

CONSENSUS PROCEDURES FOR CHURCH MEETINGS

1. Why do we have meeting procedures at all?

- to facilitate the work of the meeting;
- to enable all members to participate fully;
- to assist the meeting to reach the best outcome possible.

2. Why use consensus procedures?

- to help us as we seek to understand what is God's will on an issue;
- to ensure we listen carefully to each other's unique insights;
- to ensure participation is possible for all;
- to work towards mutual solutions;
... and in the process -
- to strengthen the faith community;
- to move away from an adversarial approach, where some will feel defeated;
- to encourage broad ownership of the outcome of any resolution.

3. What does consensus mean?

- a prayerful process, seeking to discern God's will;
- seeking a common mind about the wisest way forward for the Church at this time;
- decisions are made without voting in a process of genuine dialogue;
- being respectful, mutually supportive and empowering of all entitled to participate.

4. When is consensus achieved?

- there is unanimous support for a proposal; or
- there is general support, with a few able to accept the outcome even if not their first choice.

5. What does 'agreement' mean?

- a decision generally supported by the meeting;
- the small number unable to accept it agree to live with the outcome so the matter may be resolved;
- agreement is not 'we all agree on the proposal' (which would be consensus) but 'we all agree to live with this' (which records 'disagreement we can live with').

6. What happens when consensus or agreement cannot be reached?

Possible options (among many) include the meeting deciding (by consensus):

- there's a deeper issue to affirm;
- some aspects can be agreed - the rest need further work or should not be decided at all;
- to adjourn discussion, perhaps with more work before reconsideration;
- to refer the issue to another group to deal with, or to advise;
- to decide it is unnecessary or inappropriate to continue dealing with the issue;
- to declare that there are diverse views which Christians may hold with equal integrity;
- (rarely) to decide to resolve an urgent matter by formal majority vote.

7. What is the role of the person chairing during consensus procedures?

- to assist the meeting to discern the will of God as far as possible;
- to meet the needs and purposes of the meeting and its members;
- to be familiar with, and experienced in, the use of the procedures;
- to be alert to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as members contribute;
- to be ready to pause for prayer or buzz group reflection as appropriate;
- to encourage trust and integrity in contributions;
- to ensure care for those whose honesty or minority voice may leave them vulnerable;
- to encourage response to speeches from members, reflecting the mood of the meeting;
- to suggest or encourage creative modifications of a proposal, picking up insights expressed;
- to summarise discussion from time to time to assist in focusing the discussion.

Reference: Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Consensus Training, Jill Tabart, 31 Jan 08

UCA MANUAL FOR MEETINGS

THE DECISION SESSION *

6.5 DISCUSSION OF A SPECIFIC PROPOSAL

The benefits and disadvantages of the proposal are now canvassed by various speakers. It is important to hear from those with enthusiasm for the proposal as well as from those indicating disquiet or disapproval. Members are encouraged to indicate their agreement or disagreement.

Minor changes of wording may be agreed by the council from time to time as viewpoints are heard and considered.

From time to time the chairperson may check whether the council is nearing consensus. After summing up where it seems the council is heading:

(A) "What is your response to this proposal?" may be asked of the council.

6.6 CHECKING FOR CONSENSUS

When the chairperson believes that consensus has been reached (whether to support or to not support), the council is asked to affirm this. The chairperson states an understanding of the position reached and asks for an indication of agreement or disagreement. Typical questions could be:

(B) "Do you believe we have consensus in support of this proposal?" or

(C) "Do you believe we have consensus to not support this proposal?"

If there is no strong response to this checking for consensus, discussion may continue to enable doubts and questions to be raised and further viewpoints to be shared.

If there is unanimity to support or to not support the proposal, then consensus has been reached and the council proceeds to the declaration of the consensus result.

However, there is a third possibility. After vigorous sharing of ideas, there may be strong but not unanimous support for the proposal. In order to estimate the strength of opinion, the chairperson may ask questions such as:

(D) "Who supports the proposal?"

(E) "Who does not support the proposal as your first option, but is prepared to accept it?"

(F) "Who is not prepared to accept the proposal?"

If there is no response to the last question **(F)**, the chairperson may ask the council:

(G) "Is further discussion needed?"

(H) "Are you prepared to have the issue declared resolved by consensus?"

If all agree to the chairperson declaring that a consensus has been reached, the council moves to that step.

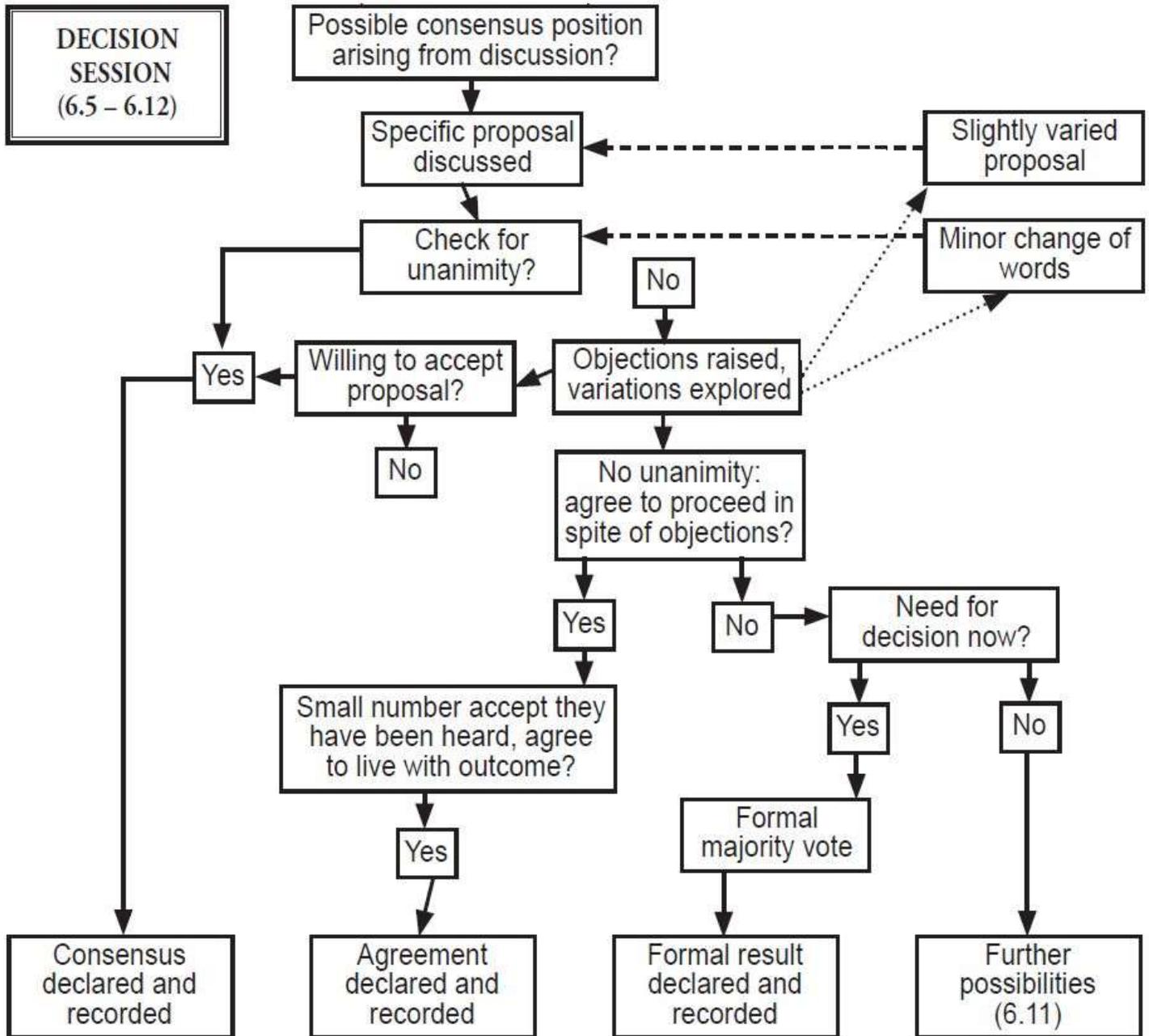
If there are those not able to accept the proposal (response to question **(F)**), the chairperson invites these people to share their misgivings directly with the whole council and discussion can continue. Where a small number is unable to agree with the majority after a reasonable time, the council may move on to the formal voting procedures. Skilful chairing is necessary here, to enable the council to be not unduly delayed at this point.

There may be some who are uneasy about a proposed way forward, yet not able to verbalise their concerns. The prompting of the Spirit may be expressed in disquiet as much as in creative suggestions for wording a proposal. All people are worthy of respect as they indicate their position, and no-one should feel pressured into agreeing with a position against their better judgement.

(* This is an extract from the UCA Manual for Meetings (pp.30,31), a full copy of which can be found at <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/MfM2015.pdf>.)

CONSENSUS PROCEDURES

DECISION SESSION FLOW CHART *



(* Extracted from the UCA Manual for Meetings (p.32))