

Decision-making

From the Editors in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

Democratic decision-making is second nature for most American Protestants. Is there a dispute in the church? Let's debate the issue, and then put it to a vote. One problem with this approach, as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other denominations have discovered, is that it can lead to almost yearly votes on a controverted issue such as homosexuality. Whatever the outcome, the process usually leaves people on all sides of the question bruised and bitter and less than eager to come back for next year's meeting. Is this process really healthy for the church? Is there a way to deal with controversial issues other than the ballot box? Denominational officials have begun to wonder.

These questions were also raised explicitly at the recent assembly of the World Council of Churches. WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser noted that the organizational life of the WCC is dominated by Protestant churches that operate by parliamentary procedure. "While many churches consider this appropriate, it is essentially a model derived from political life and is not necessarily the best way to express the self-understanding of a 'fellowship of churches.' Not only the Orthodox churches, but also many churches in Africa and other parts of the southern hemisphere, follow different models, which emphasize dialogue and consensus and the respect for hierarchy and authority."

Consensus, hierarchy and authority are not terms to which today's American Protestants immediately resonate. (The noncommittal "dialogue" is always favored, of course.) But they can certainly appreciate how, even within church bodies that are much more homogeneous culturally and theologically than the WCC, vote-taking does not always serve to deepen Christian fellowship.

On the last day of the WCC assembly a brief debate occurred that illustrated how parliamentary procedures can deflect and even undermine Christian understanding. At issue was the wording of a statement on proselytism that included a reference to "the invasion of exogenous religious movements" into Eastern Europe. A delegate from the Evangelical Church in Germany proposed that this murky phrase be left

out, since it never identified who constituted these movements, and the term might be misapplied to include indigenous Lutherans.

The proposed deletion was voted on and approved, despite strong opposition from the Orthodox delegates. The assembly then endorsed the statement as a whole--which firmly opposed proselytism--but not before a delegate from the Russian Orthodox Church stood up to complain about the "hypocrisy" of the German church in wanting to protect Lutherans.

So a statement on proselytism was passed, but at the price of what at least some Orthodox regarded as a public snub of their position. The forms of the debate precluded what would have been truly useful--an investigation into what the Russians and Germans understood as "exogenous" and what they meant by "proselytism." Clarity on those points might have fostered ecumenical understanding not only for the Russians and Germans but for the rest of the delegates. And fostering such understanding might be more important than voting on a document.