

Discernment and Decision-making at Open Table Mennonite Fellowship

Introduction

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship meets regularly for the corporate spiritual practice of discernment and decision-making. We decide congregational matters through a communal seeking of God's will. We understand *God's will* as God's deep desire for restoration and right relationship for the world, symbolized by the biblical image of the river of the water of life, whose crystal clear waters bring restoration, abundant life, and the healing of the nations. (Ezekiel 47, Revelation 22).

We make decisions using the tool of consensus, seeking unity rather than uniformity or compromise. We are looking for a clear "sense of the meeting," a way that we will together recognize as the direction we should follow. If even one among us expresses a concern over a decision, we are committed to hearing that person fully, with open hearts and minds – a needed glimpse of God's will might be found through their words. After discussion, the one with a concern may sometimes choose to "stand aside" from a decision, if they feel the community is better served going ahead with the decision despite their concerns. We recognize that this careful listening takes time and prayerful attention.

Guidelines

1. Meetings will be held regularly, normally on the second Sunday of the month following our worship and meal together.
2. Leadership Group is responsible for preparing the agenda, which will be available ahead of time, through verbal announcement the previous Sunday and by email.
3. Anyone can propose an item for congregational consideration by submitting it to the Leadership Group. The LG determines the timing and setting for addressing it.
 - We can't do everything at once; LG sets priorities.
 - Everything does not need to be decided by everyone; some items can be addressed by LG or an appropriate subgroup.
 - LG decides whether an item will be for general discussion or if it needs a specific proposal. If the latter, they will arrange for its preparation.
 - LG is responsible for seeing that notes are taken and minutes of decisions recorded at the monthly meetings.
4. Leadership Group is responsible for facilitating the meeting, either by doing it themselves or naming a facilitator. Specific proposals are ideally introduced by someone involved in the preparation; an impartial facilitator should guide discussion and decision-making.
5. Decisions will be made by those present at the meeting for decision. If someone has ideas or concerns on an announced agenda item, but is unable to be present, these should be communicated to the LG to include in the meeting. We ask LG to give attention to the balance of voices, encouraging both listening and speaking, and to postpone decisions if necessary to include absent perspectives.
6. Decisions will be made by seeking the "sense of the meeting" through consensus. Tools such as the Five-finger Straw Poll (next page) may be used as appropriate. Some decisions will take more than one meeting.
7. Decisions will be declared by the preparation of a minute that all present can accept as accurate of the decision reached and of the collective spirit of the meeting.

Five Finger Straw Poll

This is a tool for taking a quick reading on where individuals are with a given proposal. It is generally used after some discussion, as a way to uncover questions and reservations that have not yet been spoken. The facilitator clearly restates the proposal and invites people to raise the number of fingers that best expresses their response to the proposal.

5 Fingers = I can fully support the proposal as it stands.

4 Fingers = I have a few reservations, but am generally supportive.

3 Fingers = I am neutral; the proposal is just okay.

2 Fingers = I have serious questions or reservations about this proposal, but would not block the group if it wants to move ahead with it.

1 Finger = I have major problems with the proposal and cannot accept the proposal.

The facilitator follows up by inviting those who have indicated one or two fingers to express their concerns. Those showing threes might be invited to suggest improvements to the proposal. If some have chosen not to indicate any level, the facilitator may inquire about their response. If only fours and fives are showing, the group can move ahead to conclude their discussion and make their decision.

Other useful tips can be found in *In Tune with God: the art of congregational discernment*, by Sally Weaver Glick, Mennonite Publishing Network, 2004, in Appendix A, "A Fools' Kit: Practical Suggestions for Discernment Processes."