

Consensus-Based Decision Making (pg. 17 –GWS 2008-10)

While the *WSC Rules of Order* helps us to structure the voting process during the business sessions, the decision-making process of the conference is based on consensus. Consensus refers to the consent of the group or in other words, the willingness to move forward with a decision on the part of all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. Rather than a strict consensus process, which typically allows a lone dissenter to block a proposal, the WSC uses a form of consensus-based decision making (CBDM), which is based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered, but does not necessarily mean the final decision is unanimous. (The word “consensus” derives from the Latin *cum* meaning “with” or “together with,” and *sentire* meaning to “think” or “feel.” The root of “consensus,” therefore, means to think or feel together.) Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and no one person has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!). The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach an agreement. It is how we manifest the idea “together we can do what we cannot do alone” in a service setting.

This foundation is the very essence of what the conference is about. As stated above “the conference is a vehicle for fellowship communication and unity: a forum where our common welfare is itself the business of the meeting.” In order for the conference to make decisions that serve a worldwide fellowship, it is critical that all points of view are heard, even if they are not all what we might individually prefer. Our Ninth Concept reminds us all that *All elements of our service structure have the responsibility to carefully consider all viewpoints in their decision-making processes*. Our commitment to a consensus-based process before a formal decision often means the conference comes to a higher-quality decision. What’s more, participants are more likely to implement decisions they accept, and consensus makes acceptance more likely. The history of the conference reflects that only decisions that serve the fellowship are actually embraced, accepted, and used by the fellowship.

Much of the time spent at the conference is focused on building consensus on important agenda issues from the fellowship and world services. While consensus-building requires hearing and respecting all points of view, it does not necessarily mean that the discussion phase of decision-making becomes a kind of “sharing session” where all participants speak about how they feel. It is about finding the common ground that every participant can support, even when that common ground is not exactly as every participant may desire. Adequate discussion takes time and may occur in the conference meeting as a whole, in panels, or in small groups. Regardless of how these discussions occur, they require commitment from each participant to focus on the issues at hand as well as skilled facilitation to encourage that focus and lead the group toward consensus. The benefits or results of this process are a greater understanding of the proposals, agreement among participants to move forward and if needed, the modification of the proposals being considered to reflect the will of the body which has been clarified from the discussions. As the group moves into a decision, a facilitator can ask if there are any objections. If there are, the group can discuss those objections by topic and then move to a decision. Only after adequate discussion and consensus-building has occurred, does the conference enter a business session in order to formalize its decisions. Ideally, a decision can be reached by asking if there are any objections. If there are objections a more formal process is used to determine the conference’s decision.

The purpose of the old business session at the conference is to consider the issues and proposals contained in the *Conference Agenda Report*. Items from NAWS that appear in the *Conference Agenda Report* are usually the result of lengthy discussion and input at the previous conference and throughout the conference cycle. Once arriving at the conference, the body is usually ready to make a decision. The old business session occurs early in the conference week. The items contained in the *CAR* are the culmination of the work from the previous cycle and finalizing them allows the conference to spend the rest of the week having discussions and sessions that will frame much of the work for the next conference cycle.

Each item is first reviewed by the conference to assess how much, if any, discussion needs to take place before the body is prepared to make a decision. If it appears that there is not a need for discussion, the conference will move on to other items. An opportunity is provided for anyone who has something that they wish to say before the conference moves on. If the conference needs more discussion, then these discussions may take place by dividing the conference into smaller groups or focusing the discussions to see what the will of the body is on the underlying issues. Straw polls can give a sense of where the body is on a particular issue and can be used in a variety of ways. A straw poll can help to determine if any or further discussion is indeed necessary, to frame issues while discussion is occurring, and to determine if the body is ready to make a decision. These are not binding decisions and are simply a tool to aid in the consensus-based process. If a proposal has already received adequate discussion during the week, the conference may choose to have no further discussion at this time. When the discussions are finished, the conference comes together in a formal business session, using the *WSC Rules of Order*, in order to record the decision of the body. Formal business sessions are an important part of the process for the conference. As a body that only meets every two years, it is important that the conference be able to make decisions. *Robert's Rules* and formal voting can often be an adversarial process where there is a "winner" and "loser" or a "right" and a "wrong." This is why the CBDM process that precedes voting at the conference is so important. It honors the importance we place on our common welfare and the value of all viewpoints—even when we agree to disagree.

New business sessions usually take a bit more work. They are scheduled late in the conference week to allow the discussions and ideas of the week to come to bear on the discussions and decisions. The new business session focuses on items contained in the *Conference Approval Track*—including the budget and project plans for the next cycle, seating of new regions, and approval of service material—as well as the ideas that conference participants have come to during the week. The discussion on these items typically requires a much more fluid process than items in old business. Ideas are discussed and are often adapted and changed as the discussion begins to frame the will of the body. This is especially true for items being considered for the future or still in some stage of development. This can seem uncomfortable or strange to those of us only familiar with more formal processes. Straw polls and questions are used frequently to try to mold and frame the ideas being considered. Often the conference chooses not to hold any discussion on those items it does not wish to entertain.

CBDM can be a very creative process that captures the ideas present in such a way that the result is something different and better than the original proposal. It is more timeconsuming but ultimately a more effective process than simply voting.

The closing day of the conference is an opportunity for the conference to review its decisions of the week and their impact over the upcoming conference cycle. This session allows the conference participants to leave with a common understanding of the work ahead, the challenges of the next two years, and what may be expected at the next

WSC meeting.

Throughout the week, each participant is challenged to really listen to what is being said, to consider with an open mind what will best serve the fellowship worldwide, and often to surrender to what seems to serve the greater good. With over a hundred participants, respect, patience, and trust are required. But we think the effort is worth the investment, and our experience from over twenty five conferences has taught us a lot about what works and what does not. The commitment to consensus-based decision making is a part of the spiritual means by which we invite a loving God to influence our decisions.