

Consensus Decision Making at UUC

We have chosen to make decision by consensus. This is a different way of operating than most people are used to, but we believe that it is an important way to confirm the dignity of each human being and to respect his/her views. We have also found that often the well founded objection of just one person has led to a rethinking of the decision at hand, resulting in a better outcome for the whole group.

This sheet is to help us understand how to operate using consensus, the responsibility of each individual, and finally how our bylaws deal with this topic.

What is consensus?

Consensus stresses cooperative development of a decision with group members working together rather than competing against each other. The goal of consensus is a decision that is consented to by all group members. Full consent does not mean that everyone is completely satisfied with the final decision – in fact total satisfaction is rare. The decision must be acceptable enough, however, that all will agree to support the group in choosing it. The emphasis in consensus decision-making is on listening to everyone's ideas and taking all concerns into consideration in an attempt to find the most universally acceptable decision possible at a particular time. Everyone's support is needed, so the softer voices that might be drowned out in a competitive situation of majority rules – whoever can get the most votes "wins" – are encouraged and attended to. Both feelings and logical arguments are treated as important. When a decision is not satisfactory to the group as a whole, even though a majority may favor it, new options are explored and often-creative solutions are discovered that would otherwise have been overlooked.

Argument and conflict do occur. In fact, conflict is an important element, which spurs people on to clearer thinking, better understanding, and greater creativity. Although a consensus group may experience intense and heated disagreement, behind the conflict is the assumption of cooperation. People are committed to working together to meet everyone's needs as best they can.

Process for Consensus

1. An agenda, a clear definition of the topic being discussed, and a clear statement of what has to be decided helps prepare the group for a discussion. We prefer to have a written statement of what needs to be decided.
2. The Moderator introduces the idea for discussion and other people in the group respond by agreeing, disagreeing, or modifying the statement of what needs to be decided. Each group member is responsible for keeping the discussion on topic, providing clarification, summarizing underlying agreements and differences in viewpoint, identifying new issues as they arise, ensuring all viewpoints are heard and understood, and attempting to find remedies to the disagreements. All group members share responsibility for the group's process, not just the Moderator.
3. When it is apparent that most viewpoints have been expressed, all new information given, the Moderator or anyone else states the conclusion toward which the group appears to be moving. When "testing for consensus," ask whether anyone has anything else important to say. It is important that all views and feelings have been expressed.

4. In making the decision, individuals respond by agreement or disagreement. The Moderator may ask if there are objections or if consensus has been reached. In addition to raising specific concerns, it is legitimate for someone to say, "I have no specific objections, but I don't feel settled on the subject yet." Concerns are expressed and discussion continues until a decision is endorsed by the meeting as a whole.
5. The Moderator announces we have come to consensus and states the decision. This is the time when anyone who is not in agreement, and does not want to go along with the decision is obliged to speak up and voice his or her concern. It is the responsibility of the individual to speak out.
6. If the group cannot agree, it is possible that the group does not have enough information and the decision needs to be deferred until more information can be gathered. Or, it may be that the timing is such that the decision needs to be made now, and those who are not comfortable with the decision may agree to go along with a decision they would not otherwise support. This kind of concession is sometimes made for the sake of the group, but a group should never pressure someone into doing so. Consensus takes patience.

A section of the By-laws

Article VI Congregational Meetings

Section 1. A Congregational Meeting shall be called by the Board upon request of Board members or upon receipt by the Board of a petition bearing the signatures of at least ten per-cent of the active Church membership. Only members of the Church shall have the privilege of participating in consensus decision-making at Congregational Meetings.

Statement of Policy

Section 2 Believing that decisions made by the entire congregation are superior decisions, meeting will be conducted by the Moderator of the Board of Stewards or Committee Chairs and decisions will be made by consensus. Four scenarios are possible:

- All agree and consensus is reached.
- All but a few agree, but the few agree to step aside and let the will of the group prevail. Consensus is reached.
- All but a few agree and those few won't step aside and let the will of the group prevail, causing further discussion of the issue.
- In those situations where consensus is not reached through discussion and the progress of the organization is significantly impeded, a vote taken under the following guidelines will be considered to represent consensus.
 - At least three appropriately called meetings must be held in which members discuss the issue at hand.
 - At the third meeting, 85% of the members in attendance must agree to take a vote.
 - If a vote is taken, a majority of 85% will be required to express the will of the members.