

Can we all agree? Governing the WCC by consensus: Governing the WCC by consensus

by [Janice Love](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

For years church leaders have been looking for ways of conducting church business other than by parliamentary procedure. The politics of voting resolutions up or down, and the practice of following the routines of Robert's Rules of Order, tends to divide people into winners and losers. Is there another way?

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches decided that there is. It resolved in September to implement a set of rules to govern the organization by consensus. The aim is to seek "the common mind of a meeting without deciding issues by means of voting."

In taking this step, the council outlined the range of forms that "consensus" might take:

A consensus is reached when one of the following occurs: 1) all are in agreement (unanimity); 2) most are in agreement and those who disagree are content that the discussion has been both full and fair and that the proposal expresses the general "mind of the meeting"; the minority therefore gives consent; 3) the meeting acknowledges that there are various opinions, and it is agreed that these be recorded in the body of the proposal . . . ; 4) it is agreed that the matter be postponed; 5) it is agreed that no decision can be reached. Therefore, consensus . . . allows any family or other group of churches . . . to have their objections to any proposal addressed and satisfied prior to the adoption of the proposal.

The decision to move to consensus procedures recognized that some items, such as the election of staff and key budget decisions, will be decided by old-fashioned voting.

The Central Committee's embrace of consensus comes after three years of careful scrutiny. It is also a direct response to recommendations of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, which was set up in 1998 at a time when two Orthodox bodies had left the WCC and others were threatening to leave. Both the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox spurred their leaders to express more sharply and persistently their longstanding theological differences with the organization's Protestant majority.

Topics that provoke controversy for Orthodox churches, such as the ordination of women, could be addressed more productively, they asserted, if fundamental changes in decision-making processes were made. These leaders clearly wanted a greater share of power in the WCC.

The rules of the WCC seem foreign to many council members. Formulated when most member churches came from Europe and North America and when governing bodies were overwhelmingly male, the council's rules call for a parliamentary style that some churches rarely encounter in their home settings. Many have lamented the way this style forces participants into adversarial yes or no stances even when the group wants to imagine, explore and discuss alternative possibilities.

Although many participants have become adept at using the rules, feminists, young people, and delegates from Africa, Asia and Latin America have complained for decades that WCC procedures needed to move away from the model of Western parliaments.

Yet Western parliaments represent one of the most significant and enduring expressions of democracy. And for many churches, the experience of opening up to democratic processes—with widespread participation in decision-making and with procedures for receiving critical feedback—represents an overdue reformation. Can the WCC improve on parliamentary procedures that have a significant history of success in both the church and secular arenas?

Some who have practiced consensus say yes. Eden Grace, who represents the Friends (Quakers) in the WCC Central Committee and is a member of the Special Commission, argues that "how we make decisions matters, because how we treat each other testifies to whether we are living in the Spirit or not." Our behavior as Christians in governing bodies should reflect "love, respect and generosity" rather than "suspicion and competition," she says. Many who advocate processes of

“discernment” in U.S. churches would agree.

D’Arcy Wood, from the Uniting Church in Australia and another member of the Special Commission, makes the case for consensus on practical as well as theological grounds. His own church shifted about a decade ago from parliamentary-style methods to consensus methods. Whether working in a small group or an assembly of hundreds, Wood finds democratic representation to be enhanced considerably through using the new procedures.

Orthodox members of the Special Commission stated repeatedly that their goal in advocating consensus-style governance is primarily practical. With 25 percent of the seats at the WCC’s assemblies and in the Central Committee, the Orthodox are a permanent minority, and they feel acutely the danger of the tyranny of the majority. One clear virtue of a consensus approach is that it protects numerical minorities far better than parliamentary-style rules do.

Minority groups, of which Orthodox representatives are only one, will have the right not only to be heard but also to have their opinions formally recorded. Such protection will likely lead the majority to attend more carefully to how minority perspectives might be reflected in the main proposal. If such opinions run completely contrary to the main proposal, the final resolution must register the substance of the dissenting point of view, thereby more accurately recording the divisions within the body.

Furthermore, unlike parliamentary procedures, the rules for consensus are fairly simple and somewhat fluid. In the old style, those who knew the rules well had considerable advantage over newcomers or over anyone who got lost in the technicalities. In the new style, insiders are less likely to dominate decisions. In addition, participants can explore various options on an issue without specifically formulating a motion, an amendment, or an amendment to an amendment. Proposals will be tested and modified by nonbinding “straw votes” or other forms of checking with participants to see how near they are to a final resolution.

The consensus approach gives a key role to the moderator or chair, who must be adept at detecting the mind of the meeting, able to help those who require assistance in formulating proposals, and determined to allow a full and fair airing of all relevant viewpoints. Members and leaders of the Central Committee will need training to function according to the new rules, which may require refinement along

the way.

The powerful role assigned to the moderator represents one danger of consensus methods. Another is loss of efficiency. But as anyone who has witnessed the work of the WCC's governing bodies can testify, parliamentary procedures—with their snarled debates over procedural questions—are often inefficient too. If used well, consensus processes have the potential of lowering confusion and increasing efficiency.

The fear most frequently articulated about consensus procedures is that they will blunt an organization's stances on controversial issues. The WCC has occasionally taken theological or political stances that some churches or ecumenical groups reached only years later. For example, the WCC engaged in high-profile work to abolish apartheid beginning in 1968, and it condemned the prosecution of the Persian Gulf war in 1991. Will consensus methods, with their requirement of listening closely to all opinions, water down the strength of the council's prophetic witness? I believe they probably will not.

I served on the WCC Central Committee from 1975 to 1998 and I oversaw several social-justice statements. I also was on the committee that proposed the resolution on the gulf war at the 1991 assembly. In my experience, a kind of consensus approach was already being used by the WCC.

The standard procedure for writing a public issue statement was to test the text carefully with key constituencies prior to presenting the proposal to formal governing bodies. By the time a document reached the Executive Committee or the Central Committee, it would have been vetted repeatedly with those who had the most at stake. Controversy over statements would erupt occasionally on the floor of a meeting, but drafters regularly sought to incorporate the concerns as much as possible.

Although this process was not perfect, it did produce statements and programs on topics that outsiders often perceived to be controversial, and they were adopted by overwhelming majorities. So historically, a consensus-type process has led to a powerful public witness.

The WCC already has something of a track record on which to build a less adversarial, more democratic method of decision-making. If it succeeds in this venture of embracing consensus methods as its primary mechanism for governance,

perhaps the WCC will demonstrate a practical, productive model for other Christian deliberations.