# Consensus and Decision-Making:
## Issues for Parish Pastoral Councils
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The heart and goal of the *Parish Consultation Process* is the renewal and revitalization of diocesan parishes. While this goal is conceptually simple, there are two impediments that make it difficult to achieve. The first impediment is inexperience by some parish leaders with a non-confrontational decision-making model. Modern media bombards us with models of conflict: much of talk-radio; "investigative" reporting; Jerry Springer and other similar television programming; and sometimes even the United States Congress. There are few models of decision-making which do not revolve around someone protecting "their rights," even to the point of belligerence.

Another impediment to wise decision-making is time. It takes time to prayerfully and reflectively listen to others and consider options which are useful for the common good. Society often seems obsessed with instant gratification and "efficiency." Deliberations which do not produce quick results may be judged unproductive.

This report intends to present some helps to pastoral councils as they strive to reach consensus on important issues.

## Levels of Decision-Making

In *Recreating the Parish* the staff of the Parish Evaluation Project [1] present a serviceable outline of different ways of reaching decisions based upon: the number of people involved; the emotional level; available time; available financial resources; and authority to make decisions.

### 1. Nitty-Gritty: Delegating

Useful when:    Decision is about specific details, small issues, limited influence

How to use:    Let those in charge take care of the decisions. Allow freedom of work and movement

### 2. Small Matters: Voting

Useful when:    There are issues with little conflicting emotion; need vote of confidence

How to use:    Voting is for confidence and support. Help people to take ownership of the decision. There is no need to hang up the meeting over these matters. (*Caution* — if strong emotions are displayed about an issue,

potentially dividing the group, move to the next level of decision-making.)

### 3. Larger Matters: Consensus

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| Useful when: | There is one or more issues about which the group has strong emotions and when the issues have the potential to divide the group. These issues need thought and discussion. Time must be available to consider options. Group members must be willing to listen to each other and be influenced by each other. |
| How to use: | All must state their views on the issue — silence blocks openness. The only voting allowed is a straw vote (with no power) to assess attitudes. Group members must seek out differences of opinion to explore all options. No group member should "give in" just to avoid conflict. The final decision must be acceptable to all, meaning that everyone can "live with it" and support it. |

### 4. Big Matters: Discernment

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| Useful when: | One or more issues affect an entire community and many will have strong emotions over the outcome of the decision. |
| How to use: | State the problem or situation. Consult with those involved and develop a possible solution. Take time in prayer and reflection and list all the reasons *against* the solution. Take additional time in prayer and reflection and list all the reasons *for* the solution. Eventually the solution will arise from the group. If not, continue the process. |

### *Problem Solving: Finding Creative Alternatives*

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| Useful when: | There are large issues that need a good group effort to come up with creative alternatives. |
| How to use: | The group states the need (*not* the solution) and envisions what the ideal future can look like when the need is met. List what is already being done to reach the ideal. Think of all the ways of reaching the ideal. Brainstorm and be creative. Then select the best way(s). Be specific: what?; for whom?; when?; how often?; where?; by whom?; and how much?. |

**The Consensus Process**

The Diocese of Greensburg has created *New Wine, New Wineskins*,[2] a guide to parish pastoral planning. In this resource they provide a good summary of the consensus process, which is outlined below.

**What is consensus?** A group process for decision making when all come to a common understanding and agree to support the decision of the whole.

**What are the "non-negotiables" of consensus?**
- built on prayer
- seeks to discern the will of God, not my will
- based on mutual trust among persons making the decision
- honors the teachings of the Scriptures and the Church

**What is not involved in consensus?**
- majority rule (no votes are taken)
- compromise (no one should give in to keep the peace)
- competition (there are no winners and losers)
- quick decisions (it takes time to work through to consensus)
- dependence on the leader (all need to engage in discussion and come to decision)

**How does consensus proceed?**
1. *Input*
   - Issue is clearly stated.
   - Background information is presented.
   - Opportunity for clarification is given.
2. *Discussion*
   - Facilitator introduces the issue and others respond. Facilitator keeps discussion on the issue. When most viewpoints have been expressed, facilitator tests for consensus. (See below for additional information).
3. *Reflection*
   - Does the proposal further the Kingdom of God?
   - Is there anything in Church law that would prohibit the proposal from being carried out?
   - In light of the Indicators of Parish Vitality, will the proposal be good for the parish?
   - Can each person live with the proposal and support it?
4. *Review*
   - The facilitator summarizes the issue, the background, areas of agreement and disagreement, and a statement of the consensus reached.
   - If there is no consensus, continue to discuss the problematic areas.

**What if consensus is difficult to reach?**
- If the discussion is "going around in circles," drop the matter and continue the meeting. Return to it later.
- If there seems to be missing information, do further research and gather more data before trying to complete the consensus process. Postpone further discussion until all have had the opportunity for prayer and reflection.

**What if I am the one who's outside the circle of agreement?**
- Are you considering what is best for all?
- Do you understand all the data given? Have you carefully justified your reasons for disagreeing?
- Can you say, "Well, I don't agree completely, but I see the validity of your position and I can live with that?"

**What kind of attitudes can help or hinder the process?**

*Help*
- openness
- honesty
- respect for the truth in everyone
- patience
- enthusiastic support for the outcome
- spiritual outlook and reliance on the Holy Spirit

*Hinder*
- rigidity of opinions
- hostile or suspicious minds
- determination to win
- sabotaging the process: "Why do we have to do it this way?"

## Six Steps for Arriving at Consensus

After an issue has been presented and necessary background information has been given, the facilitator does the following.

1. Invites clarifying questions.

2. Summarizes for the group what the clarifying issues are.

3. Invites someone to begin the discussion.

   - using "I" statements, an individual introduces an idea or opinion as to how the issue may be approached
   - another individual responds to that statement (as a good listener would) and adds ideas or reactions of their own, using "I" statements.

• a third individual develops ideas further, using "I" statements.

• until all have offered their wisdom.

4. Keeps discussion on the topic and, if there is a need, rephrases complicated or confusing comments.

5. Summarizes points of agreement and points of difference.

6. After judging that consensus may be possible at a given time, tests for consensus by asking if there is anything else of importance to be offered that has not been said. Also, if there are serious areas of disagreement, invites individuals to be ready to state their position on the issue, give reasons for their position, and perhaps present alternate solutions.

The discussion continues until the area of disagreement are reduced or eliminated. If the group cannot reach consensus because more information is needed, one or more persons are delegated to gather the information within a certain time frame, e.g., by the next meeting. Consensus is achieved when all participants agree that they have been heard and their positions have been affirmed, thus allowing them to support the prevailing opinion.

**When should our council use a formal consensus process?**

Only when discerning major decisions that are intended to establish goals and objectives for the future.

Not about operational issues or day to day decisions. Most of these issues are not brought to the council anyway.

**Notes**

1. Holden, Carol M., D.Min, Sweetser, Thomas P., S.J., and Vogel, Mary Beth, M.P.S. 1996. *Recreating the Parish: Reproducible Resources for Pastoral Ministers*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward.

2. Gubish, Mary Ann, M.A., Jenny, Susan, S.C., M.A., and Neff, Mary Kay, S.C., M.F.A. 1997. *New Wine, New Wineskins: Revisioning the Parish through the Ministry of the Parish Pastoral Council*. The Catholic Diocese of Greensburg, PA.