



God, in your grace,
transform the world

World Council of Churches
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Doing business by consensus

The 9th Assembly will be the first in World Council of Churches' (WCC) history in which business will be conducted by consensus rather than by parliamentary procedure. With over 720 delegates representing 348 churches from more than 110 countries who will deliberate in six languages, the WCC Assembly is perhaps the largest and most diverse gathering to adopt consensus decision-making.

Why did the WCC change the way it conducts meetings?

The change in style of WCC decision-making came as a recommendation from the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, which was then approved by the WCC central committee in 2002..

The Special Commission was established by the Harare Assembly in 1998 to address grievances expressed primarily by Orthodox churches about elements of the structure, style and ethos of the WCC. Concerns included how items came on to the agenda of WCC governing bodies, how churches in minority positions could voice opinions, and how the Council adopted social and ethical positions.

Such concerns were gradually replaced by positive attempts to find a decision-making style more representative of the membership and ethos of the WCC. The parliamentary style adopted by the WCC when it was founded in 1948 was very familiar to most of the Protestant North American and European churches which joined the WCC at that time. However, over the years, the membership of the WCC has expanded to include many churches which use different forms of decision-making and find parliamentary procedures complicated and confrontational.

In addition, many felt that an ecumenical body whose primary purpose is "to call one another to visible unity" should have a decision-making process that better reflected its basis. It was noted that while parliamentary procedures focus on decisions and therefore follow a political logic, consensus procedures seek to build a common mind and therefore have a spiritual dimension that suits better the nature and purpose of a fellowship of churches.

What does "consensus" mean?

Consensus as a decision-making process for the WCC is defined as "seeking the common mind of the meeting without resort to a formal vote" through a process of "genuine dialogue that is respectful, mutually supportive and empowering, whilst prayerfully seeking to discern God's will".

A consensus decision means there is "agreement about the outcome of a discussion". This occurs when:

- a) all delegates are in agreement (unanimity); or
- b) most are in agreement, and those who disagree are satisfied that the discussion has been both full and fair, and agree that the proposal expresses the general mind of the meeting.

Where did the idea of consensus decision-making come from?

The experiences of the Religious Society of Friends, the Uniting Church in Australia, the United Church of Canada, and some Orthodox churches, with consensus decision-making, as well as the cultural roots of African and Indigenous peoples, led to its consideration by the Special Commission and helped to develop its application to the WCC. The specific procedures for conducting business by consensus, however, had to be adapted for a global, ecumenical context such as that which prevails within the WCC.

How does it work?

The most visible sign of the new procedures are the blue and orange cards held by delegates. An orange card held discreetly at chest level indicates to the moderator that there is warmth towards a speaker's opinion or proposal. A blue card held the same way indicates coolness. Both cards crossed in front of the chest indicate a feeling that prolonging debate on a particular point or proposal is not helpful. The moderator reports the sense of the meeting, helping delegates to recognize the areas of agreement and the areas needing further deliberation.

Path to Consensus

1998: The Harare Assembly establishes a Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches.

2001: The Special Commission's interim report is presented in February at the central committee meeting in Potsdam, Germany.

2001: In November, a plenary meeting of the Special Commission held in Hungary identifies "consensus" as "the appropriate decision-making method for WCC governing bodies".

2002: The Final Report of the Special Commission is presented at the central committee. Following the report's proposal the latter recommends that the Council move to a consensus method of decision-making.

2003-2004: Churches and individuals experienced in consensus decision-making are consulted in developing a draft of procedures for the WCC. These are circulated to member churches and central committee members. The draft rule is revised based on the comments received.

2005: The revised rule on the conduct of meetings is proposed and tested throughout the central committee meeting in February. Central committee members adopt this new rule on the final day of the meeting to apply to all WCC meetings.

2005: WCC officers and moderators of Assembly committees undergo a three-day training session on the new consensus procedures in December in order to equip them for their role at the Assembly.

Less noticeable elements include the careful preparation of agendas to ensure that each item is approached in a way best suited for reaching consensus. For instance, a particularly controversial item could be referred first to a small working group before a proposal is brought to the floor for discussion. Much of the business should reflect consultation with member churches and committee work, so that the proposal is already a product of dialogue. Sessions are designated so that participants know when they are for information, for dialogue, or for decision-making.

If a consensus cannot be reached, a number of options are available. The disputed issue can be adjourned or referred to a smaller working group. The meeting can pause for reflection by observing a moment of silence or prayer. The different points of view can be recorded. Or delegates can record that a consensus of opinion was not possible at that point.

Moving to consensus decision-making has also generated criticism. Concerns have been raised, including:

Business will be slowed down, and meetings will not be able to deal with urgent concerns.

Moderators of sessions have been trained in consensus procedures. Such training, and the testing of the process Consensus decision-making may require fewer items on the agenda to allow more time for discussion. Those with experience in consensus decision-making indicate that while the process requires more preparation and discussion, once a matter is decided, it is more quickly implemented.

Other provisions have been put into place to prevent a "paralysis" of business. For example, if consensus cannot be reached, but participants feel that the urgency of business requires moving forward, a business item can shift to a vote if 85 percent of them approve. Some items, such as elections, finances, and constitutional changes, will still always be done by vote.

A few people - or even just one could prevent a decision from being made.

The experience of others has shown that attempts by one or two dissenters to stop a decision are extremely unlikely if the process is fair and allows all to be heard. Thus, even if a few delegates could disapprove the decision, they would not hold up the overwhelming majority. Procedures also allow the option of recording dissenting opinions, or, in extreme cases, moving the decision to a vote.

The prophetic voice of the WCC will be stifled if it is limited to only what all members can say together.

It could be true that the WCC would not be able to adopt quick controversial positions. Others counter this concern by arguing that when decisions are made with the full support of the fellowship of churches, the weight of the agreement and the ease with which they can then be implemented make a far greater impact than a decision reached by simple majority.

Some also hope that the change in procedures will allow even more controversial issues to come on to the agenda of the WCC because they protect dialogue without pushing for a decision, such as the discussion on human sexuality, held at the February 2005 central committee meeting.

The WCC is the most diverse Christian gathering in the world. How can one expect all to agree?

The fundamental postulate of the WCC is that, despite all their divisions and differences, churches are bound together by their faith in Jesus Christ. Thus in many ways, consensus-building has been in place since before the WCC was officially formed. For example, the Faith and Order movement has depended on patient dialogue and conversation on theological and ecclesiological points until agreements can be accepted by all those involved. Such processes can be long, but also break important new ground, such as the work on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, that has had a profound impact on the practices of many churches around the world.

In addition, many WCC committees have essentially used a consensus decision-making style before, although in an informal way. In particular, when dealing with public issues, the practice has been that key affected constituencies would have been consulted by the time a draft statement reached the floor of a central committee meeting.

This experience, along with that of other churches, makes many people optimistic about the possibilities for consensus decision-making in WCC governing bodies. The new central committee to be elected at the Assembly will take stock of the experience with the new model in Porto Alegre and will consider the issue again at its first full-length meeting in August-September 2006.

This material is intended as background information for media and does not necessarily reflect WCC policy. Media contact: media@wcc-coe.org +41-79-507-6363

For further information:

Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC
<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/whol/special-01-e.html>

Final Report of the Special Commission
 WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp. 69-103
<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/policy-documents/special-commission.html>

Guidelines for the conduct of meetings of the WCC
 WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp. 23-39
<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/policy-documents/conduct-of-meetings.html>

New rule on Conduct of meetings (Rule XX)
 WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp. 61-68
<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/policy-documents/constitution-and-rules.html>

Resource Persons:

- **Eden Grace**, Religious Society of Friends, USA
- **Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood**, Uniting Church in Australia
- **Mrs Anne Glynn-Mackoul**, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, USA
- **Dr Janice Love**, United Methodist Church, USA
- **Dr Jill Tabart**, Uniting Church in Australia