



Resources for Module 1: Building Support for Consensus Based Discernment

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Lesson 1: Why change is needed

Why we need change: A template for an article or letter

Use this template to make the case for change in your particular context

1. An article for a denominational journal, blog post or to start a local conversation

The Emperor has no clothes – or why Roberts' Rules of Order must go

Perhaps you have heard the story about the emperor who had so much vanity that he had to be the best dressed person in the city. One day a man came to him and offered to create for him the most dazzling collection of clothes anyone had ever seen. All it required was the provision of gold and jewels and he would weave a magic cloth that would dazzle everyone with its beauty. However only the most wise, loyal and faithful subjects would be able to see its beauty.

The trickster deceived the emperor and the gold was provided. At the first fitting of the robes the emperor could not see any cloth but was determined not to look foolish. So he praised the man and paraded in front of his servants – none of whom wanted to appear disloyal. So they too pretended that the clothes were the finest they had ever seen.

Eventually the day came when the emperor went to show off his magnificent clothes to the whole kingdom. Decked out only in his underwear, and clothes made of his magic cloth, the emperor strode into the street. Everyone knew the story about who could not see the clothes so they heaped praise and cheers upon the emperor. Until a little child shouted out "The emperor has no clothes!!!" Once the fiction was named everyone admitted what they already knew – the emperor has no clothes. All is not what it pretended to be. The deception could only continue until someone named the truth.

It is time to shout out the truth about the way our church does business. The parliamentary processes (also known as Roberts' Rules of Order) are a sham, a fake, when it comes to being able to discern the will of Christ for his church. The rules we use demand loyalty, pretend they are something wonderful - they are not! Those who disagree with using parliamentary processes for discernment in the church are accused of disloyalty or stupidity. It is neither – it is truth telling!

Why we need to change the way we make decisions

- The current rules are confusing and disempowering
- Churches are experiencing growing incivility among members
- People leave the church and outsiders are appalled at Christian behavior
- People don't want to be involved in decision-making meetings
- Traditional meeting procedures aren't acceptable to many people today
- The current rules are confusing and disempowering
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A process in the church that leads to harm to its members, a negative witness to the community and does not result in faithful decisions has to be rejected. Some of the symptoms that we have to change include:

The Problem with Parliamentary Procedures

Roberts' Rules of Order work against the goal of fostering and building Christian community. They were designed to copy what happens in parliament. We know how well that is going at the moment! Division, hyper partisanship, abuse and denigration of opponents are the normal thing. Do we really want to encourage that in our church?

The reasons for the problems with the parliamentary approach are easy to see.

- It cares little for church values - it's about decisions not community.
- Parliamentary rules are really about how to fight fair. It's about movers and seconders who fight for their cause.
- So the rules are combative in their character and oppositional in their values.
- It privileges certain people - usually educated and clergy at the expense of hearing the voices of women, young people, lay people, migrant communities, minorities, etc.
- It forces the discussion into a framework of a "yes" and "no" choice.
- It creates winners and losers. This limits the range of possible outcomes.
- The rules are complex and confusing
- Decisions are made by a simple majority, which can lead to many people feeling like "losers". This creates pastoral issues in the church, and often means that the same issues keep returning again and again.

There is an alternative to Roberts' Rules of Order

Around the world churches, and community groups, are rejecting the old, unfruitful ways. Instead they are using consensus-building approaches in their decision-making. The World Council of Churches and the World Communion of Reformed Churches use consensus discernment in their meetings. The World Methodist Council is learning about it for possible use in its meetings. Individual churches around the world have the experience and the tools to make healthy, community building, effective decision-making in the church. Websites like makingchurchdecisions.com have many stories and ideas that work.

Conclusion

The present way of making decisions isn't working for most people and the witness of the church is compromised. Roberts' Rules are out of date and it is time for a new way.

Can we agree that it is time to say that the Emperor has no clothes? Can we admit that the way we do discernment in the church is broken and it's time to fix it?

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2. A draft letter to encourage a rethink about the way business is done in the church

Dear NNN,

I am writing to you in my role as a member of the Church Board / District / Presbytery / NNN to share with you my concerns about what I have seen happening in our meetings. I do not think that we are treating each other well enough; or behaving in ways that are likely to make faithful discernment possible.

These are some of the things that concern me. (Write specific examples. Use the general points below as a guide to what you see is wrong.)

I believe these problems arise because we use parliamentary rules. We need ways of discussion and discernment that better express and support Christian values and decision-making.

The problems with our standing orders for meetings include:

My request is that we set time aside in a meeting to discuss whether our standing orders are helping us or not. I recommend a guided and careful process of conversation so that all the issues can get on the table. I am prepared to move a motion to that effect, and prepare a paper for the meeting.

Discussion on the alternatives can wait for a later time. However I want us to set time aside to discuss if the way we do discernment is broken and it's time to fix it.

I am not alone in my view that it is time for a change. Stories from around the world point to the desire for a more healthy, creative and uplifting way to "do our business". The World Council of Churches and the World Communion of Reformed Churches have recognized this in their move to use consensus discernment in their meetings. Websites like makingchurchdecisions.com have many stories and ideas that work.

I look forward to working with you to put in place a constructive way to have this conversation.

Yours etc,

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Support for Consensus Based Discernment

Lesson 2: The values in a consensus Discernment Process

A checklist to assess your meetings

Measure if your meetings express the values of consensus discernment.

A Checklist for Christian Values and Count Theological Foundations

Rooted in Christian Values

Values and understanding	Never	Sometimes	Always
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Our meetings are places where we are:

Honest about what is important

Encouraging and seeking collaboration

Celebrating God's gift of diversity

Humble, open to change and new ideas

Respect everyone

Theological Foundations

In our group we understand that Discernment

Requires the contribution of all participants

Is an exercise in discipleship

Is a spiritual exercise

How do you rate your group?

Very Good

Good but room of improvement

Unsatisfactory

Three things I can do to improve our Group's performance:

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Lesson 3: How to change to Discernment

A resource to support you making changes in your context.

Develop a roadmap for how to bring about change.

A framework for an action plan to bring about change

Change does not happen in the same way for every group. Each organization has its own level of openness to change; different entry points / levers that create opportunities for change; varying resources and people that can support change.

This worksheet provides you with some starting points for how you can develop a strategic plan for change in a variety of areas. Some can be stand alone activities. Some will join together to be part of a larger framework / action plan and so the separate parts will need to be developed into an over arching work plan.

A number of worksheets are provided for a variety of projects. They can be adapted for projects for which a template is not provided.

Worksheet #1B: educating others about consensus discernment

1. What do I think it will be helpful for people to know about consensus?
2. Which group(s) / individuals do I have access to that might be most receptive? (Note: you will need to prepare a separate worksheet for each group.)
3. What methods can I use to introduce and teach about consensus discernment? For example: articles, sermons, Bible studies, hold conversations, raise ideas, Choose approaches that are relevant for each group.
4. By what date will I deliver these learning opportunities?

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Worksheet 2: Introducing consensus discernment to business meetings

Who are the people that I need to work with so that there is support for the proposals that I bring forward?

How will I go about raising the discussion with people that I need to get on side? What are the steps in that process?

Which levers can be used to start the conversation / make changes? For example: teaching opportunities, introduce elements of this process, conduct a performance review of the meetings from a values and effectiveness perspective, use case studies or critical incident reviews, etc.

By when will I "pull the levers" so my meetings have the opportunity to consider the limitations of the present approach and the possibilities of consensus?

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Lesson 4: How to prepare people to be good at Discernment

A disciple formation Bible study

This study may be used with a regular Bible Study group or one gathered for this issue. Make use of your leadership skills to ensure that the setting is appropriate eg seating, resources are prepared, people are welcomed and that the group commences its Bible Study in a way that is appropriate to what they normally experience.

It is recommended that this material be provided in the form of a handout. This worksheet can then be used to assist the discussion by keeping the questions in front of people, providing a copy of key information and the Bible passage, and also be a place to make notes.

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A Bible Study on Discernment

Gathering and Welcome (5 minutes)

Greeting, introduction to the people and session, opening actions, eg prayer.

Reflection on our experience (20 minutes)

This Bible study is on how Christians discern Christ's will for their life. We all have experience of this subject – as individuals and as groups of Christians making decisions in the church. (Depending on the size of the group and how well the people know each other this step may commence in smaller groups of 3 or 4. If sharing starts in smaller groups allow about 7-10 minutes for sharing in the larger group before moving on to the next step.)

Think back to a time when you were confident that God was leading you in a particular decision that you had to make.

- What was that issue?
- Why were you confident God was leading you?
- What steps did you go through as you sought Christ's will for you?
- What things did you take into account / weigh up as you tried to discern Christ's will for you?

Input (10 minutes)

(a) A Christian tradition

The Methodist tradition teaches that there are four things to take into account when trying to work out what God wants for our lives. This schema is named after the founder of Methodism – John Wesley – and is called the Wesley Quadrilateral.

The four considerations that Wesley says should inform our discernment are:

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- **Scripture** – the centrality of Scripture for what is normative in the Christian life and faith is affirmed. Wesley understood that the use of Scripture is more than “proof texts” or finding Bible verses that seem to speak to the issue at hand. Individual texts need to be read in their context – genre, culture, location in the Scriptures, etc. The great themes of the Bible also shape the way in which specific texts are interpreted.
- **Tradition** – we are not the first Christians to reflect upon the big issues of faith. Biblical interpretation does not happen in a vacuum but rather our views are shaped by what we have been taught through our family, local church and denomination. The received theology of a church is one of the main ways in which Christians are shaped by their tradition. John Wesley also understood that taking tradition into account meant the need to consider the views of other denominations and the views of the historic church. Tradition is personal, historic and ecumenical.
- **Experience** – the Christian faith is incarnational and as such it takes reality seriously. Our experience informs our discernment because faith and life work together to make it possible to be a disciple. Sometimes our experience in life invites (or challenge us) to think afresh about what we thought we knew about God and God's ways in the world.
- **Reason** – reading the Bible, attending to the tradition / theological reflection, and reflecting on experience need us to use our minds. Notwithstanding that God can do far more than we can ever imagine faith with understanding is the norm. Reason helps us to bring the various parts in the Wesley Quadrilateral together and makes discernment possible. At the end of the day we need to make a judgment about what God wants for us; and reason helps us to do that.

Reflection on our experience (20 minutes)

- Thinking back on your experience, which of these four elements in discernment influence you the most? Why?
- What is positive for you about the idea of including all four parts of the Wesley Quadrilateral – Scripture, tradition, experience and reason?
- Does anything concern you about including Scripture, tradition, experience and reason as part of the way in which Christians discern God's will?

Input (10 minutes)

(b) The Bible - Acts 15

Read the passage from Act 15 and identify which parts of the Wesley Quadrilateral are in use. Mark Scripture references with “S”, tradition with “T”, experience with “E” and reason with “R”.

The Council at Jerusalem

15 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." **2** This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. **3** The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. **4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. **7** After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. **8** God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. **9** He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. **10** Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? **11** No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. **13** When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. **14** Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. **15** The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

16 "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, **17** that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' **18** things known from long ago.

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. **20** Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. **21** For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

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22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers.²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings. ...

Reflection (20 minutes)

Share which parts have been marked with S, T, E and R.

- Discuss any surprises, discoveries, or questions that come to you from doing this exercise.
- Does this study challenge you to make changes to the way that you as an individual, or the church as a group, should go about discerning God's will? If you are comfortable share your response.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

End by thanking people for their sharing and with an appropriate prayer.

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Lesson 5: Overcoming Objections

A cheat sheet of answers to objections about Discernment

A resource to help you respond to objections

Objections	Response
The process takes too much time	<p>It is time well spent affirming the value of people, generating more options, behaving like Christians and building ownership of the final decision.</p> <p>Complex business takes time. Consensus discernment can be quicker for more complex business.</p>
It's messy and confusing	<p><i>Robert's Rules of Order</i> is confusing and can seem out of control. Emotions are important ways of sharing. They should be listened to and taken seriously.</p>
The debate gets dumbed down. Emotions not logic take over	<p>Insight and wisdom comes from more than just the thinking part of the brain. Emotions help people to express themselves and can make insight possible. Reasoning is still part of the process but respect is given to other ways of sharing and exploring issues.</p>
Consensus leads to the lowest common denominator decision	<p>Consensus here is thinking about the way a decision is made – unanimously. But we can build towards consensus even if 100% agreement isn't found. The process builds on, adds to, where there is agreement; not trading off preferences to reach compromise.</p>

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The church will lose its prophetic voice

Careful discussion can grow support on contentious issues. People who have been heard can be willing to stand aside and defer to the group. There is no proof that the church is more prophetic with a 50%+1 vote.

A small group can impose a veto

All consensus processes have mechanisms that make it possible to move on even if there is a small minority that are not in agreement. The important thing is that these people are heard first.

Can we trust the process?

Trust is important for any process to work. Transparency, honesty, clear and good information at every stage will build confidence and trust.

There is nothing wrong

Share some stories of where people have been excluded or hurt or where decisions haven't been put into effect because of the current processes.

Fear of change

Remind people of the similarities between the old and the new: words of a proposal, a rationale presented, discussion of ideas, use of small groups. But also affirm the difference in values – inclusion, reflecting Christian values, etc. It isn't all discontinuity!

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