Lesson Plan & Study Guide

Small Group Leadership:
Consensus Decision-Making

Working with Jesus

About the iFollow Discipleship Series
Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

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Small Group Leadership:
Consensus Decision-Making

This presentation is designed for people who desire to serve Jesus Christ and help lead others to Him.

Learning Objectives

1. Some methods of group decision-making
2. What is Consensus Process, and what are the advantages of consensus over other decision-making processes?
3. Are there biblical models for consensus decision-making?
4. Roles that are necessary to help a group doing consensus process
5. Specific steps to consensus process

Content Outline

1. Comparing several methods of group decision-making process
2. Strengths of consensus
3. Weaknesses of consensus
4. Roles in consensus process
5. Steps to consensus
6. Conclusion

Background Material for the Presenter

There are only a few basic ways to make decisions in a group. It could even be said that there are only three, though each has a number of forms and subcategories: (1) One leader makes the decisions; the rest follow. (2) Everyone has a vote and the majority rules. (3) The whole group makes and owns the decision together by coming to consensus.

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The Leader Decides

The first method of decision making, arguably the most used in the history of the world, is simply to allow the leader to decide. It is sometimes called "dictatorship." It is important to understand that in this sense, the word does not necessarily have the negative connotations we attach to it in politics or human rights. When an individual or couple is starting a small group, it is often necessary for them to make the decisions for a period of time. Even in parenting, when children are very small, until the child grows and the parent can teach her to make her own decisions, the parent must make the decisions for the child. The leader makes the decisions, often with some input from the group.

The difficulty, of course, is that power corrupts fallen humans, so the most benevolent of dictatorships is likely to become a tyranny. Yet this method has remained popular throughout much of Christianity, even in churches, because Christians believe in the supreme authority of God, seeing Him, one might say, as the ultimate Benevolent Dictator, who cannot make a mistake or be corrupted. Humanly, this means there is often a person or persons who act as prophets, or mouthpieces for God. Insofar (and only insofar) as the group sees this prophet as speaking God's own words, they see those words as something to be implicitly obeyed.

> **Three main ways groups make decisions:**
> 1. Dictatorship: One person makes the decisions; the rest follow.
> 2. Voting: Everyone has a vote, and the majority rules.
> 3. Consensus: The whole group makes and owns the decision.
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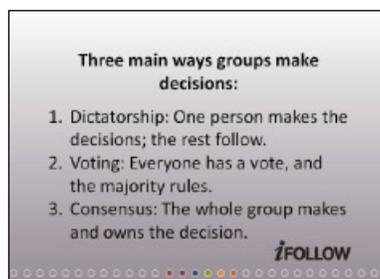
Despite the fact that much scriptural support may be found for this idea, once the early Christians such as Paul began saying shocking things like "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus," (Galatians 3:28) the seeds were already planted for a new way of thinking. Over the centuries that have passed since then, more and more emphasis has been put on individuality, both in rights and in responsibilities.

Voting

This has led to the second common style of decision-making; the group votes. There are three main types of voting systems, with many, many variations in detail and method.

> **Three voting systems:**
> 1. Range voting: each member assigns a score to one or more options.
> 2. Simple majority: anything supported by more than 50% of the group wins.
> 3. Plurality: the largest block in a group decides, even if it is less than a majority.
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Simple majority—Anything supported by 51 percent or more of the group goes, even if 49 percent were strongly opposed.
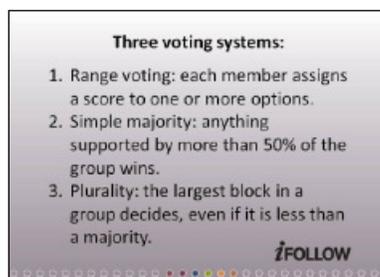
Plurality—The largest block in a group decides, even if it is less than a majority. So if in a group of 10 people, three vote for option A, three for option B and four for option C, the four determine the direction for all ten.

Range voting—Each member assigns a score to one or more of the available options. ("Strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree," etc.) The option with the highest average is chosen. This may be seen as more fair or just than a simple majority, because it allows for more nuance. In range voting, a few people who care strongly may win over a greater number who don't care very much.

There are other forms of voting systems, but by definition, voting methods end with "winners" and "losers." Some people will not get the outcome they wanted. They may get an outcome they really hate, or even feel to be morally wrong. Yet this is what we in the Western world have come to see as the backbone of democracy, and what we actively seek to spread throughout the world as if it were a religion in itself, and the solution to all ills. We think of it as a way of life in which human rights are protected, but is this entirely true?

Consensus

Consensus, in contrast, is a style of decision-making which endeavors to allow each and every member of a group to have not just a vote, but a voice, and a hand in the shaping of the outcome. There are many different styles and procedures for coming to consensus, but all seek to find or create an option *all* group members can agree to. Even though no one person may get precisely the outcome he desired, the group will continue to work together until an outcome is fashioned that takes in the most deeply-felt needs of each member of the group.

Consensus: an attempt to find or create an option all group members can agree to.

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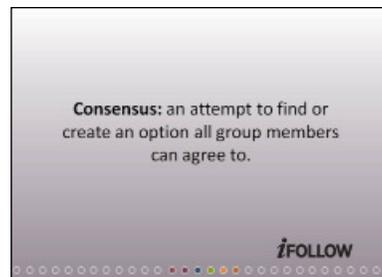
Consensus as it is known today is generally said to have been popularized by the Society of Friends, or the Quakers, in the 19th century. However, the Quakers and others who believe in consensus process often also believe that it began many centuries before they did—in the Bible itself.

The 15th chapter of Acts describes what has come to be known as the Jerusalem Council. Disagreement over circumcision and other Jewish customs and laws had arisen, and a group of delegates including Paul, Silas, Barsabbas, and Barnabas were sent to the apostles in Jerusalem. Acts 15 describes steps that sound quite similar to the steps of consensus process today, as each one takes a turn to speak and be heard, and they hammer out a list of things they all can agree on.

Consensus models have also been used in many other early societies, such as Native

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American tribes and nations in North America. The Haudenosaunee are the most commonly invoked, but many tribes, to this day, use a form of consensus process.

According to Wikipedia, "Japanese companies normally use consensus decision making, meaning that everyone in the company is consulted on each decision. A *ringi-sho* is a circulation document used to obtain agreement. It must first be signed by the lowest level manager, and then upwards, and may need to be revised and the process started over." This passage refers to a website, japanese123.com/ringisho.htm, which describes the process in slightly greater detail. This would come as a surprise to most American businesses, because one main objection to consensus is that it takes too long and can become too unwieldy.

Strengths of Consensus Process

The Co-Intelligence Insitute (CII), a non-profit group whose mission is to "promote awareness of co-intelligence* and of the many existing tools and ideas that can be used to increase it," has a very interesting webpage which compares Consensus Process, Robert's Rules of Order, and a process called Dynamic Facilitation, created by consultant Jim Rough to enhance creative decision-making in primarily institutional settings. All quotations in this section are from this website. (See resource section.)

[* Co-intelligence is a term this group uses for the united wisdom of a group, which is always greater than the sum of its parts. We could include the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, present by invitation in our groups.]

The webpage includes numerous very specific and exhaustive advantages and disadvantages of each of the three and is well worth further study for those who are interested. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that each of these, and indeed, other group decision-making processes as well, is very good at doing what it does. The question is, which does the group need at a given time?

Consensus Process leads to:

a. "good decisions that can last"
b. "thoughtfulness and care"
c. "feeling collective accomplishment
d. "resilience"

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Using Robert's Rules keeps things orderly and predictable, and is efficient for getting through an agenda. Committees such as church boards tend to follow some form of RR. It also has the benefit of being familiar to most people. However, a small group is not a committee, and is often at its least orderly, predictable, or efficient when it is doing its most vital work.

Dynamic Facilitation "focuses and combines people's creative energy to deal with
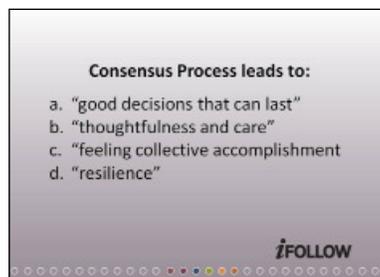
big issues, 'impossible' problems, difficult people and chaos" and may well be worth looking into if the group finds itself in an "impossible situation."

But for the daily life of the group, (or rather, those days when decisions are needed, which will not be an everyday matter,) Consensus Process (CP) may be the best overall method. Its greatest strengths are that it is "good at making decisions that everyone agrees to, that can last. It is characterized by thoughtfulness and care, and making sure everyone is heard. It helps people feel collective accomplishment as progress towards consensus is reflected back to the group. It is resilient, since the group holds part of facilitation role."

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Used by Christians, CP can help find, not the will of the majority, but the will of God.
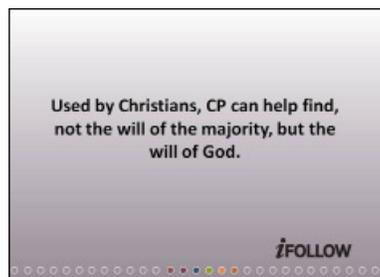
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Since the purpose of having small groups in the life of the church is both intra- and interpersonal growth, as well as growth in finding, understanding, and following God's will, such characteristics as "good decisions that can last," "thoughtfulness and care," "feeling collective accomplishment," and "resilience" are deeply important, especially to those group members who may never have felt heard and cared for before. According to the writers of the CII webpage,

"Consensus Process focuses on weaving many evolving pieces of the truth into decisions everyone present can agree with, constantly oriented to what is best for the whole group. Success = decisions that have staying power because the deliberations were so thorough, wise and inclusive that everyone involved is willing to engage fully in their implementation. Consensus seeks at least agreement—and, at best, shared understanding so deep that it aligns everyone naturally to a shared approach to the situation. The ultimate goal of consensus is communion in collective action."

That sounds like something that could have come straight from the Bible! What are some of the other strengths of CP? There is little training necessary. Once a group becomes familiar with CP, many or all members may take turns facilitating (helping to direct the traffic of discussion and be sure each is heard,) and can also share other roles, outlined below.

One of the most interesting comparisons on this website, for the purposes of a a church small group, is the one on "Fixed ideas, judgements, ideologies." In a group run by Robert's Rules of Order, and for that matter, in all voting situations, such as elections, people put all their energies, and even money, into defining, declaring, and then promoting their own ideas of the right thing to do in a given situation. The goal is for each to insist and persuade, gathering greater and greater groups of people who agree with them, in order to determine whose ideas are, in fact, the will of the majority. This leads to an almost Darwinian result—what many accept as "survival of the fittest," in other words, the principle that the idea that gains the most support is really the best one for the time being. But as we all know, this isn't always the case.

It may be simply the survival of the one with the loudest voice, or the most charisma, or the most money. In a Christian group, the ideal is for each to be heard, and in fact, what the group is looking for is not the will of the majority, but the will of God, who has promised to be present, and who can speak through each member, no matter how humble or inarticulate.

Both CP and Dynamic Facilitation models seem to support these ideals more fully. In the case of CP, individuals attempt to discern which of their ideas are really for the good of the group, and which are simply their own preferences or beliefs. They then let go of the latter and concentrate on the needs of the group. This is, of course, much easier to say than to do, especially if one feels that his ideas are strongly based on Bible doctrine. It seems strange that some of the most acrimonious arguments in a church or spiritual setting are over clashing "bosom beliefs" that each feels to be from God. If, in fact, each can believe that God's will will prevail, and let go of their own need to defend, a third truth will often emerge, stronger than both the opposing ones. Or, as the Quakers put it, "Together we can weave a greater truth than any of us can find alone." The Quakers are well known for their concept of the "inner light," drawn from 1 John 2:27 and surrounding texts, but they knew this could be misused and misunderstood by one person alone, so they trusted even more that the Divine would speak in community, through the gathered members of a prayerful meeting.

On the other hand, it can be a weakness of CP if people are too self-effacing and let go of their own ideas and suggestions prematurely. If a group has this problem, like two comedians in a doorway – "no, you go," "oh, no, after you"—it might be time for a dose of Dynamic Facilitation principles, even without knowing any more of the process than this: "Fixed ideas and passionately-held beliefs are welcomed, listened to, reflected, and fully acknowledged. In the process, people often find themselves choosing to let go of fixed ideas quite easily, as there is nothing to defend." Now, wouldn't that be a welcome outcome!

And finally, the ICC website expresses the energies of the three group processes as follows: RR—building and pushing; CP—weaving and deeply understanding the landscape; DF—bubbling up and quantum leaps. As one can see, all are good, each may be needed at different times; the trick is figuring out which is needed at any given time.

Weaknesses of Consensus Process

As mentioned above, some argue that CP can be too unwieldy and time-consuming. This can be true. The only answer to it is to determine whether the decision under consideration is important enough to the group to make

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Weaknesses of CP:

a. Can lead to group think and reduced energy
b. Some people appear open, while subtly defending own turf or manipulating
c. Others
d. Others "act out" or raise trivial concerns

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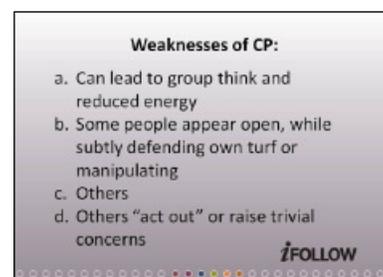
the time to consider it prayerfully and thoroughly. If it involves learning the will of God, there can be nothing more valuable, but not all minutiae of group life need this level of attention.

Other than that, there appears to be only one important disadvantage of CP, and for the last time, we will quote from CII, as they put it so clearly and succinctly. (Ellipses are theirs.)

The focus on community can lead to groupthink and reduced energy. Some community-oriented people develop the capacity to appear open, while subtly defending their turf or manipulating others. … It takes time for the culture of community to develop, so consensus may be applied where there isn't enough shared sensibility to allow it to do its magic. … Important hot topics can be neglected as people argue "cross-town busses" (side issues to be dealt with later). … Taking people's statements in order of hands raised (or other mechanical system) can bog the rapidly-evolving energy of the group. … Consensus is more about listening to each other than generating breakthrough ideas. … Consensus can often get bogged down by certain people "acting out" in the group by raising trivial concerns with regards to proposals under consideration, leading to frustration by other participants. … Consensus can raise issues that can't be resolved by consensus.

Roles in Consensus Process

There are many lists available, some of them long and best suited to large groups. This is a list of the four basic roles that would seem most important for a small group. It is important to restate that in CP, the responsibility for these roles is ideally shared by everyone. Each can take a turn and learn the skills needed to play these roles, and even when it is not one's "turn," each will watch out for the needs of all.

That said, there will be different individuals who are particularly suited to a given role. As an aid in determining this, we will consider each role in the light of biblical models and spiritual gifts. For reference, see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 12:4-8.

1. Facilitator

The word "facilitate" means to make easy. A group facilitator is significantly different from a group leader. The facilitator not only shouldn't lead, but should give this task to someone else if she feels strongly about the issue at hand. This can be difficult if everyone feels strongly! If this happens, give the job to the one the

Roles in Consensus Process:
Facilitator

a. Helps guide the process
b. Not a leader, but a helper
c. Keeps on track
d. Makes sure all are heard
e. Spiritual Gifts: administration,
   leadership (if humble)
   encouragement

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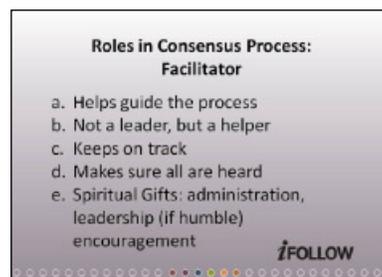
group feels is best able to suppress personal desires and opinions and concentrate on the good of the group.

A facilitator makes sure everyone gets a chance to speak, and that no one is heard twice until everyone is heard once. This involves two sometimes difficult tasks – being sure quiet ones get a chance to speak and are encouraged to do so in a gentle and non-threatening fashion, and being sure those who are all too ready to speak get a chance to listen, ditto. The facilitator sees that the agenda is moved through reasonably and in order, and notes when the discussion seems to reach a point that a proposal could be made. The facilitator can then either offer a proposal himself, or suggest that someone else to do so. At that point, the facilitator checks for consensus, encourages further discussion if necessary, and sees to it, in concert with the scribe or notetaker, that the final proposal includes all concerns brought up in the meeting.

Spiritual Gifts for Facilitators—At first glance, it would seem that facilitators would need gifts of leadership and administration; however, this will only be helpful if the leader in question is humble enough to submit to the group. The gift of encouragement may be more to the point, as the facilitator seeks to help quiet people speak up, eager people listen up, and worried people express their needs and trust that they will be met. Discernment and wisdom would also be very helpful in a facilitator.

A Biblical Model—A close reading of Acts 15 would seem to indicate that Peter and James, at least, played something of a role of facilitator at the Jerusalem Council. Verse 7 says that "after much debate," Peter stood up to speak, and what he said seems to have been an attempt to cast oil on troubled waters. The others then continued to listen as Paul and Barnabas relayed the stories of how they had seen the Spirit work. Then, in verse 13, James stands and makes the first proposal. It is clear from the context that more discussion and clarification was necessary before they agreed on a letter to send to those working with Gentiles, but it is also clear, both that Peter and James were seen as leaders even among the other apostles, and that they did not impose their own opinions, but listened to the voice of the group. Or more vitally, listened for the Voice of God within the voice of the group.

Those who may feel nervous and inadequate to the role of facilitator can take courage from this, then. Those who are in the Spirit are grown into the roles they need. Who would have liked to have the old Peter as a group facilitator? And just imagine either of the Sons of Thunder in that role! Yet, not that many years later, here is James, amazingly wise, while the most cursory reading of the letters of John will suffice to show that the Beloved is now perhaps the most openly loving and compassionate of all twelve.

2. Vibeswatcher

This cutesy term sounds like something that came out of the 60s and 70s, but it is descriptive, at any rate. The vibeswatcher has the task of becoming, and remaining, attuned to the emotional state of the group and of each individual within it. This is easy for some people and not so easy for others. Possibly it's a great exercise for those to whom it does not come automatically. The vibeswatcher attempts to lighten things, possibly with a little humor or a community-building game, when things grow heavy and the going is rough. She might open the windows for fresh air, or the curtains for more light if people seem bored, or suggest a restatement of some question or item of discussion if the group is growing silly. He may stop the action and ask for some quiet breathing and prayer if emotions are growing tense.

The vibeswatcher must notice and intervene if someone's fear or anger is being ignored, belittled, or shunted aside and speaks up, gently, if there is an emotional undercurrent that seems to be affecting the whole group.

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Large groups also have a Gatekeeper who welcomes, hands out papers, greets latecomers and catches them up, and deals with interruptions. For the small group, this can be the vibeswatcher.

Spiritual Gifts for Vibeswatchers—This is a role whose importance can hardly be overstated, at least if the issue on the table is controversial and emotionally charged. It is a task that is difficult to describe and essential to maintain with kindness and honesty. The person who takes this role needs the gifts of encouragement, mercy, and a kind of prophetic eye. But most of all, the vibeswatcher needs discernment to see through to the heart of the matter, to the heart of what an inarticulate person is trying to say, and to the heart of the members and of the group itself.

A Biblical Model—There can be no better model (for any of these roles) than Jesus Himself. Two stories, in particular, come to mind, in both of which Jesus brought the matter to the attention of the group, but in two very different ways.

The first story is found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 7, at the home of Simon the Pharisee, healed by Jesus of leprosy. When Jesus perceived that Simon was silently criticizing Mary, He did not scold him publicly. He told a story in which, if he chose, Simon could find a new attitude. The rest of the guests, hearing the story, had the same choice to make, and clearly enough of them understood what had happened
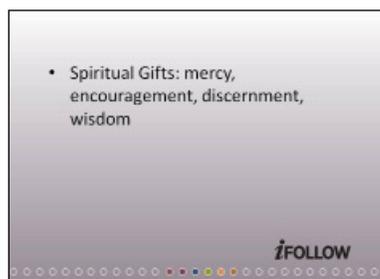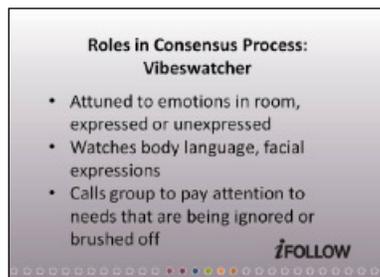
that the story came down to us, even though it wasn't said in so many words there at the table.

The second story is that of the woman with an issue of blood, found in Matthew 9, Mark 5, and Luke 8. In this case, despite the fact that He is hemmed in by a large and excitable crowd, including a distraught father who wants his daughter healed, Jesus notices the silent need of a timid woman who knows she would be in big trouble if she is caught touching anyone, let alone a man, especially an important teacher! Jesus didn't want to display Simon's sinful attitude to his guests, but in this case, Jesus does want the woman and everyone else to know that her illness is *not* because of her sin, nor is it a sin to come to Jesus for help. He makes her tell her story in front of everyone, however humiliating she might think it, with the purpose of showing all present (and us today) that she has acted in faith and is rewarded for it.

Neither of these is the story of a group coming to consensus, but they are examples of the quick empathy and merciful, straightforward love needed in such a role.

3. Timekeeper

Here is a simple role, one which almost anyone will feel able to play. It is the timekeeper's job to first, ask if the group wants to set a time limit on each person's turn to speak or on brainstorming sessions, second, to watch those times and let people know if they're growing close to the end, and third, to keep time for the entire session, giving notice at half-way, and perhaps a five-minute warning, or whatever the group wishes. They may also ask if the group wants to re-negotiate for a different time allotment if something is taking more time than expected. When the timekeeper wishes to speak, it is best to ask someone else to keep time for that period.

Roles in Consensus Process: Timekeeper

a. Keeps time for group as a whole and for individual speakers
b. Gives halftime and later warnings
c. Calm and matter-of-fact
d. Detail-oriented
e. Spiritual Gifts: helps, tact and diplomacy

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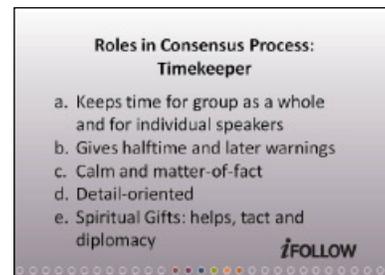
Spiritual Gifts for Timekeepers—Despite the fact that it's a simple role, this is an important one. As in the whole world, what Plato would have called the "worker class" runs the planet. If all the presidents, kings, and prime ministers suddenly disappeared, we'd go on pretty well, but just imagine what would happen if all the custodial, kitchen, and sanitation workers disappeared! So it is with "helps" roles like this one of timekeeper.

It can be more difficult to do than it first appears, too. Many times a group says they'll allow each person three minutes, or five minutes, but one person goes on and on anyway, and no one has the courage to call a halt. Often the speaker will even say, with a show of modesty, "I'm talking too much!" or "Should I go on?" Generally, the others say politely, "Oh, no, do continue!" Setting someone as timekeeper gives that

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person the permission to matter-of-factly say, "One minute," and then "Thank you, time is up." This task requires an eye to detail and small things, so this person would do well with the gift of helps or service, and whether they're specifically listed in the Bible or not, tact and diplomacy come in handy, too.

A Biblical Model—There does not seem to be a particular Bible character we can point to as a timekeeper; however, there are Biblical injunctions that fit here. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 tells us there is "a time for everything." Ecclesiastes 8:5 adds that "a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure." In 1 Corinthians 14:40 Paul admonishes, "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." James 1:19 says we should be "quick to hear, slow to speak." And of course there are passages in nearly every epistle as well as other Bible passages which command us to listen to and love each other, to consider others' needs before our own; in short, to obey the Great Command to love others as ourselves, and the Golden Rule to treat them as we wish they'd treat us.

4. Notetaker or Scribe

This is much more than the usual secretary taking minutes. What he or she writes needs to be complete enough to help the group get back on track if they can't remember what they've covered or where they lost their train of thought, settle disputes about what was said and decided already, and to create the agenda for the next meeting.

Preferably on a white board or flip-chart the whole group can see, but possibly in a notebook or computer, the notetaker keeps track of key points, proposals, consensus decisions, difficulties and questions, and things which were tabled for later discussion. This person also must keep track of who was assigned to carry out which tasks, and when.

Roles in Consensus Process: Note taker or Scribe

a. Keeps notes of discussions, ideas, brainstorms, proposals
b. Also notes disagreements, stated needs
c. Takes note of similar and dissimilar ideas
d. Makes final report

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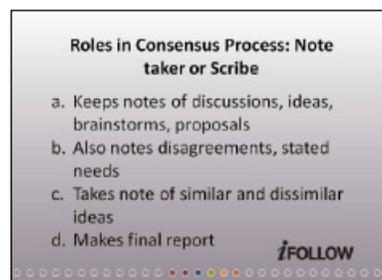
The notetaker may be able to help if the group members think they have found the skeleton of a proposal, but are having trouble formulating it.

Spiritual Gifts for Scribes—At least one spiritual gift list, found on kodachrome.org/spiritgift, cites writing as a spiritual gift in itself. They reference the first verses of several gospels and epistles, in which the writers mention their desire to write down the things they want to share, but there is another favorite text among Christian writers, Habakkuk 2:2, especially the version found in the New Living Translation: "Then the Lord

Spiritual Gifts: knowledge, discernment, interpretation, tongues, teaching

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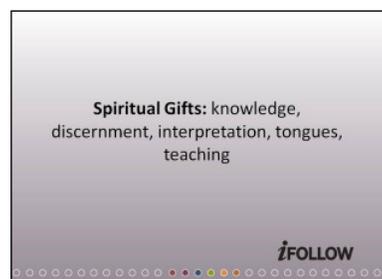
said to me, 'Write my answer in large, clear letters on a tablet, so that a runner can read it and tell everyone else.'" This is what a notetaker must do; make things plain to the rest. This is more than merely recording. A scribe needs to be able to quickly distill whole paragraphs into topic sentences or fragments, which hold the heart of the matter. This requires gifts of knowledge, discernment, interpretation, and even, in a sense, tongues. Teaching might not come amiss, too, since most teachers can outline skillfully. The most important skill? The ability to listen fast and write faster!

A Biblical Model—There are, one might say, two levels of scribery. The first, in a consensus group, is that described above; listening closely to debate and discussion and excitement and disagreement, and capturing quickly the essence of the points made. Luke did this. He listened to endless stories, often (unlike the other gospel writers) those of women, and probably took copious notes, and then, according to his own words, he attempted to "write out in consecutive order … the exact truth." (Taken from Luke 1:1-4) He later wrote Book Two, the one we know as Acts. And yet I am sure he would have agreed with John that the whole world wouldn't have held the books if they'd written down everything Jesus said and did. (John 21:25) They had to distill. They had to choose which parts were the most essential, the heart of it all. This is the scribe a consensus group needs.

But the second level is also important. Scribes were ubiquitous in an illiterate society, so they are found throughout the Bible, and their most important function was to record *everything. Exactly.* Just the way the person employing them said it. Being the detail-lovers that they are, people who want their ducks in neat and orderly rows, the Jewish legal scribes of Jesus' time tended to be frustrated by His creativity and unpredictability, and His willingness to put people and His love for them above the pure letter of the law, or at least above what the scribes considered the pure letter of the law. To many, then as now, those very Hebrew letters were the actual words of God Himself, and for this itinerant preacher to come along and say "You have heard [insert law of Moses] *but I say* [insert heretical teaching such as 'love your enemies]" was actual blasphemy. The second level, then, of scribery, is copying. And if it weren't for the faithful scribes of about 40 centuries, we would have no Bible. They copied carefully, painstakingly, and deliberately. Those who added and subtracted bits have caused argument and controversy to this very day.

We need this kind of attention to detail, too. When the meeting is over, and the proposals are put into practice, when the members of the group need to know exactly what was decided, or someone needs to put the meeting notes into a computer or a permanent file, they have to be complete, and they have to be right. Watch for the people who can fill these two roles, and try not to get them confused, and all will be well.

Steps to Consensus

Now we get down to the actual business of coming to consensus. There are quite a few plans available, some of which are referenced at the end of this lesson. We will study a fairly simple one, and at the same time get a look at the roles in action.

Step One: Name the Issue—This first step can be simple, or it can be a dilly. What, exactly, is it that we are trying to decide? Does the group want to determine a mission outreach? Or does it know, in general terms, that its mission will be helping the needy in the community, but it has to decide how? Or is it just a matter of what, when, and where? The facilitator asks all these questions, people toss out answers (at this point there may be no real discussion, just suggested possibilities.) What's it all about? Why are we here? The notetaker writes down everything, no matter how wild, and makes note of any disagreements that arise, without spending much time on them now: "Food pantry? I thought we had decided we were going to help Habitat for Humanity!"

Let's say the group discovers that there is so much confusion and disagreement, that they realize they have no idea what they want to do. They just want to work for Jesus in their community. They've named the issue, and the scribe has written across the top of the board, "We want to find a part in the Great Commission that is ours to do."

Step Two: Clarify—This is when existing information is brought up and questions are asked. There is already a Habitat office in the town. The group could join in their work. On the other hand, one group member has experience with doing Mom's Days Out, and another is very good at public speaking. They could have a seminar of some kind. Questions to be put on the board might include, What gifts are present in our group now? Are there dreams already burning in some hearts? Do we want to start something entirely on our own, or join something already existing? What are the advantages/disadvantages of each?

Step Three: Discussion Begins—This is the point at which it becomes most important to be sure each and every member has a chance to hear and a chance to be heard. The vibeswatcher pays close attention to facial expression, voice tones, and body language. The timekeeper calmly announces the end of each person's allotted time. The notetaker puts up the distilled ideas, and takes particular note of similar opinions held by some (how many?) as well as differences. The facilitator keeps the discussion on track and helps to avoid details until an option is chosen.

When someone has a concern, it is heard and written down. Often, what appear to be disagreements are only misunderstandings, which melt away as there is careful listening. Those disagreements which remain and are real are considered as valuable resources for building a solution everyone can agree with.

Perhaps several people are interested in helping with Habitat, but one young man

says he doesn't like the idea of helping to build houses because he doesn't know how. Someone says lightly, "Oh, that's all right, you'll learn!" The discussion turns in another direction, but the vibeswatcher says, "I think we need to give more consideration to what John has said. John, can you share more?" It turns out that John feels anxious and inadequate, and reading between the lines of what he actually says, it's clear he thinks men should know these things, and he doesn't. Someone could share a story in which he helped at a Habitat house even though he couldn't even hold a hammer, or someone could ask, "If we end up helping build houses, would you feel more comfortable working with me? I can help you learn what you need to know." Or perhaps John has an entirely different mission idea, which goes on the board with the other options.

Step Four: The First Proposal—When it looks as though agreement is coming close, anyone can make a proposal, which the scribe records. The proposal should be stated as clearly as possible, though with the knowledge that it is probably not in its final state yet.

Step Five: Discuss Proposal—This is the time for more detail. The facilitator makes sure anyone who has questions or reservations is heard, and amendments are added if necessary. When it looks as though consensus is close, the facilitator initiates the next step.

Step Six: Call for Consensus—This is not yet formal consensus. The facilitator looks around. "Are we in agreement?" There is nodding, smiling, and a little uncertainty here and there. The facilitator and the vibeswatcher ask for concerns or reservations. If these are serious, the group must return to either Step Five, discussing this proposal more, or all the way back to Step Two, discussing the issue and coming up with different proposals.

Some consensus guides have detailed ways of expressing how close to or far from consensus each one is. One method is to raise a certain number of fingers to show the "range of consensus," from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In small groups, these methods are probably not necessary. The most important thing is to be sure each one is heard and understood.

There are three ways disagreements can be dealt with: they can be turned into agreements, the group may agree to make room for diversity in the solution, or the person or persons holding the disagreements may decide to let go of their attachment to their opinions.

The best goal is to work at changing the proposal until there is nothing left but agreement. They will help to build one Habitat house, John will work side by side with William and then they will discuss how it went and decide whether to do it again or do something else.

Compromise is acceptable, and a respected way to build a solution, but in CP, it is seen as weaker than a solution which succeeds in meeting everyone's deepest needs. John decides he does not wish to help build a Habitat house, but he is willing to help cook and serve the meal offered to the workers. This is OK for now, and once he's seen others work, he may decide to help next time, thus meeting his own deeper need to feel competent. (Or he may discover he's a chef in the making and has a whole new direction to go in his life now.)

The third thing that can happen with a disagreement is that those who are in disagreement decide to let go of their personal opinion. Perhaps the speaker in our group really wanted to have a seminar. She decides that if the group wants to build a house, that will be fun, too, and a good way to reach out to the community in a way Jesus would have done. She can do a seminar another time.

Step Seven: Formal Consensus—There are three possible "votes" for each person in the group. Because unity and agreement are so important to the consensus process, just one person who disagrees profoundly may "Block" agreement. That is to say, once this person has been heard and listened to and all have attempted to understand and to bring his needs into the proposed solution, in the end his disagreement is unanswerable. The Co-Intelligence Institute has this to say about blocking:

"A block is not a veto, nor is it properly undertaken to aggrandize an individual's views or power. In most cases it is only allowed when someone feels that the proposed decision would be disastrous for the group. Groups that allow casual blocking find they cannot function with consensus. Thus the importance of shared community values and sensibilities."

A person may also "Stand aside," indicating that they disagree with this proposal and do not want to help with it, but they are willing to let it stand and not get in the way of it. Again, this is not a desirable outcome in a small group of perhaps only eight or ten people. Especially if they are, in fact, discussing their mission for God, they must try to find a solution that will use the gifts and meet the needs of all.

Third, and of course, greatly preferable, a person may be "in consensus." In other words, whether or not things went just the way she hoped they would, she is content with the proposal as it stands. She has been heard, adaptations have been made to meet her needs, and she feels this is the will of God for this group at this time.

The final step once a proposal is agreed upon is to discuss the nitty-gritty of how this proposal will be implemented. This will not necessarily be done at the same meeting. Who will do what, when? What are the steps to meet the goals that have now been set by the group? How will they evaluate, over time, and know when to make new decisions? The notetaker is more important than ever here. The final report is complete and detailed, and includes any disagreements or concerns which still exist.

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Conclusion

Among all the effective ways that groups can make decisions, any group will seek the way that meets the needs of any given situation. For many decisions, especially those which may be difficult, emotional, or controversial, Consensus Process can provide a way to meet the needs of every member, make sure they are all heard and understood, and help them guide each other, or grow together, toward a solution that will meet each one's deepest needs. It can deepen a sense of community and unity because differences are not hidden but are looked at clearly, together, and reframed in ways that make sense to all.

In Christian groups, such as the Quakers who first shaped Consensus Process into the form in which we know it today, there is a greater dynamic. Jesus said He would be present in even the tiniest groups of only two or three people. He promised to be with every individual, so why would He add this promise to groups unless He meant His presence, through the Holy Spirit, would be different in a group than it is with one person? God can speak through any willing vessel, but in groups, His voice can come through more clearly, not because they are all alike in their unity, but precisely because they are different, with differing skills, perspectives, backgrounds, and baggage, and so can reflect more facets of God's infinite love and wisdom.

Our Great Commission as Christians is to share what Jesus taught when He was here, to do the things He did, "and even greater things than these!" (John 14:12) He made clear that the most important of all the things He taught was to love as He loved us. (John 15:17) Much later in his long life, John made it even clearer in his letters, especially 1 John, that to love God, it is necessary to love our brothers and sisters.

One of the first things we can do to show that love, and indeed, to grow that love, is to listen. Listen carefully, attentively, deeply. Listen to what is said, and to what is not said. Find unity, not in sameness or a repressing of differences that masquerades as sameness, but in the true diversity of authenticity. Consensus Process is one small way to help in this lifelong endeavor.

Handouts in this Package

1. Steps to Consensus
2. Roles Necessary in Getting to Consensus

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Additional Resources

Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olson (1997) *Discerning God's Will Together.* Upper Room Books.

Butler, C. T. and Rothstein, Amy (1987). *On Conflict and Consensus: A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decisionmaking.* Portland, ME: Food Not Bombs Publishing. Published on line at: www.ic.org/pnp/ocac (On page 18 is a chart with a pdf file one can print for use in a group or committee.)

Dressler, Larry (2006). *Consensus through Conversation.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Johnson, L. T. (1996). *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church.* Nashville: Abingdon.

Palmer, Parker (n.d.). "The Clearness Committee." www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/clearness-committee   (Describes the Quaker method for discernment and consensus.)

Saint, Steven and Lawson, J. R. (1994). *Rules for Reaching Consensus.* San Diego: Pfeiffer.

Strauss, David and Layton, T. C. (2002). *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems and Make Decisions*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Websites

A short, simple overview of consensus process can be found at: www.activism.net/peace/nvcdh/consensus.shtml

A small manual (3 pages) on consensus decision-making is available at: lefh.net/pcpo/Boards__/Handouts/CONSENSUSSteps.pdf

Co-Intellegence Institute (CII) is an organization dedicated to educating people about consensus decision-making. It has many helpful resources available for download at: www.co-intelligence.org

Missional Church is a website designed to encourage Christian congregations of all denominations to move to a more mission-driven type of church life. It includes many resources on spiritual discernment and consensus decision-making: www.missionalchurch.org/resources/discerning.html

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The Formal Consensus Website provides books, workshops and seminars, both online and in person about this topic: www.consensus.net

The Transforming Center is a parachurch organization focused on changing the life of congregations toward a more mission-driven approach. It has available on its website a PDF that shows a simple (though not necessarily easy) process for coming together and discerning God's will as a group living in Christian community: www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/feb2005.pdf

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the differences of the different group decision processes: dictatorship, voting, and consensus.

2. When might each be the best way to go?

3. What are the opinions in the group? Is one way preferred? Why?

4. Are there people experienced in CP? What do they think of it?

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Group Activity

A Windshield Survey

Part One: Use Before the Steps to Consensus are Taught

Purpose: To introduce the concepts of CP as opposed to other decision-making processes.

Preparation: This exercise should come after the basics of CP, its strengths and weaknesses, and the roles have been presented. You will need a board or flipchart.

Assignment: Let the seminar class become a Small Group, or more than one if there are enough people. Have no more than eight or ten per group, to speed up this exercise. Allow them a few minutes to discuss the roles and choose who will play each role for the purposes of this exercise. The first role to choose is Notetaker, so that person can begin keeping notes of this "meeting" right away. At this point, let them just talk a little about what experience they have, what they know their spiritual gifts to be, and which roles they would like to try out, and why. They may share stories of discussions they have facilitated or participated in and what they learned or how they wish things had gone differently. Then reconvene for the next section. After the steps to consensus are discussed, each small group will role play a consensus process meeting.

Time: Allow 20-30 minutes for this portion of the activity. No debriefing yet.

Part Two: Use After the Steps to Consensus are Taught

Purpose: To practice the actual steps to consensus.

Preparation: In case no one volunteers a problem or issue to work on, have a couple of sample scenarios ready, such as "We are a new mission group, and need to decide what we want to do and how."

Assignment: Divide into the same small group(s) as before, with the roles agreed on earlier. They will role play a simple consensus meeting, choosing something fairly easy to agree on, but not too easy. Have some members role play disagreements, questions, possible fears, and how to work them out. Some individuals may have a real problem in their actual small groups that they wish to work with, or issues they have worked with in the past. Some may wish to see how it would feel to block, or stand aside.

Debrief: Talk about how this might feel if the issues and situations were real. Do the class members think they would like such a process, that they would feel listened to and understood if they experienced CP in their own groups?

Time: Allow at least 15 minutes for role play, plus an additional 15 minutes for discussion and sharing of reactions.

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HANDOUT

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Steps to Consensus

Step One: Name the Issue
What, exactly, is it that we are trying to decide? The facilitator asks questions, people toss out answers (at this point there may be no real discussion, just suggested possibilities.) What's it all about? Why are we here? The notetaker writes down everything, no matter how wild, and makes note of any disagreements that arise, without spending much time on them now.

Step Two: Clarify
Questions to be put on the board might include, What gifts are present in our group now? Are there dreams already burning in some hearts? Do we want to start something entirely on our own, or join something already existing? What are the advantages/disadvantages of each?

Step Three: The Discussion Begins
This is the point at which it becomes most important to be sure each and every member has a chance to hear and a chance to be heard. The vibeswatcher pays close attention to facial expression, voice tones, and body language. The timekeeper calmly announces the end of each person's allotted time. The notetaker puts up the distilled ideas, and takes particular note of similar opinions held by some (how many?) as well as differences. The facilitator keeps the discussion on track and helps to avoid details until an option is chosen.

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Step Six: Call for Consensus
This is not yet formal consensus. The facilitator looks around. "Are we in agreement?" There is nodding, smiling. . . and a little uncertainty here and there. The facilitator and

the vibeswatcher ask for concerns or reservations. If these are serious, the group must return to either Step Five, discussing this proposal more, or all the way back to Step Two, discussing the issue and coming up with different proposals.

Step Seven: Formal Consensus

There are three possible votes. The first is, of course, "in consensus." Each person has felt heard, their main concerns have been addressed; they are confident that this is God's will for the group at this time. The second is "stand aside." This is a person who disagrees with the will of the group, but will go along with the majority. This is not recommended in a small group, where one person can be 10 percent or more of the membership. It is better to pursue some way of meeting all needs and objections if possible. The third possible vote is a "block." This person believes so strongly that the decision of the group is not God's will that he or she will not stand down. This requires much more prayer, and perhaps another meeting later. When all else fails, and if the rest of the group is convicted that they are heeding God's will, the blocking member may leave the group.

Small Group Leadership: Consensus Decision-Making

Handout 2

Roles Necessary in Getting to Consensus

Facilitator

Helps guide the process

Not a leader, but a helper

Keeps on track

Makes sure all are heard

Spiritual Gifts: administration, leadership (if humble), encouragement

Vibeswatcher

Attuned to emotions in room, expressed or unexpressed

Watches body language, facial expressions

Calls group to pay attention to needs that are being ignored or brushed off

Spiritual Gifts: mercy, encouragement, discernment, wisdom

Timekeeper

Keeps time for group as a whole and for individual speakers

Gives halftime and later warnings

Calm and matter-of-fact

Detail-oriented

Spiritual Gifts: helps, tact and diplomacy

Notetaker or Scribe

Keeps notes of discussions, ideas, brainstorms, proposals

Also notes disagreements, stated needs

Takes note of similar and dissimular ideas

Makes final report

Spiritual Gifts: knowledge, discernment, interpretation, tongues, teaching