

# Decision-making at Assembly

Assembly seeks to know and do God's will through communal discernment. We make most congregational decisions by consensus.

We seek consensus through prayerful openness, respectful listening, a willingness to speak one's view, and taking the time needed to hear each other and the Holy Spirit. Taking the time needed means we usually bring a proposal to at least two congregation meetings for discussion before testing for consensus. Consensus does not mean we must all agree. Rather it means we decide on something that everyone can live with. If a decision cannot be made by seeking consensus, the Leadership Group may establish a different decision-making approach (including seeking approval by an 80% majority vote of resident members).

Small groups and congregational meetings are integral to this discernment. All attendees are welcome to participate in small group discussions and congregational meetings; however, only resident, covenanted members make congregational decisions.

Members who choose to not attend meetings signal their willingness to abide by the decisions of the group.

Not all decisions come to the congregation. The Leadership Group has authority for leading us, identifying decisions that need to be made, and determining the approach to be used. Individuals, small groups, and ministry teams can propose issues for discernment to the Leadership Group.

Summary from Assembly Handbook, Sept. 2012

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## Further information on Decision-making at Assembly

At Assembly, there are many parts that impact decision-making. They include committees, small groups, pastors, staff, elders, small group reps, and those who participate in congregational meetings. What we don't have is a neat and tidy flowchart, a hierarchy, or a one-size-fits-all diagram that regulates the role of each of these parts.<sup>1</sup> Rather we are guided by some key principles when it comes to decision-making.

- 1) We're a participatory congregation.
  - a. This means there is no clear chain of command. So if you're into hierarchy, clear rules, and efficiency; AMC will endlessly frustrate you.
  - b. It also means there is an assumption that all participants will have the opportunity to speak into most issues *of consequence* that come to the congregation.
- 2) We make decisions by consensus.
  - a. This means (in part) that we seek to make mutually acceptable decisions through a process of gathering information, listening to various viewpoints, engaging in respectful persuasion, and prayer.
  - b. In other words, we have a lot of conversations, we welcome a variety of voices, and we test to see if the Spirit is leading us to a widely accepted decision. We don't vote.
- 3) The Leadership Group (LG) is tasked with determining what process is needed for a given issue.
  - a. This is one of LG's key functions. The LG is the guardian of good process.
  - b. Assembly's growth and the greater complexity which comes with growth has made this more difficult; in part because it has resulted in some evolution of understanding about what matters are consequential enough to come to the congregation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We tried to make such a chart 5-10 years ago; we gave up in frustration.

<sup>2</sup> A decade ago I noted the emerging tension in Assembly between the "process everything at congregational meeting" crowd and the growing "don't bother us with so many decision; that's why we have a leadership group" crowd. Then and now, the LG tries to walk the fine line between those two polarities, rarely satisfying people at either ends.

### The 5-finger test for consensus

A facilitator clearly states the proposal and then asks members for a show of fingers.

5 = *Unqualified, enthusiastic "yes."*

4 = *I can live with the decision. It's okay with me.*

3 = *I have concerns or am not ready to support, but will not block/delay approval.*

2 = *It's too soon to make any decision. Needs more work/discussion/time (delays testing for consensus until future meeting).*

1 = *I have major concerns and stand against approving the proposal (blocks approval at this meeting).*

Those showing 1, 2, or 3 fingers should be asked to help the group understand the problems they see with the proposal.

- c. But we have a variety of resources we can utilize in any given discernment process. There are committees, small groups, small group reps, ad hoc groups, staff, and LG discussion as one representative body of the congregation. ∴ Decision-making is often a multi-faceted and dynamic process.
- d. Which process we use can be informed by asking the following questions:
  - i. How widespread is the interest and the impact of a particular issue?
  - ii. (Or similarly) How potentially controversial is it?
  - iii. Are there others who are already empowered to make this decision?
    1. For example, CE can decide curriculum, classrooms, etc; Worship Committee can decide # of hymnals, worship themes, etc.

In the end, what often happens is that:

- Decisions about new policies or proposals for a new congregational direction come to the congregation for discernment;
- Matters squarely in the purview of committees or staff go there;
- Some matters get decided by the LG. These include issues that are too time-sensitive for a wider-process; that lack sufficient congregational interest to bring to a congregational meeting; or that have been entrusted to the LG to decide (e.g. forming ad hoc committees). The LG also occasionally makes *recommendations* on matters that go to the congregation or elsewhere for decision-making.
- Gray areas come when there is overlap (e.g. budget) or lack of clarity (e.g. new worship pattern; solar panels vs furnace)

Karl Shelly, LG Retreat, 2020