Majority rule? Church decision making: Church decision making

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Democracy is a wonderful form of government, especially compared to the alternatives. Giving everybody a vote provides a nonviolent means of managing conflict and of holding leaders accountable to the will of the majority.

But democratic process can be a lousy way to run a church. The process itself tends to create antagonistic parties, and putting things to a vote produces winners and losers. Strict adherence to democratic process can keep us from freely being the church with one another. A vote may technically decide a volatile issue, but it often doesn't settle the matter within a congregation or a wider church body.

Churches often put things to a vote for the same reasons that countries go to war: voting is the way one side can impose its will on the other side. We vote because we don't have the imagination to think of other ways of making decisions or resolving conflicts. We vote because we don't have the patience to live with ambiguity, or the grace to live with differences, or the endurance to commit ourselves to a long process of seeking a consensus.

Does it make sense to hold a vote on whether or not homosexuality is a sin? That kind of decision making calls for a process of discernment, not a roll- call vote. Issues having to do with truth claims or matters of church identity call for a more consensual method of decision making. That method entails being committed to reasoning and studying together, listening to each other and the Spirit, praying, being silent and even fasting. Such an approach demands patience to wait until it seems "good to us and to the Lord" to move in a particular way.

The consensus model of decision making is perhaps more practical in small groups—it fits congregations better than denominational assemblies. Yet some church bodies like the World Council of Churches have adopted a consensus method of decision making. Part of such an approach is to seat delegates at tables where there is opportunity for conversation among people with differing views.

The way churches make decisions is as important as what decisions are made. Is the minority voice heard and respected and are its concerns somehow reflected in the resolution adopted? Conversely, how do the minority voices respond to the majority—are they prepared to graciously accept a decision contrary to their own? In some traditions there is a regular practice of the minority spontaneously ceding to the wishes of the larger group, thereby giving the group the freedom to move ahead.

The story is told in the Mennonite tradition of a man who was firmly opposed to ordaining women to ministry, but who nevertheless attended the ordination of his daughter-in-law. Though the ordination decision went against his views, he attended the service to show his support for his daughter-in-law and his commitment to remaining in relationship with her. Can the church find similar ways to show that we remain in fellowship even when we disagree?