

Considering consensus Is agreement possible?

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A large congregation debated long and vigorously about whether to use church funds to construct an addition to their building. Finally, after 70 percent of those assembled voted for the

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addition, one man who had been vocal in his opposition announced that he wanted to be the first to make a donation—of \$1,000—to the project. In response to others' astonishment, he said, "The community has made its wishes known, and I am willing to accede to it. My donation is a public act of standing with my community."

I suspect church leaders rarely encounter people willing to show such generosity of spirit when their views do not prevail. Although we pride ourselves on being people of

peace, Mennonites have hardly achieved perfect practice when it comes to dealing with contentious decisions.

In what follows, we will consider these questions: What models for decision making does our society practice, and what are their strengths and limitations? What goals do we as churches have for decision making, and what processes can help church leaders as they guide decision-making practices?

Three decision-making models

In the North American literature on group decision making, communication scholars describe three typical approaches.

Minority rule has been defined variously as decision making by experts, by a designated authority, or based on one's position in the hierarchy. Popular in many business organizations, this method is efficient and tends to support or reinforce an existing hierarchical structure. But recent management theory suggests that minor-

ity rule can produce organizations whose members have little ownership in decisions, little loyalty to the group, and little sense of power in the organization.

An episcopal polity centralizes decision making in a denominational hierarchy. The Catholic church provides a prime example of minority rule, with the pope and curia as the classic locus of authority. Despite this long tradition, the Catholic church has demonstrated some desire to increase lay participation in decision making. Sociologist William D'Antonio points to the Papal Birth Control Commission of the 1960s as an example of participatory decision making in the Catholic church; the commission included lay people, theologians, bishops, scientists, and philosophers.¹ Mennonites may sometimes use minority rule when, for example, decisions are made by bishops, conference authorities, pastors, elders, or church councils.

Majority rule, the second stance, is the model on which many political systems are now predicated. Not surprisingly, it is also a popular method for decision making in other forums, including some businesses and churches. One critical element in the success of this method is allowing adequate time for education and discussion prior to a vote. In such cases, majority rule—which may range from a simple majority of as little as 51 percent to a super majority—is most useful when issues are not especially important, the decision must be made quickly, and the commitment of all members to the final decision is not critical.

Especially in the absence of adequate information and conversation, majority rule has drawbacks. In many groups, it makes little room for the perspectives of the minority and provides little protection for their needs and feelings. Groups may move ahead too quickly, cutting off discussion to achieve a speedier solution. Management gurus describe the “Abilene Paradox”: the first person to speak up, or the loudest or most persuasive voice, rules the day and sways the vote, often leaving others with unspoken questions and concerns. This situation gives decision-making power to those who are extroverts, particularly articulate, or simply more aggressive in making their point. In all these circumstances, the group suffers under the tyranny of the majority.

On the other hand, when the group has enough time to understand the issues, and enough outlets for authentic discussion and

response, majority rule has its benefits. Research indicates that participation in decision making enhances psychological involvement and commitment to voluntary organizations and churches. In his analysis of decision making in six Southern Baptist churches, speech communication specialist Charles Conrad maintains that majority rule allows members to integrate religious and secular elements of their identities, and it aids in negotiating tensions within the church's theology and between that theology and the church's organizational structure.² In general, encouraging participation in the life and decision making of an organization promotes greater loyalty in its members and greater commitment to its overall goals.

Consensus is a third stance, defined here as a state of agreement in which all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed to the satisfaction of the group. The commentary on "Church Order and Unity" in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* explains that

*decision making by consensus is a way of coming to unity in the church (see Acts 15:22). Consensus means that the church has together sought for the unity of the Spirit. The church listens carefully to all voices, majority and minority. Consensus is reached when the church has come to one mind on the matter, or when those who dissent have indicated that they do not wish to stand in the way of a group decision. Consensus does not necessarily mean complete unanimity.*³

This form of decision making tends to produce better decisions, and like majority rule, it increases members' commitment and satisfaction. It is also likely to be time-consuming, difficult, and tension producing, as members seek to find unanimity or at least reach a decision they all can live with. These inherent difficulties expand exponentially as the group grows from few members to a large congregation or even a denomination. In spite of its drawbacks, consensus does provide outcomes advantageous to the whole group.

When I began studying decision-making processes, I was skeptical of the possibility of achieving consensus. I had rarely

seen it achieved, particularly in a larger group. But after considering the options, I have come to believe that, even when the outcome is not fully realized, the process suggested in the ideal of consensus is worth pursuing. In what follows we will consider four elements critical to this process.

Encouraging discussion

Listening “carefully to all voices, majority and minority” means providing a variety of outlets for education and response. These venues may include Sunday worship, guest lectures, Bible studies, Sunday school classes and small groups, gatherings for prayer, and congregational meetings. Not every parishioner is comfortable speaking in front of a large group. Some will talk more comfortably among those with whom they have deeper relationships of trust. And some will need time to ponder and write out their response. The group may want to establish clear ground rules for discussion (for example: treat others with respect, allow everyone to participate, withhold judgment while listening). The Mennonite Church USA’s document on “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” provides an excellent set of guidelines to help with this task.⁴

To increase mutual understanding, consider spending a portion of the discussion process in examining the diversity in your body of believers. One way of looking at differences would identify where members are along a traditionalism-communalism continuum. Sociologist Fred Kniss explains that “for Mennonites, traditionalism has meant stressing traditional moral and spiritual values, the importance of family, biblical and communal authority, and denial of individual interests in favor of the collectivity.”⁵ He describes communalism among Mennonites as “a concern for egalitarianism, social justice, pacifism, environmental conservation, mutual aid, and religious congregations as primary communities for their members.” Such differences may indicate divergent political views, varying hermeneutical traditions, and dissimilar understandings of one’s relationship to the larger culture.

A congregation had been without pastoral leadership for two years when their search process selected a husband-wife team as candidates. During the congregational meeting leading up to a vote, a vocal minority expressed concern that this couple’s cur-

rent church was a “welcoming congregation,” one that accepts gays and lesbians into membership. Although the pastors had not initiated the action to become a welcoming congregation, they had presided over the decision-making process in the congregation. This vocal minority would fall within the traditionalist camp. The majority of the congregation proved to be communalists: After a discussion that lasted nearly three hours, a 91 percent vote sealed the decision to invite the couple to become the congregation’s pastors. Before the new pastors assumed their responsibilities, several of those in the minority left to find a new church home.

A heterogeneous congregation in which members adhere strongly to opposing views is likely to face almost intractable problems in reaching consensus. One question to consider here is whether congregations are more likely to reach compromise or

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consensus on structural or fiscal issues (as in the example about the building addition), than on more abstract issues of culture, theology, morality, or ideology.

A second kind of diversity to consider is how members evaluate and prioritize different types of evidence for or against a position.

Sociologists John J. Nelson and Harry H. Hiller, in a study of fundamentalist churches, list three argumentation strategies unique to the religious context. They are (1) argument based on scripture, (2) appeal to the deity, and (3) reference to the general mission or role of the church in the world.⁶ I would also add a fourth strategy: (4) personal witness or prophecy. To what degree is each of these appeals considered legitimate within segments of the church? On what basis do people believe final decisions should be made? Unless leaders identify these differences in argumentation strategy, conflicts may persist, and opposing sides may not recognize, understand, or accept the basis of others’ appeals.

Investing a reasonable amount of time well

The amount of time a group spends on an issue should be determined by the issue’s weight, importance, and complexity. Because of the weight of religious-theological debate, discussions on these

matters may be drawn out for years. Unlike businesses, which must move quickly lest they grow stagnant and lose their competitive edge in a fast-paced marketplace, churches may drag out discussion almost endlessly. There should be a happy medium between these models. When an issue is taken up, congregational leaders should establish a schedule that identifies opportunities to participate and the ultimate decision deadline. A schedule is desirable because the average person in the pew is unlikely to sustain enthusiasm for debate longer than three or four months—six at most. And beyond an initial window of persuasion, attitudes are unlikely to change significantly.

I reached this conclusion after observing the Integration Exploration Committee from 1990 to 1995, as its members interacted with other church leaders and members, in the process leading up to the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church in the U.S. and Canada.⁷ When those involved had read the materials and asked a few questions, most were either uncertain about what was delaying the merger or they hoped they would die before it took place. I doubt that many minds changed after that initial period.

And even the most straightforward discussion, when carried on over a long period of time, becomes complex. The discussion of the structural merger of the two binational denominations was in process for at least twelve years. During that time, I saw the “garbage can theory of decision making” in action: when organizations make big decisions, a detritus of small issues gets thrown on top, complicating the issue, and making it messy. Unresolved theological issues surrounding women in ministry and membership standards, for example, were tossed into the hopper with the integration deliberations. Some argued that all of these issues should be worked out before a structural merger took place. Had those guiding the process agreed, the merger would have stalled indefinitely.

Determining a desired outcome

Next we consider the result we are seeking. When all are satisfied that their concerns have been heard and attended to, it is time to make a final decision. If leaders determine that consensus is possible and desirable, three vote options—agree, disagree, and

stand aside—should be clearly explained. Because the stand-aside option is rarely practiced, leaders should clarify that those who choose to stand aside are indicating that they do not concur with

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the decision but will not stand in the way of or try to subvert the group's moving forward with it.

If it seems unlikely that a true consensus will emerge, a majority vote may be in order. Although a politician may serve after being elected by a mere 51 percent of voters, a congregational decision that was opposed by 49 percent of the group is likely to be prob-

lematic. For each decision, or each type of decision, leaders should determine the extent of agreement that will allow the group to move ahead comfortably. A new pastor, for example, will surely function more effectively if he or she comes into the congregation with the support of at least 70 or 80 percent of the members.

Shaping empathic responses

Whether our decisions are made by consensus or by majority vote, how do we treat those who continue to disagree or have concerns?

In 1995 in Wichita, Kansas, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church voted to begin the formal process of merging into a single denomination. After twelve years of processing this decision, which was pursued with particular energy in the three years leading up to the vote, the two bodies, comprising 160,000 members, represented by more than 600 voting delegates, passed the motion by 84 and 86 percent, a higher percentage than many in church leadership had anticipated. Before they announced the results of the vote, leaders cautioned delegates and spectators to the convention, numbering more than 8,000, to remain prayerfully quiet, lest they show disrespect for the feelings of those who had opposed the merger. Because the denomination would not meet in such a sizable body for another two years, the majority supporting the historic change had no opportunity to celebrate, lest their joy be construed as a cry of victory.

At the time I resented being denied a chance to celebrate an accomplishment for which I and many others had invested long hours and significant work. My feelings about this “denial” have changed over the years, as I weigh the value of maintaining community over the momentary joy of “winning.” In competitive sports we cheer our side and jeer the losers; in the ongoing life of a community, all members’ psychological well-being and sense of belonging are to be prized.

In his study of Southern Baptist decision making, Charles Conrad points out this value:

At no time did any member suggest that the outcome of the vote reveals the moral superiority of one position or group of believers over the others. In fact, the act of voting seemed to be only the first step in a ritual which functions to protect the selves of the members of the losing group. Business meetings end in prayer; and business meetings in which voting terminated a politicization cycle ended in prayers which asked for God's guidance in implementing the decision in the event that the congregation had “mis-read” God's will.⁸

This action, Conrad argues, is critical, because simple “majority votes can readily undermine the sense of identity that the minority has gained through participating in decision-making.”⁹ He suggests that managing such tension with positive communication may even “compensate for any potential alienation from the ‘tyranny of the majority.’”¹⁰ I have come to appreciate this practice in organizations that seek a unity-focused practice over a competitive one.

Final reflections

Even when a group eventually accepts the compromise of a majority vote, the effort to seek consensus closely resembles the process of negotiation, defined as an interactive communication process by which two parties who lack identical interests attempt to coordinate their behavior and allocate scarce resources in a way that will make them better off than they could be if they were to act alone. This negotiation process has been modeled in

Mennonite initiatives such as the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (an alternative to the adversarial win-lose model enshrined in our legal system) and taught in the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Virginia) and elsewhere. As is true of seeking consensus in congregational or denominational decision making, such negotiation offers the hope that a clear process, which respects the interests and concerns of all parties, stands a greater chance of succeeding. And this process of negotiation is one that, like consensus, honors our Anabaptist history of nonresistance in all human relationships.

Notes

¹ William V. D'Antonio, "Autonomy and Democracy in an Autocratic Organization: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994): 379–96.

² Charles Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action in Church Decision Making," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no. 3 (1988): 345–62.

³ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 63.

⁴ "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love: Commitments in Times of Disagreement" is available in English or Spanish, in various formats, from Mennonite Publishing Network, 616 Walnut Avenue, Scottsdale, PA 15683; phone 724-887-8500 or toll free 1-800-245-7894.

⁵ Fred Kniss, "Ideas and Symbols as Resources in Intrareligious Conflict: The Case of American Mennonites," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1996): 7–25. See also Kniss's *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

⁶ John J. Nelson and Harry H. Hiller, "Norms of Verbalization and the Decision Making Process in Religious Organizations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, no. 2 (June 1981): 173–80.

⁷ See Kerry Strayer, "Structural Change and Cultural Continuity: The Movement toward Integration in Two Mennonite Denominations" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 1995).

⁸ Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action," 358.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 359.

About the author

Kerry Strayer teaches communication at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. Her dissertation focused on the merger between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. She began looking more broadly at Mennonite decision-making practices in preparation for a June 2006 conference evaluating the impact on the denomination of the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. She continues to collect narratives of individual, congregational, and denominational conflict and decision-making processes. To share your story, e-mail her at kstrayer@otterbein.edu.