

Consensus

The following section describes the way consensus runs at Live Oak UU Church.

The Live Oak UU Church is, to the best of our knowledge, the first Unitarian Universalist Church to be founded on the premise that all decisions would be made using a consensus decision-making process. This chapter explores why we have this commitment to consensus, and how consensus works in our organization.

Why Consensus

We adopted the consensus model very early in the organization of Live Oak, at a steering committee of Feb. 26, 1994, although the idea had been discussed before that. One of our important goals was the creation of a church with shared leadership. Several organizing members were active in various women's groups that used consensus. They explained the process, and it seemed a natural fit with the goal of shared leadership.

In a nutshell, we believe consensus is important because it says that our commitment to each other is more important than any particular decision. Consensus says that how we reach decisions is at least as important as the decisions that we reach.

The Goals of Consensus

The most important goal of consensus is to make each member of the community feel that his or her opinion is important to the group. Ideally, we also try to achieve a decision that all members of the community support. Where that is not feasible, we consider it an acceptable alternative to achieve a decision that most members support, and that none strongly oppose (and even those that are not in favor, at least feel that they have been heard).

The Consensus Process

For the purpose of this discussion, we will use these definitions of terms:

The Proposer: The person presenting a proposal for the group decision.

The Proposal: A proposal that is being brought to the group for a decision.

The Facilitator: The person responsible for facilitating the consensus process. The president often performs this role for the Steering Committee. Committee chairs typically act as the facilitator for their committees. It is inappropriate for the facilitator to have a direct interest in the proposal. In that case, the group should appoint an alternative facilitator.

The Group: The group responsible for making the decision. This could be the Steering Committee or a church committee.

The Consensus Process can be divided into five distinct time periods. Let's go through them.

The Pre-Proposal: The pre-proposal phase occurs before the proposer actually brings the proposal to the meeting. During this phase, the proposer should discuss the proposal with as many individuals of the group as possible, especially those individuals who are most likely to have issues with the proposal. Email discussions, lunch discussions, draft copies of the proposal are all avenues that should be fully explored in this phase. If the pre-proposal phase is well executed, the actual decision process is often a speedy formality.

The Proposal: The proposal is presented to the group. During this phase, discussion should focus on informational questions, such as, "What does this paragraph mean?" The facilitator should disallow any discussion that is not pertinent to understanding the proposal.

The Discussion: The discussion phase is when members of the group are asked to explore their own feelings on the proposal. When the consensus process is being followed carefully, the facilitator will ask each member of the group in turn if they have anything they would like to say. Members can discuss their feelings or "pass." Several rounds of the group may be necessary before everybody has had their say.

During this phase, the facilitator should ensure that each member has an opportunity to express feelings without interruption. The facilitator should also promote a respectful climate, and encourage all members, especially those who may hold minority opinions, to speak.

For non-controversial proposals, the facilitator may decide that a strict, going around the circle is overly time consuming and not necessary. In this case, the facilitator can just call on those raising hands. But at the first sign that discussion is likely to be animated, the facilitator should shift to a formal "go around the circle" approach.

The Non-Binding Vote: Often the facilitator will sense that the group is in such agreement that acceptance or rejection of the proposal seems a foregone conclusion. In this case, the facilitator may call for a non-binding "show of thumbs" to "see where we are in the proposal." The facilitator will ask that people put thumbs up to indicate support for the proposal, thumbs down to indicate non support, and thumbs horizontal to indicate no opinion. If there is no dissention, the facilitator may proceed immediately to a decision. The facilitator can take a non-binding vote several times during the proposal. It should not be used as a way of pressuring members of the group to adopt a majority position.

It is critical to remember that this is not a vote. This is only to be used to ascertain if the group has already reached consensus. In such cases, further discussion serves no useful purpose. It is quite common for the non-binding vote to show consensus much earlier than most would expect.

The Consensus: When the facilitator believes that all members have had their say, the consensus phase begins. In this phase, the facilitator asks how many people support the proposal. If there is a clear majority, then the facilitator asks if anybody is strongly opposed (or, "can't live with the proposal"). If nobody indicates strong opposition, the proposal is accepted. If there is still strong opposition to the proposal, then the group enters a resolution phase.

Resolution: Resolution occurs if the group is unable to reach consensus because at least one person remains in strong opposition. Usually the facilitator will reopen discussion to work out a solution that everyone finds acceptable. If further discussion appears pointless, then the facilitator will appoint an ad-hoc committee composed of groups representing all major opinions. This group will meet off-line and prepare a recommended compromise for the next meeting. If this group is unable to reach a consensus recommendation, then decision can be considered "blocked" (see the section on blocking).

Blocking a Decision

When one or more members of the group are unable to resolve their opposition to the proposal, they can "block" the decision. In this case, the facilitator can declare the decision blocked and may check to see if the group wants to invoke the escape clause (see section on escape clause).

Somebody who is "blocking" a decision has a responsibility to do all of the following:

- Work diligently to fully understand the proposal
- Try to work out the opposition with the proposer

The Escape Clause

The group has the right to invoke an escape clause, as outlined in article 5.4 of the Bylaws. The escape clause requires that the group take two votes. The first is a vote to bypass the consensus process, and requires a 3/4 vote of the group. The second is a vote to accept (or reject) the proposal, despite the fact that consensus was not reached. This vote also requires a 3/4 vote of the group. If either vote does not achieve 3/4 majority, then the decision cannot be accepted.

It should be noted that the invocation of this escape clause is a highly unusual event. So far, our church has never invoked the escape clause.

Dangers with the Model

It is conceivable that a "poison" individual could block a decision for reasons unrelated to genuine issues with the proposal. We have not had this experience. If it comes up, this would be the most likely reason to invoke the escape clause.

Common Misconceptions

Consensus takes too long

When the pre-proposal process is taken seriously, the actual consensus process rarely takes long. Even when it does, the payback is that everybody involved in the decision (even those initially opposed) feel much more buy-in. Traditional wisdom is that even when consensus takes longer to reach a decision, it take much less time to

implement that decision. Therefore, the upfront process investment of time and effort means there is less work convincing people after a decision has been made.

Consensus requires that everybody agree to every decision

Consensus attempts to reach full agreement, but allows decisions when some are "against" the proposal, but are "willing to live with it."

Consensus requires everybody to agree on every little thing

Consensus is fully compatible with delegation. Often the larger group will delegate a decision to a smaller group (sometimes even a "group of one). Consensus only requires that whatever group is making the decision (the smaller or the larger group) is using consensus to arrive at the decision.

[The Steering Committee officially approved the consensus model on Feb. 26, 1994. On Oct. 12 1996, an amendment was added that one person talks at a time.]

[The consensus section was passed at the steering committee 14 Sep 2002]



A Few Words On Consensus Government from the President of Our Congregation, Roger Sessions: 10/96

Some revolutions begin with a bang, and some with a whisper. In our case, it began five years ago, with a decision made by fewer than ten people, with almost no debate, before our church even had a name.

The decision was simple. We will run our church by consensus. Rather than voting on issues, we will insist that every issue be resolved to the satisfaction of all involved. We believed that how people feel about any given decision is ultimately more important than the decision itself.

Our goal was, first and foremost, to be a warm and caring community. We therefore wanted a decision-making process that valued the individual, not voting blocs; that favored community-building, not clique-building; and one that encouraged cooperation, not contentiousness.

Our church has grown ten-fold since that early meeting. And I believe that the decision to use consensus contributed more than any other to the spirit of community that is such a vital part of our church.

Our story has spread. Every year we get a few phone calls from members of other churches who have heard about our commitment to consensus. They want to know how we make it work, whether or not we are satisfied, and how to deal with the skepticism they face from "those who know better".

I tell them some of the problems we have had to face. Decisions that have devastated other congregations have left us feeling closer than ever. The decisions are not always easy, but the decision process is one that always leaves us bonded.

This is the turning point for those listening to our stories. Every year, more people decide that the kind of community we have created is the kind they want for themselves.

Our church will continue its success. It will prove through growth how well consensus works. I predict that consensus will become the dominant model for church governance throughout the UUA...I am proud to be part of it, and grateful to those who introduced us to the ideas.

So I invite everybody, especially new members, to be a part of our Steering Committee, and experience first-hand the consensus process. I invite everybody to be part of the revolution.

From My Heart,
Roger Sessions

**Some Additional Words on Consensus by Barb Kemper-Nolan:
09/96**

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church was founded on the basis of shared leadership. We have chosen consensus as our decision-making process. Consensus has been used by tribes, villages, and communities for centuries; Native Americans and Quakers use it as their major community decision-making process. And so do we.

Consensus is the process of group decision-making without voting. Voting encourages competition, often without regard to other's concerns, since its goal is the winning of the most votes. Using

majority rule risks alienation and apathy within the group. Old habits of competitiveness, defensiveness, and possessiveness inherent in parliamentary procedure need to be "unlearned" if the group is choosing shared leadership. Consensus fosters an environment in which everyone is respected and all contributions are valued. Creative resolution of all concerns contributes to the overall quality of the decision. Decisions reached by consensus are usually a synthesis of proposals or new ones that develop as a result of the discussion. Consensus does not mean unanimity. The goal of consensus is to achieve a decision that everyone in the group can live with, even though it may not be everyone's first choice. The major advantage of consensus over majority vote is that no one becomes committed by others to a decision that s/he cannot live with comfortably. In using consensus, a greater sense of individual responsibility for the group's actions is generated and individuals who carry out the plans are more satisfied with the work.

Consensus requires a different kind of attitude toward conflict and its resolution. Conflict is considered necessary, welcomed, and desirable, not something to be avoided, repressed, or feared. Its resolution is achieved through creativity and cooperation. The group strives to create an environment in which disagreement can be expressed without fear and heard as a concern which when resolved, will make the decision stronger.

Since the skills and techniques necessary for consensus are not readily taught in our society, it is helpful to take a little time to acquaint yourself with the process.

First of all, the seven prerequisites for a group to use consensus are:

1. Unity of purpose within the group.
2. Equal access to power.
3. Autonomy of the group from external hierarchical structures.
4. Time: for group process as well as tasks.
5. A willingness in the group to attend to process issues (i.e. the WAY we work).
6. A willingness in the group to attend to attitudes (cooperation, trust, sense of community, being open to change).
7. A willingness in the group to learn and practice skills (communication, facilitation, participation, etc.).

In other words, our meetings are our church. HOW we get there is as important as the decision or task at hand. Consensus can only work among advocates (those who are committed to being supportive and empowering of one another).

When consensus works, everyone feels both a personal sense of triumph and a sense of closeness to the group. The process requires maturity, and flexibility, along with a willingness to give way for the good of the group, to listen rather than to hold forth, to invent rather than insist. Consensus calls forth the best that is in us, and so empowers us to work together in community.

It is important to note that consensus is not useful when:

- The situation is an emergency.
- The group has insufficient information.
- There is a forced choice or all options are negative.

Individual members value their own desires more than the group's purpose.

Consensus manuals emphasize that each group must adopt its own workable process. ALL the resources emphasize that the biggest impediment to successful process is lack of training. Rather than abandon consensus in the early stages when the kinks are still being worked out, they recommend adopting an emergency clause that allows for some form of voting. At Live Oak we have adopted such a clause. In an emergency, if 75% of the members agree, we put the proposal to a vote. Seventy-five percent of the members must approve the proposal in order for it to be adopted. However, we are proud to say that we have yet to invoke this. We have worked together, increasing our communication skills, improving our creative problem solving efforts, and strengthening our sense of community.

Our process is rather simple:

1. A proposal is presented.
2. Discussion and resolution of concerns occurs.
3. We ask "Is there anyone who can't live with this decision?"
4. If this occurs, we send the proposal to a committee representative of all positions.

5. The committee returns to the steering committee with a revised proposal.
6. Further discussion and resolution of concerns occurs until everyone can live with the decision.

While on the surface this may appear to be time-consuming, it is important to note that time used in the decision-making process is made up in the implementation process because:

- A small hierarchical group does not have to take time to explain a decision they are imposing on the large group. Instead, the entire group was part of the process.
- Concerns and potential problems have been addressed ahead of time.
- As a group, members are more invested in the decision because many of them have not just been "outvoted" by the majority. There is usually greater enthusiasm in carrying out the steps of the adopted proposal.

Consensus furthers the bonding of a group and affirms each member's value above the importance of any single issue. It is truly a spiritual practice. We invite you to join us in our endeavor.