

Proposed change for seeking consensus and agreement

- Do we have consensus on this?
 - **If all orange** – I declare we have consensus
 - **If some blue** – Has your point of view been heard? Would anyone like to speak to explain their concerns?
- **When all have spoken and no one wishes to speak**

We will show cards again. If you consider that your point of view has been heard, even if this resolution is not your first preference, then if you feel that you can agree to consensus being declared as the mind of the meeting please show an orange card. If all cards are orange we will have reached consensus.

If you do not agree, please show your blue card. We do not wish to press you to show orange if you feel it is not right. If there are blue cards I will then invite you to record your objection, so that we can proceed with what is the general mind of the meeting and declare an agreement. You may then bring your name to the minute taker at the close of this session

 - **If all orange** – I declare we have consensus
 - **If some blue** – I declare that this is resolved by agreement. Those who choose to do so may record their objection by giving their name to the minute taker at the close of the session
- **If there is neither consensus nor agreement**
 - Adjourn the discussion to report back to Council/Committee later
 - Ask a group to do some more work on it.
 - Only if it is urgent move to majority decision.

Consensus decision-making in the United Reformed Church: a review of experience to date with some recommendations for the future



Pauline Barnes and Elizabeth Nash
(current and immediate past consensus advisors)

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- ▶ Check with minute taker that the correct wording is on the screen – including changes
- ▶ Try one of the following:
 - A few minutes of quiet reflection
 - Prayer
 - Discussion in buzz groups
 - Refer to a small group to take the issue forward, either at next meeting or later in that meeting
 - Ask for a discussion on whether the issue needs to be resolved at this meeting
 - Summarise the views you have heard.

As we move toward consensus use these questions asking people to show their cards in response:

- ▶ Do we have consensus in support of this proposal?
- ▶ Do we have consensus not to support this proposal?
- ▶ If strong but not unanimous support:
 - Who supports this proposal?
 - Who does not support this proposal as your first choice but is prepared to accept it. Are you prepared to have the issue declared resolved by consensus?
 - Who is not prepared to accept this proposal? Do you accept that your views have been heard and that you agree to live with the outcome? Are you prepared to have the result declared by agreement? If so you may choose to record your dissent.
 - Who is not prepared to accept this proposal?
 - look for further possibilities
 - adjourn discussion to another time or place
 - ask a task group to do some more work on it
 - refer the issue to another council or group
 - decide the issue is unnecessary or inappropriate
 - declare there are diverse views which Christians may hold with equal integrity
- Only if the issue is urgent move to majority decision.



Suggested wording to reflect back what you see in the card response

- There is not a lot of support for that point of view
- Those remarks were not very well supported
- There was quite a mixed response to that speech
- There is strengthening support for this direction but there is more work to be done
- Many people agreed with that speech
- There seems to be support for that possibility – can anyone offer a form of words that will help us to move forward taking these insights into account?
- There is a growing number of crossed cards so we need to move on from this discussion. Please show your cards to respond to the following questions:
 1. Are there any different and important points which we need to hear? (orange – there is more to hear; blue – we have heard the main points)
 2. Are you ready to make the decision? (orange – we are ready to make the decision; blue – we are not yet ready to make the decision).

Decision Session

- Remind everyone that only members of the council or committee may speak and vote
- 3 mins each speaker
- Announce the issue and call the presenters
- Invite speakers to queue at the microphone
- Encourage speakers to keep seeking a way forward that respects all contributors' opinions
- From time to time sum up what you hear to be the predominant view
- Call for speakers with a different perspective

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Introduction

We have been asked to bring together the experience of the URC with consensus decision-making since 2007. In that year General Assembly agreed that all decision-making (with the exception of certain specified matters) should start by using consensus procedures and encouraged other councils and committees to use them. We hope that this brief review will allow everyone involved in using consensus decision-making to see:

- the position the URC has reached,
- what immediate actions and practices will make good outcomes more likely whenever consensus decision-making is used,
- the questions we need to address in the longer term in order to extend good practice and embed consensus decision-making in the URC's thought and practice.

This document contains valuable practical information so we hope it will be distributed and used widely among the councils of the church.

A note on terminology:

We recommend using the phrase 'consensus decision-making', whereas in the past we have talked mostly of 'consensus'. The phrase makes it clearer that we are talking about the decision-making process, and gets round a tendency we have noted to speak of 'consensus voting'. In this document we use the abbreviation CDM for brevity. To make the document generally applicable, we have used the terms 'chair' for whoever is in direct control of the conduct of a council or committee session, 'presenters' for those introducing substantive matter on which a decision is to be taken, and 'participants' for those members of a particular council or committee involved in decision-making.

- Try to encourage a balance of speakers with orange and blue cards, although it is important to hear from those who have reservations or uncertainties or who wish to suggest changes.
- Look for other balances in the speakers. Call for a speaker with a different perspective, or ask for a young person, or a woman or ... Summarise what you have heard every now and then
- Pray
- Use buzz groups – share with your neighbour your views, questions and ideas
- If there is a wide divergence of views, invite everyone who wishes to join the facilitation group at a specific time and place to discuss this further and try to produce a resolution on which they can all agree. This should be done as soon as the Moderator feels that all the main issues have been raised. It does not have to wait for everyone to speak.
- When the discussion session is at an end (and it may come to an end because you have run out of time), sum up what you believe to be the mind of the meeting, including any changes to the proposals (if they were strongly supported) and ask for cards to check if you have summarised accurately.

Suggested wording when asking to see the indicator cards

- What is your response to that speech?
- Please show your response to that point of view
- Please show your indicator cards so that I can see your reaction to what has been said.

- After each speech ask to see the cards:
 - How do you respond
 - What is your response to that speech
 - Please show me your indicator cards to show your reaction to that speech
 - Then tell the participants what you can see.
- Treat all contributions as valuable, respecting different opinions. Be careful to be impartial at all times
- Be confident that the Holy Spirit is guiding the work of the meeting – if you are eager to discover the discerned outcome of the meeting, the meeting will respond expectantly
- If the discussion gets polarised or confrontational, encourage a few minutes of buzz groups or prayer with neighbours, to seek a way forward which is respectful of all views.

Information and Discussion Session

- Announce the business of the whole session including which reports are to be considered
- Call the presenters for the first item of business (they have 5 mins for presentation)
- Invite questions for clarification
- Explain that everything may be discussed, but in a later Decision session we will be determining specific proposals
- Ask speakers to queue at the microphones – anyone may speak, but encourage them to build on what has been said before; we are moving together towards discerning a common mind, not coming with a previously prepared speech. Speakers have 3 mins.
- Call the speakers to the microphone – it is not necessarily first come first served!!!! If speakers carry the card appropriate to their view, the chair will be able to make sure both supportive views and reservations, opposition and uncertainty are heard

Where we are

CDM is used by some but not all councils of the URC: Children's Assembly, FURY, General Assembly, Mission Council, some Synods, some Assembly and Synod committees and some church meetings for specific tasks such as calling a new minister. Where it is used, it may not be used for the conduct of all decision-making.

We have found CDM not to be a process that can be implemented with little thought or preparation, rather that it has to be worked at. Where meetings are infrequent and participants change frequently, it may be difficult to build up a body of experience in the workings of CDM. The result for some is that it continues to feel unfamiliar. Some individuals either do not want to implement CDM or feel uncomfortable with its workings.

The most common criticisms are that CDM takes too much time and is clumsy at the final point of decision-making when there are a very small number of people who do not favour the proposal. We would like to try to improve this and in the next section suggest two changes which we could experiment with to see if they make the process better.

Where CDM has been adopted and used consistently, there has been acceptance, even enthusiasm! Councils are not so confrontational as hitherto. CDM has provided a framework for dealing with complex and possibly contentious issues, such as human sexuality, while still retaining and, moreover, building community. CDM makes sense to younger participants who have not experienced majority voting as the only route to decision-making. Even where people are not necessarily at ease with the consensus procedures, CDM has allowed new and/or unexpected solutions to be found to some issues.

As we gain experience as a church, it has become apparent that there is a deeper layer of CDM to be explored beneath the surface processes which could be seen as just 'orange and blue cards'.

Several aspects have yet to be fully understood and appropriated. There is the underlying process of eliciting a wide range of views and listening respectfully to them all for the movement of the creator Spirit which lies within. There is also the need for every stage of planning of councils and committees to be carried out with CDM in mind.

We have come to understand what successful use of CDM looks like in the URC environment. When CDM is used successfully:

- It is energy-giving rather than energy-draining
- Communication amongst all participants and between the participants and the chair is helped by the environment in which the council takes place, or at least is not hindered by it. We include within ‘the environment’ both the spirit in which the council takes place and the physical conditions
- There is time to explore all the dimensions of an issue, the apparently positive and the apparently negative, but decision-making is not unnecessarily protracted
- All are encouraged and feel able to make a contribution to the discussion as it unfolds and are able to follow the course of the discussion
- Everyone feels that their views have been heard and understood
- The outcome (not necessarily consensus) is recognised by all, even if it is not their first choice.

We have some way to go in internalising consensus values and changing our procedures to embody those values to greatest effect. In the remainder of this document we suggest actions, practices and questions for consideration which will make a successful outcome more likely and which should help embed CDM values and practices in URC councils and committees. Our aim is have a church which is informed, confident and consistent in using CDM.

APPENDIX

Check List for Chairs

Beforehand

- Check that the agenda gives enough time for issues which may be difficult and need to be worked on outside the meeting and brought back later
- Check the resolutions to see if there are any which need a majority vote if consensus cannot be reached
- Think what methods may be useful for different discussions e.g. would buzz groups be useful?

For All Sessions

- Announce what the session is: Information and Discussion or Decision
- Announce if a majority vote will be needed if consensus cannot be reached
- Note time limit on speeches 3 mins – this is different from the procedure under majority voting, so it needs reminding and highlighting
- Explain the cards:
 - **Orange** – warmth towards an idea or argument
 - **Blue** – reservations, opposition or uncertainty towards an idea or argument.
 Only hold up one card at a time or those sitting behind you will think you are holding up the opposite colour.

of the meeting please show an orange card. If all cards are orange we will have reached consensus. If you do not agree, please show your blue card. We do not wish to press you to show orange if you feel it is not right. If there are blue cards I will then invite you to record your objection, so that we can proceed with what is the general mind of the meeting and declare an agreement. You may then bring your name to the minute taker at the close of this session.”

Questions for the longer term

- Consider what training should be available for chairs and participants and how this might be delivered
- Moderators of General Assembly have an important and visible role in making CDM work: at what stage is training most helpful for them?
- Consensus procedures have been successfully used in local churches for calling a new minister. Could training in CDM for local churches be built round this specific use?
- Using CDM makes extra demands of a chair. Is there advantage in having training available in how to chair meetings as a precursor for more specific training in CDM? Or issuing good practice guidelines and checklists?
- Would a system of visual cues for use with all types of display system (PowerPoint to flip charts) help to embed CDM session types and other aspects of consensus procedures in our understanding? eg when we see a green triangle we know we're in an information session
- Would it be helpful for a wider group of people to offer ideas and ways to improve the way we do consensus? It should include those who are critical of it.

Recommended actions in the short term

Information

- Make the existing information on CDM (resolution to 2007 General Assembly and Consensus Procedures for the Councils of the United Reformed Church) easily identifiable and locatable on the URC website
- Add Check List for Moderators (appended to this document) to the URC website and make it easily locatable as above
- Include a reference to the location of this information with all agendas for councils and committees that use CDM at any point
- Build in to councils and committees a brief time to reflect on the processes used to make decisions (What went well? Even better if....?) so that we accumulate understanding about CDM
- Distribute this document to General Assembly Moderators, General Secretariat, Synod moderators and clerks, General Assembly Arrangements Committee, Committee convenors, relevant Church House and Synod staff.

Planning

- All councils and committees to consider CDM implications at planning stages
- Work with consensus advisor when deciding facilities needed and setting agenda for General Assembly and Mission Council
- In agenda planning, consider not just the 'what' but also the 'when', as this is important for effective CDM (eg timetable complex or contentious issues near the beginning of the council/committee so that there is time for further work, if needed, and a second opportunity for decision-making)
- In planning the conduct of each session, consider what kind of activities might help participants to hear and understand each other (eg be prepared for buzz groups or more extensive group consultations)

- Presenters to be made aware of 5 minute rule for their planning of presentations
- Those planning conduct of sessions to be aware of the kind of outcome needed by presenters (eg a majority vote may be needed if consensus not reached within a certain time limit; constitutional requirements in specified areas for a majority vote)
- Consider beforehand who out of those present may be able to act as CDM facilitators if needed.

Practicalities

- The physical set up for the council/committee to promote communication between chair, presenters and participants so that all can see and hear each other and be aware of the progress of the decision-making process
- Seating to be inclusive (no one marginalised from the main group or disadvantaged in the CDM process because of their position)
- Seating to allow discussion in small groups (if using tables, these must not be so big that people at the same table can't hear each other)
- Chair to be alert to possibilities of 'interest groups' becoming fixed in particular locations (with the result that small group discussion does not achieve its aim of allowing people to listen to a diversity of views) and be able to counter this
- Possibilities for break-out groups to be identified if these are likely to be needed
- Lighting and positions of chair and participants to allow chair to identify easily those wishing to contribute and to gauge easily the responses of the participants
- Everyone to be clearly heard by everyone else when making a contribution to plenary discussion
- Everyone able to move easily in order to access microphones
- Chair to be able to communicate with participants the progress of the discussion. A visual method, which can be easily and quickly updated, will help

- Chair and consensus advisor (if being used) to be able to communicate with each other easily
- Participants to receive indicator cards and voting cards (for use in majority voting) before the start of the council/committee
- Have means of timing contributions and someone to operate and communicate with chair and/or presenters/participants.

Procedures

- The Chair to explain clearly at the start of each session where we are in the process
- Using the Check List for Moderators which is appended to this document will provide a consistent model for the CDM process
- All contributions to be timed and limited to the announced timings
- Recognising that consensus procedures as we have operated them may tend to privilege those who oppose a proposal, we suggest that chairs make positive efforts to elicit all perspectives that support the proposal. This is an equally important part of ensuring that we really have heard all the views that there are
- The use of crossed orange and blue cards has been discouraged in some councils because they were wrongly used by some to indicate that a particular contribution was not valued. Their correct use is to show that participants think that it is time to move on to another perspective and to finish that discussion. We are now proposing to make use of crossed cards in all councils in order to improve the flow of discussion, stop it from becoming too protracted and maintain consistency of practice
- We have now produced a shortened version of the final part of the process for when there are only a small number of people who show a blue card. After checking that everyone has been heard we propose that the chair says the following and that there is a single showing of cards:
 - “If you consider that your point of view has been heard, even if this resolution is not your first preference, then if you feel that you can agree to consensus being declared as the mind