

## Working Toward Consensus

We've all recently had the opportunity to cast our vote on important issues. But when working with small groups, like your church committee or a team at work, voting isn't always the best way to make decisions. When we go with the "majority rules" philosophy, we also agree that the "minority loses." Our decisions become a matter of either/or instead of working toward a solution that all can support.

The term consensus implies agreement, compromise and consent. When groups use consensus to make decisions they often throw parliamentary procedure out the window. Instead of making motions with seconds, followed by discussion and voting, the group talks through decisions until they come up with a solution that all in the group agree to support. That doesn't mean that every person in the group gets exactly what they want, but it does mean that they get enough of what they want to go along with the decision.

It also doesn't mean that the process is simple or quick. Working through issues until a group reaches consensus can be difficult and time consuming. But when you take the time to do it, the result is better group cohesiveness and support of the direction the group is taking.

So what are some consensus-building strategies that work with groups?

- All members need to have a clear idea of the issue at hand – what is it we're trying to accomplish?
- Trust among the group members is necessary to make the consensus process workable. The more we understand the other members of our group, the more we come to trust them. So incorporate some time in your meetings for the members to get to know each other. Ice-breaker activities can be a great help with this.
- The group must work to listen, respond and incorporate the ideas expressed by **all** members.
- Listening is critical. Effective listening can be a challenge. To make sure you understand someone's position, restate it and ask for clarification. For example "It sounds like you would prefer to move the meeting to a new location. Is that right?"
- All members must become a part of the discussion. This requires a conscious effort of the group leader to draw out the opinions of those who aren't talking openly. A simple question – "Jo, what do you think about this?" - can be all that it takes.
- Look for common ground. Ask the members to identify what they **do** agree upon. Often there is more agreement than disagreement. And identifying where we do think alike can open up new possibilities for compromise.
- Ask members to consider other's points of view. One technique is to ask something like "Doris, can you see why Jim feels the way he does about this issue?"
- Bring decisions to a close by asking for agreement. For example "It sounds like we all want to develop a new brochure. Is that right?" Then go around the group and see if each person agrees. Often members will be nodding their heads. If someone isn't openly agreeing, ask if they support the decision.
- Remember that while consensus builds more agreement than voting, you won't always be able to give every member of the group everything they want. But while they might not be pleased with every aspect of the action taken, you do want to work until they can at least "agree not to disagree."

In the end the members of your group will determine whether there is consensus to move forward and accomplish their goals. Consensus building is a process. And it is continuous.