

A Primer on Consensus

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Presented to Madison Mennonite on October 4, 2024

Consensus

- CAN promote inclusivity
- CAN be more egalitarian and less patriarchal
- CAN encourage a collaborative spirit
- CAN foster the emergence of unanticipated, better solutions
- CAN offer an alternative to avoiding issues for fear of stirring up trouble
- CAN demonstrate the belief that everyone's voice is important
- CAN show that the people in the room are more important than the decision

Consensus, also,

- CAN be exclusive
- CAN promote inequality and patriarchy, privilege longstanding voices
- CAN encourage a divisive spirit
- CAN disable responsiveness to the Spirit
- CAN disable better solutions to pacify a few
- CAN radically protect status quo and disable change
- CAN marginalize new voices, voices of people from marginalized communities, introverted voices, voices of people desiring change, and time-bound participants (i.e. families with kids, people who work certain schedules)
- CAN help us pretend our community doesn't have politics or power dynamics while perpetuating them
- CAN center the people in the room over everything else
- CAN privilege previous decision-makers over current decision-makers
- CAN delay or slow decisions in ways that marginalize members of our community
- CAN make us feel entitled to provide input on all things

What surprises you about the also list? Do any of items from the also list not make sense? When have you experienced the also list items when doing consensus? What makes you most uncomfortable about consensus decision making? What have you heard makes others uncomfortable about consensus? Are there folks who regularly don't participate? Have you asked them why?

With or without consensus: unhealthy communities make unhealthy choices in unhealthy ways. (Melissa Florer-Bixler)

Consensus is a skillset and it's difficult. There are lots of tools that we can use. Today, I'm going to talk about the green, yellow, and red card process.

- Provides a visual, real-time representation of where people are.

- **Red card:** I am really concerned about this decision. I need to learn more to move forward with this proposed decision. I'm concerned this decision does not align with our community values and, as of now, don't support it.
- **Yellow card:** I have questions and I want to learn more to move towards green. I have some concern this decision doesn't sufficiently align with our community values and will support it.
- **Green card:** Full agreement. I love this and am excited to move forward.
- Generally, we start with red card holders asking questions and stating concerns and then follow similarly with the yellow cards. We work to make space for others to speak before speaking again.

It takes work individually and as a group to "do consensus well."

What questions do you have about using the cards?

Moderators guide congregational meetings in a manner consistent with our commitment to making decisions by consensus. Moderators work with church leadership to understand the goals of our congregational meetings, then help the community have structured dialogue for the purpose of discerning the Spirit and the best path forward for the church.

The role of moderators and church leadership is to help us find unity, encourage healthy discussion, and to bring us into unity as to God's direction for our community.

We empower the moderator to:

- Listen to God with us and to hear how God is at work in our discussion.
- Take the temperature and assess next steps in real time including closing discussions, calling for consensus before all things feel resolved, and tabling and rescheduling discussions.
- Manage time. Ensure we don't go overtime. It's ok to end early, but not to end late.
- Reflectively listen.
- Seek all voices.
- Moderate dominant voices. Limit the amount of time individuals speak.
- End discussions.
- Guide us when we get off-track.
- Observe and respond to power dynamics.
- Invite us to listen to God and one another more deeply.
- Invite us to release our hoped-for outcomes and to open ourselves.

Pairs and then together: Does anything surprise you about the role of the moderator? Does anything about it make you uncomfortable? Does anything about it give you reassurance? How do we actively give permission to our moderator to guide us?

Decision-makers:

- Listen to the moderator and assume they want what's best for our community.

- Listen well to one another.
- Assume those who want different decisions also want what's best for our community.
- Welcome feedback on how we can participate better.
- Step into discomfort—speak up if that's normally difficult, speak less if speaking comes easily.
- Weigh in sparingly.
- Trust those closest to a decision to understand it better than ourselves.
- Release the outcomes we hope for and open ourselves to alternatives.
- Seek to recognize the cost of decisions and to what extent each person bears the cost.
- Seek to recognize the cost of delay and non-decision and to what extent each person bears the cost.
- Seek to recognize our own power and the ways that power dynamics are affecting the process.
- Seek to understand and honor the process.
- Seek to teach and make space for newcomers less familiar with the decision-making process.
- Trust others to make decisions without us that are both the best and not the decision we would have made.
- Block consensus sparingly.
- Seek awareness of our internal feelings, fears, and insecurities.
- Embrace what is gained. Mourn what is lost.

What else would you add to this list?

In small groups/pairs: Which of these responsibilities is most difficult for you personally? Which of these responsibilities is most important to you that we practice together? What makes you most uncomfortable about making decisions together?

Be fast to try new things, experiment and learn. Be slower to make long-term or permanent decisions.

The less permanent the decision the fewer people who need to be involved in deciding it.