

# **“Conversations on the Journey”**

## **Module III: Modes of Decision Making**

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# Module III: Modes of Decision Making

## Guidance from Acts of the Apostles

Members of the early Christian community faced the same challenges as the Christians of today. They had to decide whom to call forth for ministry, how to settle disagreements, how to identify the movement of the Spirit with the church. Decision-making was as important to them as it is for the church today. Imagine that the record of these early conversations were placed in the form of “minutes.” Below you will find four examples:

### **Minutes of Meeting 1: Based on Acts 1:12-26**

The meeting was held in a large upstairs room, where the eleven disciples were gathered with Mary, the women who were followers of Jesus and others. Total attendance: 120. Peter, reminding the assembled of the word of David “...let another take his position as overseer,” was concerned that a twelfth disciple be chosen to replace Judas. To qualify, the nominees must have been followers from the beginning and witnesses to the Resurrection.

Two were proposed by the group, Matthias and Joseph. The whole assembly prayed asking for the guidance of the Spirit: “Show us which one of these two you have chosen...” They then cast lots for them and the lot fell on Matthias.

### **Minutes of Meeting 2: Based on Acts 6: 1-6**

A complaint had been registered by the Greek-speaking Christians that their widows were being neglected in the food distribution. So the twelve called a meeting of the total community to consider the matter.

The twelve were so busy teaching the Word of God to this growing church that they didn’t have time to serve tables. They suggested that seven people be selected with the qualifications of being trustworthy, wise, and full of the Spirit. The community was pleased to choose seven Greek speakers. “They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands of them”

### **Minutes of Meeting 3: Based on Acts 11: 1-18**

The meeting was called by the apostles and other believers, having heard that Peter was coming to town. Some were upset that he was associating with Gentiles and wanted to know why.

Peter told his story in great detail—his dream, his meeting with the Gentile Cornelius in his home, and how the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius’ household while Peter was preaching.

"I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said" 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When [the council] heard then, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

#### **Minutes of Meeting 4: Based on Acts 15: 1-35**

The meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem was called at the request of the church in Antioch. Conflict had arisen when several from the Jerusalem church who were teaching in Antioch insisted that Gentile Christians should observe the ritual laws of Moses—particularly the rite of circumcision.

Paul and Barnabas, who disagreed with these Jerusalem teachers, were sent to Jerusalem by the Antioch church to discuss the issue. They were warmly welcomed by the Jerusalem church, which was eager to hear their stories of the conversion of the Gentiles.

The issue at hand was addressed, there being intense debate on both sides. Peter, in particular, spoke eloquently about the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles and of salvation by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

When Paul and Barnabas spoke, there was a silent hush. Their stories of signs and wonders swayed the assembly. Then James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, spoke the mind of the whole group. He cited Simeon's prediction that Gentiles would believe, then he said the church should lay off troubling the believers at Antioch. The assembly consented, and then they chose two of their own members, Judas called Barnabas and Silas, to carry a letter back to the church at Antioch. The letter read:

...We have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you...It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials; that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

**For Reflection:** As you reflect on these four examples of decision-making in the early church, what are the common elements you discover?

How does the example of the early church speak to our efforts to make the best recommendations for the life of the church today?

*Adapted from data/ministry/transfrm.doc*

## Modes of Decision-making

At the beginning of the Church, the apostles saw the need for sharing responsibility for the life of the church. With the approval of the community seven men were selected to care for the pastoral needs of the Greek community. (Act 6:3ff) They consulted with the wider community on issues relating to laws and practices of faith. (Acts 15: 5-28) For the apostles sharing responsibility or collaboration was more than delegating work. It also included inviting others into the task shaping of the life and ministry of the church.

Collaborative decision-making means much more than just a passive hearing of the opinions of persons or groups. It is based on the conviction that there is genuine wisdom within the community. As participants in the collaborative decision-making process, we are called to build up the Church by involving ourselves in decision-making. We share our gifts with the rest of the group knowing that no one individual has all the answers. Each member has a contribution and a different part of the answer.

Through a process of listening and sharing done within a context of openness and respect, all the wisdom of the group can be found and the Spirit's direction for the group discovered. There are diverse ways of coming to that insight. All processes have common elements that must be present for the good of the whole:

1. Accuracy of the information shared
2. Willingness to be mutually influenced through shared wisdom
3. Respectful listening
4. Non judgmental weighing of options
5. Commitment to the agreed upon outcome
6. Prayerful consideration
7. Adequate time for investigation and pondering

The three most common processes for coming to a decision are:

- Consensus
- Discernment
- Voting

**For Reflection:** How is decision-making within a community of faith different from the decision-making processes of society, business or civic groups?

What signs would indicate that the process has moved away from the faith oriented mode?

## Consensus

Steps in decision-making are the same in all areas of pastoral planning but the mode of decision-making changes with changing circumstances. If the decision is directional and strategic, then the decision is characterized by collaboration, consultation and consensus-building. Participation is the guiding principle especially in the stages of evaluation and recommendation. Such work takes time but results in greater ownership of the decision and more widespread support for it. (Policy and Guidelines for Parish Consultative Structure, Archdiocese of Seattle, pg. 23)

Consensus, defined as a group process for decision-making through which all come to a common understanding and a mutual support for the decision, involves intellectual agreement by participants. It involves four steps:

### Input/Information gathering

- The issue is clearly presented
- Adequate background material is presented
- Questions are clarified

### Discussion

- There is open response to the issue presented
- All opinions and positions are heard
- Leader tests for common understanding and consent (consensus)

### Reflection

- In pastoral situations the decision is weighed in the light of the following considerations:
  - Does the position reflect the Gospel message?
  - Will the decision lead the parish to a deeper implementation or living out of its mission statement?
  - Can all live with and support the recommendation?

### Review

- Summarize the issue including areas of agreement and disagreement
- State consensus reached
- Continue discussion of any areas that are not resolved

Consensus requires that persons move away from pre-judgments and their own first preferences. It does not imply unanimity but does require a substantial commitment to the chosen direction. Because decisions are delayed until a full commitment of support is established, consensus promotes unity within the parish community.

**For Reflection:** Given the commitment of time and reflection that consensus requires, what might be appropriate decisions for this model?

What types of decisions would not be appropriate for the consensus mode of decision-making?

## Discernment

A parish pastoral council is a discerning community. As such, it moves beyond the data to hear the leading of the Holy Spirit under the data. Discernment is rooted in prayerful listening to God. Maureen Conroy, RSM, a spiritual guide and director describes discernment saying:

Discernment means to sift through, distinguish, separate and divide interior movements that result from God's personal involvement...Developing a discerning heart is about sifting through interior movements so we can choose those that bring us to deeper union with God and reject those that draw us away.

David Lonsdale, SJ. expands this understanding noting:

Discernment, then, is the ability both to allow one's own life to be formed and guided by the word of God and to play an appropriate part in ensuring that this word also guides the life and shapes the structure of the community

A PPC must listen to the voice of the Spirit speaks through the scriptures, through their prayer, through the experience of the church, through the reality of their community. Discernment is always focused on God's desire even when it might be challenging or inconvenient. As such the task of discernment is guided by:

- \*prayerful consideration of the needs of our community, church and world
- \*Gospel priorities
- \*pastoral priorities of the universal and local church
- \*our own resources of time, talent and treasure as well as our limitations
- \*our reality

In and through the sacrament of confirmation, the church acknowledges the presence of the Spirit speaking through each member of the Body of Christ. That theological conviction means that discernment opens itself to listen to the voice of all members, especially those who might be overlooked.

The process of discernment has its own characteristics: honesty, dignity, community, responsibility and simplicity. If one does not approach the act of discernment with those characteristics, true discernment cannot take place. All participants must be open to being mutually influenced and be willing to speak the true as they experience it.

**For Reflection:** Using the Gospel of last Sunday, seek to understand what is asked of your community. First invite each person to share what they have heard within any comments. Then invite the group to identify any common insights. Finally, seek together what response is being asked of you by the Word of God.

## Voting

Decision-making using a voting process is the most commonly used method for reaching decisions in civic, business and political spheres. Voting is often determined by personal preference, data on hand and often results in a win/lose dynamic. Voting allows majority interests to determine the outcome of all decisions. While the use of the voting process might incorporate many of the elements desired for pastoral decisions, it does not build them into the voting process.

Decisions made by Parish Pastoral Councils are rarely reached through voting. It is the task of the group to listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to reach decisions that are unified, accepted and supported by all. Voting, while not entirely excluding such an outcome, does not contribute to its realization.

Voting is a useful and appropriate method for organizing decisions such as what day the PPC should meet. That type of practical detail does not need a full discernment process although it does require that members listen carefully to everyone's needs, weigh the options and have all the information necessary to make the determination. Any decision that cannot be accepted or supported by the whole is inappropriate.

Reflecting upon decision-making and parish pastoral councils, guidelines from the Diocese of Seattle note:

“While these models may be appropriate in other contexts, the mission of the Church calls all to share responsibility according to their appropriate role and responsibility. Therefore, within the context of faithfulness to the teachings of the Church, parish decision making about direction and priorities should make use of models which will promote community and a commitment to the Gospel and our faith tradition. This requires a posture of servant leadership on the part of parish leadership, seeking to understand the needs of the community and building consensus around particular directions.” (Policy and Guidelines for Parish Consultative Structure, Archdiocese of Seattle, pg. 24)

**For Reflection:** How can the use of a voting process be divisive in a community?

What specific circumstances might make voting an effective method?

## Challenges to Decision-making

There are both internal and external challenges to making decisions that are rooted in the wisdom of the Spirit. No matter which mode of decision-making is used, the following are necessary:

### 1. Adequate information to make a decision.

Information is power. When needed data is not disclosed, the group is not able to make an informed choice. Some information is, by nature, confidential and cannot be disclosed but that would be an exception to the norm. Having strict confidentiality understandings among PPC members and honoring those limits allows for free disclosure of information.

### 2. Time pressure

Discernment or consensus seeking takes time and prayer. A rush to closure violates the process. The more vital the decision, the more time is needed to ensure that the recommendation grows out of the Spirit's leading

### 3. Openness to influence

When anyone enters into a decision-making process with his/her mind made up in advance, it is an obstacle to Christian discernment. This can happen in two different types of circumstances. A member of the council can be so fixed in his/her person view that they are closed to hearing new data or different perceptions. On the other hand sometimes councils are asked for advice but the outcome is already determined. Either situation frustrates the process.

Internal obstacles are sometimes more challenging than exterior ones. Sometimes the person can be unaware of them within themselves. The some of these obstacles are listed below:

**Fear:** Fears can arise from uncertainty in the face of change, fear to speak one's truth, fear of how the consequences of the decision might personally impact you

**Attachments:** Often times we are attached to things without realizing it. This can happen when the issue under discussion carries symbolic meaning for the person.

**Absence of a stance of discernment in our lives:** PPC members cannot enter into discernment successfully if discernment is not present as a stance or pattern in daily life

**Ego needs:** Self knowledge and internal freedom is important in the discernment process. The need to be right, to be important, to be successful or to have one's opinion hold more importance than others due to role or experience can disturb a discernment process. Detachment from a specific outcome is required.

**For Reflection:** When you reflect upon your experience with decision-making, how have you encountered any of the obstacles listed above? How were they resolved?