

Consensus: what it is and why we use it at Assembly

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There are many ways for a group to make decisions. A group can vote (and require a simple or super majority for approval), it can use ranked choice voting, it can delegate the decision to a subset of the group, it can draw lots, it can seek consensus, ... There is no one best way. Each way of making decisions has advantages and disadvantages.

We at Assembly try to make most of our congregational decisions by consensus. That is not because it is God's preferred mode of decision-making. It too has advantages and disadvantages, and some would argue that the disadvantages of consensus get more pronounced the larger a group. But we've used consensus to-date because it has important advantages that other processes don't.

What consensus is. At its best, consensus decision-making is a process that involves a careful gathering of information and viewpoints, discussion, persuasion, and testing and adjusting proposals until we reach a decision everyone can agree on or live with.

Consensus is not about finding unanimity; it's not even about finding an outcome that everyone is happy with. Rather it's finding a way forward that everyone can live with. Or as the Assembly Handbook says, "Consensus is declared when everyone agrees that the decision is acceptable enough that they can support the group in choosing it."

In Quaker circles, where consensus has been practiced for hundreds of years, they would also say consensus is about seeking the will of God. It's not just our rigorous, intellectual search for the best proposal; rather, it's a holy gathering of obedient listeners looking for God's leading. We too try to bring our spirituality, our reliance on God's Spirit, into our discernment.

Advantages of consensus. There are a number of reasons why we use consensus as opposed to voting:

- At its best, consensus is generally better at avoiding a sense of winners and losers; in that it lessens the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed on them.
- Second, consensus often produces more creative and intelligent outcomes. Ideally, it allows for a proposal (or "idea fragment") to grow and change through our asking questions and listening to each other.
- Third, and perhaps most important, consensus seeks to hear and value every voice and perspective. In this process, we don't move forward until every voice that wants to speak is heard and considered.

Disadvantages of consensus decision-making:

- It takes a long time; it's slow; it's simply not a quick process.
- It is a process that can heavily favor those who are most articulate, and those who like to talk in large group settings. There are ways to minimize this disadvantage but it usually exists to some extent.
- To get the most out of consensus, you need a skilled and trained facilitator.
- It requires a high level of buy-in, patience, and maturity from participants (see below).

What consensus requires. Consensus decision-making asks a lot of us. It's a process that relies upon 1) people's willingness to participate in all (or most) of the discussions; 2) people's ability to listen deeply to others, and 3) people's openness to shift their perspective when appropriate.

Communities split when people are not willing to find a way forward amidst difference. Consensus decision-making offers a way to creatively address differences, but doing so takes a generous spirit, open to compromise.

For those who find themselves in the majority position of a discernment process, the consensus process specifically asks you to listen very attentively to the minority voices; and to ask non-defensive questions until you understand their perspectives and concerns. In addition to careful listening, consensus demands your patience; we try to move forward together or not at all. To rush a decision or push a proposal through simply because you have more people on your side is contrary to the way of consensus.

And to those who find themselves in what seems to be the minority position of a discernment process, consensus asks much of you too. It challenges you to seriously consider the emerging wisdom of the group; what does it mean that many people are sensing a different direction than you? Can you trust the group when it differs with what you want?

Testing for consensus. Part of this careful dance towards consensus involves testing where we're at along the way. We do that in a variety of ways.

Sometimes we invite processing in small groups, or use a survey, or ask participants to place themselves on a continuum (these steps particularly help us hear from those who aren't as comfortable speaking in a large group). And we also use the 5-finger method to test where we're at (see box).

Occasionally, people mistakenly refer to this 5-finger method as "voting." Again, there is nothing sinister about voting; voting is another way of making decisions that also has advantages and disadvantages. But what the 5-finger method tries to do is to get a sense of the meeting; to see if we've achieved a level of comfort with a proposal that allows us to move forward, or not. If we were voting, we'd simply reduce the response options to yes and no, take a vote, and announce the winner.

When we check for consensus in this way, there is room for a range of responses; not solely yes or no. One possible response is to indicate that while I'm not in favor of a proposal, I have been heard and am willing to stand aside, allowing the group to move forward.

Blocking consensus. The 5-finger test includes an option to indicate that one's concerns are so significant that they cannot in good conscience stand aside. If this option to block consensus is invoked, the decision is postponed (not killed), and the Leadership Group (LG) is tasked with exploring next steps. If the LG finds that the concern of one or a few cannot be resolved, then a possible next step listed in the Assembly Handbook is having the congregation make the decision by an 80% majority vote.

Blocking consensus is an aspect of consensus-building that one should rarely see if there has been good process for everyone to be heard. I'm always troubled when I hear that option invoked during a discussion, almost like a weapon. I sometimes hear variations of, "If this or that doesn't happen, I will block consensus." I wonder if that's what we'd say if we understood consensus as a spiritual discipline; as a discipline of careful listening to each other and to God's Spirit; and as a posture that is open to yielding to the group's wisdom rather than insisting on "my way." We rarely get exactly what we want in consensus, but hopefully we all get heard, have our perspective taken seriously, and, to the extent possible, have an opportunity to influence the shaping of the final decision.

5-finger testing for consensus

A facilitator clearly states the proposal and then asks members for a show of fingers.

5 = Unqualified, enthusiastic "yes."

4 = I can live with the decision. It's okay with me.

3 = I have concerns but will not block approval.

2 = I have major concerns and stand against approving the proposal (blocking).

1 = It's too soon to make any decision.

Needs more work/discussion.

Those showing 1, 2, or 3 fingers should be invited to help the group understand the problems they see with the proposal.