

Communal Discernment and Large Assemblies.

Excerpted and adapted from “Discernment and Decision-Making” by The Reverend Victoria Grace Curtiss of the Presbyterian Church.

Large Assemblies

Communal discernment processes can be used in large assemblies, but they will take a different form from that with smaller groups. A number of Christian bodies (including, e.g., some Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, some Roman Catholic orders and the Religious Society of Friends) have been using structured processes of communal discernment and recently, the World Council of Churches approved the use of a consensus-seeking process to make decisions.

What follows is one model, used for a number of years by General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia at its gathering of some two hundred seventy delegates.

The presentation of business followed a threefold pattern with an information session, a deliberative session, and a decision session.

1. Information Session

A proposal was presented, followed by questions for clarification or for further information. This session lasted until the presiding officer, the president, was satisfied that the group had asked all the questions it needed to ask.

2. Deliberative Session

Discussion on various viewpoints was encouraged. Each delegate was given an orange card to signify support and a blue card to signify opposition. Delegates showed these cards after each speech, which helped give those assembled and the president a sense of the mind of the assembly. This helped avoid repetitious speeches and assisted the movement toward consensus, as the group gauged levels of support for various ideas.

Sometimes, several amendments were proposed during the deliberation stage. If consensus on the amendments was apparent, they were incorporated into the original proposal. If larger or more complicated amendments were proposed, discussion on the issue stopped and the original presenters and the amendment presenters developed a common proposal to bring back to plenary.

3. Decision Session

Only minor changes to the proposal were allowed at this point. The benefits and limitations were discussed. The blue and orange cards were again used to indicate agreement or disagreement with the points made in the discussion. The president focused on both the process and the content. When the discussion seemed to have reached its conclusion, the president asked, “Do you believe we have reached consensus on this proposal?” If delegates raised a significant number of blue cards, discussion continued. If

only orange cards were raised, consensus had been reached. If a few blue cards were displayed, the delegates who raised them were encouraged to share their misgivings with the assembly. If they could be handled with a few word changes, consensus was still able to be reached.

If the objections continued, the president sought to bring the assembly to agreement. The president asked a series of questions of the assembly to ascertain whether those unable to support the proposal felt as if the majority had heard their views. They were also asked if they could live with the majority view and allow the assembly to record an agreement.

If opposition continued, the assembly had two choices. The first was to determine if the issue had to be decided at that point, which allowed the assembly the opportunity to revisit the issue at a later time. The second was to take a majority vote.

Concerns

With communal discernment, fewer decisions may flow from a particular meeting. Communal discernment processes can take longer than other modes of decision making, especially if they are new to participants. However, though the time of deliberation may take longer, the time for implementation will likely be shorter because of the collaboration and ownership gained while reaching consensus. Moreover, when a body uses only parliamentary procedure, it could spend more time arguing over an issue than in collaboratively finding common ground.

A concern is sometimes expressed that persons in the minority can either attempt to exercise veto power or be pressured to adopt the majority view. However, consensus is not the same as unanimity. Those with minority viewpoints can choose to:

- withdraw their concerns
- permit the decision to be made, with the intent to abide by the decision, and request that their concerns be recorded in the minutes
- state why they cannot support the decision at that time

The facilitator or group can determine whether it is best to resolve their concerns before proceeding, go ahead and proceed with the decision, or lay down the matter. When minorities feel their concerns have been heard, understood, and respected, their response is normally to allow the body to move ahead.

Some wonder if the prophetic voice of the church is likely to be muted by this approach. However, in an era of much violence in the world and political polarity in the United States, efforts toward collaborative decision-making are themselves prophetic. The encouragement of open discussion allows a greater diversity of views to be expressed, which can be a profound, prophetic expression. Also, the care taken to reach decisions promotes ownership and, thus, solidarity of the fellowship. Even if consensus is not reached, the reflection and enrichment can strengthen the voice and health of the body.

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