

Saved by stalemate: When the church splits 50-50

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

It's beautiful when the congregational system is humming along—when the church is Spirit-filled, when worshipers are singing to one another in psalms and hymns, submitting to one another, bearing each other's burdens, enjoying the unity of the faith, sharing bread from house to house and rejoicing continually. When faced with major decisions, the congregation seeks the Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In prayer and copious dialogue, a consensus emerges and the secretary writes in the minutes, "It seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit to . . ."

But sometimes the congregational system hits a pothole. This can happen when the decision-making process is accelerated or compressed, when the decisions to be made in that process have huge implications for the life of the church, and when the issues raised are theologically profound and the consequences painful no matter what is decided. At these times, a congregation can see its unity shattered. Sometimes a vote is forced. The bylaws are read, the quorum established and someone pipes up, "We need a simple majority vote!" The vote is taken, the majority wins, the minority loses and everyone agrees (at least for the moment) that all should accept this as the Lord's will.

Twice in my pastoral ministry, churches had an exact 50-50 vote. Both times the vote occurred under pressure and was 50-50, I believe, by divine intervention. In each situation, the unexpected tie vote saved the church from a dive into regret and conflict.

In the first situation, the founders of East Bay Church had located the church on two acres of property that would one day be alongside a major expressway and intersection in the middle of a growing city. Developers were continually making low-ball offers. But the congregation fit comfortably into its building, and the site was a great location because of visibility and ease of access. There was no incentive to sell.

Then rapid growth changed things. Sanctuary seating, which was meant to accommodate 200, was stretched to seat 350. The bathrooms were inadequate, the children's ministry area was cramped, the youth were huddled in a back room. The building needed massive repairs. Businesses and not residences were growing up around the church. Then came the high-ball offer from a Home Barn store. Millions were suddenly on the table and the company wanted to move quickly.

The church soon divided into two camps. Camp One wanted to sell the property, buy an existing church building in town, and bank the rest of the money to use for mission and a security cushion.

Camp Two agreed that the property should be sold, but wanted to move to the edge of town where the population was growing and build a dream facility for the future.

Each was a righteous position; each had merit. But the Home Barn deadline was nearing. The church set a day for the vote, then decided to fast and pray for an entire day in preparation. Through some rather deft political maneuvering, Option One was the only proposal on the ballot. People arrived looking tense, and a heated but respectful discussion began.

Those speaking for the proposition to buy a church building said: With this move, we will have enough capital reserve to alleviate future financial concerns. We can use the accumulating interest for mission work. Buying an existing building is good stewardship. A previous church in that building grew and thrived.

Those speaking against said: This proposition shows little faith and requires no sacrifice. This is bad stewardship—cheap is not synonymous with good stewardship. The potential for growth in the area of the new building is minimal. Here is our chance to shoot for the stars; let's build the dream on a strategic location of our choosing.

The question was called, and everyone filled out a ballot. As the votes were counted, it was eerily quiet. The moderator received the results and read: "The results are 111 for, 111 against." There was a long silence. Then: "As moderator I may cast the deciding vote. I abstain. Motion to dismiss will be entertained."

Home Barn withdrew its offer. Time passed and East Bay came to a consensus—not unanimity but consensus—that at the right time we would exercise Option Two. Finally another offer came in. The congregational vote was about 85 percent to sell,

build and move. Most of the remaining 15 percent accepted this and joined in without expressing any reservations.

In a second situation, many years later, I was serving a small church that had run out of people, money and vision. Under my prodding, the executive council had proposed that the church close its doors on Pentecost of the coming year. The sooner we closed, some of us thought, the more assets we could turn over to the denomination for ministry elsewhere. Having learned something from the Case of Home Barn, however, I urged the leaders to take their time. We led the congregation in a month of prayer, including guided fasting, a 24-hour prayer vigil, focus groups and other intentional forums.

But when the congregation met, the vote was 19-19 with the moderator abstaining! I was dumbfounded; the odds of winning the lottery would have been greater than the odds of one pastor experiencing this situation twice. The church carried on in its life and work.

In both cases, God saved the churches. A 51 percent vote would have splintered the body. A huge action with no mandate would have destroyed our unity and crippled our mission.

The church councils in each of these situations met to process the votes and figure out what had happened and why. I've learned several lessons from these sessions. Jesus said, "Take my yoke and learn of me" (Matt. 11:29). The learning comes from yoking up, taking up the experience of being in the harness of spiritual formation. Through prayer and shared reflection, we want to grow from what we've experienced. What is the Spirit saying to us through this event?

First and foremost: let the circumstances confirm what God is doing; don't try to read what God is doing in the circumstances alone. As writer Henry Blackaby says, "Find out what God is doing and join him there!" Don't let the situation become the blinders that limit our ability to see what God is doing.

The Holy Spirit is rarely confined by artificial schedules and arbitrary dates. When members looked back, we recognized that we (including the pastor) had let Home Barn set the agenda and timetable. We had been enticed by the missional allure of money: "Think of the great things we could do if we had all that money!" It wasn't until later, when the time was right and the guidance clearly heard and understood, that we had unity. Trust the Spirit to build consensus over time. Take whatever time

is needed. The agenda and pace cannot be set from outside.

The issue is not going too fast and getting ahead of God, or going too slowly and lagging behind God. We are instead, as Paul says, to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). How do we hear the Spirit? I’ve learned to listen to and to expect to hear the Spirit in the gaps—in the pauses, impasses and parentheses. We hear the Spirit in each other too, and when we pay attention to those spiritual mileage markers the Spirit has set out along the way.

The difference of opinion was not due to sin or willful disobedience: it was about a difference of means. Both groups wanted God’s will but saw different means to that end. It is not always clear what is God’s best and what is just good.

Leadership often gets too far ahead of the congregation. The core leadership team had spent a lot of time discussing the preferred option, praying, investigating and evaluating its impact and consequences. Some of this was communicated to the congregation along the way, but when the vote date was set, the congregation was not ready. The vision caster must wait for the team, the team must wait for the congregation, and everyone must wait on the Lord.

Just ignoring the Home Barn offer and taking more time alone would not have led us to the new consensus. I believe that coming to clarity about God’s direction required the experience of the 50-50 vote. That is spiritual praxis—we reflect on the experience not only to better interpret it but also to create a climate of change. The process is as important as the product.

Second, before anybody moves and seconds anything, carefully articulate the mission. Scratching the itch of “felt needs” is not the same as following the Lord’s mission. Clarity of mission emerges from the congregation as a whole, not just from a segment.

Finally, remind yourself and others that true stewardship is simply using all that God gives to do all that God asks: it has nothing to do with cost or savings. In the end, Option Two required fund drives and borrowing on top of the sale proceeds, but the Lord was also in the fund drive and the borrowing.

And finally, on a personal note: you will never hear me shout “Question!” in a meeting just to speed things along.