- When the Chairperson believes enough discussion has occurred, and it is time to seek consensus for the proposal at hand, he or she will restate the proposal so everyone is clear and then asks ‘Do we have consensus?’
- Cards are held up high clearly until the chair indicates the vote is taken. Waving them or holding them up for a brief second is not helpful.
- If all cards held up are the same colour, consensus is declared and recorded.
- If consensus is not reached the discussion continues. This process continues for as long as the Chairperson deems it helpful.

Sometimes the process stalls. After vigorous sharing of ideas, there may be strong but not unanimous support for the proposal. There may be some who are uneasy about a proposed way forward, yet not able to express 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 – but neither is it helpful to dig your heels in and be stubborn or rude over an issue.

Agreement

If, after careful attempts to work towards consensus, there remains 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?’

Having a yes to both questions enables the Chairperson to then ask:

- ‘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 there is no person indicating against these two questions, then agreement is recorded.

If after these steps have been followed, a small minority still cannot in all good conscience accept agreement; further steps must be followed. The Chairperson will ask:

- Does a decision need to be reached now?

If not, then the chair will defer it until the next meeting when all members have had further time to reflect.

Should the meeting agree that a decision must be made

The Chairperson must ask for permission to move to formal procedure.

Decision by formal majority

75% of the meeting must agree to move to formal procedures. The majority make the decision with it being recorded as carried by formal procedure.

A flowchart of the Consensus process is included within the Appendix.

DISCUSSION

- What do you like about Consensus?
- What do you struggle with?
- How effectively have you seen Consensus in action?
- Is it something your Church uses well?