

ST. AMBROSE CATHOLIC CHURCH-- BRUNSWICK, OH

PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL APPENDIXES

APPENDIX B: PERSPECTIVE OF CONSENSUS

“ Before investigating, find no fault; examine first, then criticize. Before hearing, answer not, and interrupt no one in the middle of his speech. Dispute not about what is not your concern, and in the strife of the arrogant take no part. “ Sirach 11:7-10.

A group process of seeking substantial though not necessarily unanimous agreement on a significant matter. The group strives to attain a conclusion which all can support, even if some still disagree. Consensus can be described in the following way: “I understand what most of you would like to do. I personally would not do that, but I feel that you understand what my alternative would be. I have had sufficient opportunity to openly share my thoughts and feelings. I feel that I have been listened to, but I clearly have not been able to sway you to my point of view. Therefore, I will support what most of you wish to do.”

1. In seeking consensus, the key value is to reach an optimal level of agreement and support. This contrasts with the concern to make a decision expediently, however divided people might be.
2. The concern to reach consensus has a profound impact upon how a group goes about its work. The desire for consensus leads to seeking participation by all members of the group and by others who will also be impacted by the outcome. Input is used to shape and reshape a proposal based upon what is said.
3. If we choose to build consensus, we first need to build relationships which will enable consensus to happen. Building an atmosphere of openness and truth is essential for a group seeking consensus. Otherwise people often end up with a false consensus. For example, if one asks, “Does everyone agree?” or “Does anyone disagree?” it may be that few people respond. However, there may be people who do not feel comfortable expressing disagreement, especially if an atmosphere of honesty has not been created.
4. In one form of the consensus process, each person is asked to:
 - Prepare his/her own position as well as possible before the meeting and realize that the task is incomplete until the viewpoints are supplied by the other members of the council. Each person has a part of the truth. To do this preparation, each member should have the agenda and proposal under study at least seven days before the meeting.

- Recognize an obligation to express his/her own opinion and explain it fully so that the rest of the council will have the benefit of all the members thinking.
 - Recognize an obligation to listen to the opinion and feelings of all the other members and to be ready to modify his/her own position on the basis of logic, understanding and sensitivity.
 - Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as voting, compromising, or giving in to keep the peace, and to realize that differences of opinion are both helpful and often present. In exploring differences the best course of action will gradually make itself apparent. Consensus begins only when members are ready to really listen and are open to modifying their positions.
5. Consensus almost always takes more time at the beginning than other methods. However, it can also be more 'efficient' than other methods when we consider a long term perspective that includes effective implementation and positive community impact. Decisions that are made quickly but do not receive support in the implementation phase are seldom effective or efficient.
 6. It is also important to be clear about 'who makes what decision in what ways.' This is an excellent area for dialogue at the very beginning of any significant consensus process. Otherwise the unspoken expectations about roles in the consensus process can lead to frustration and disappointment as different people or groups feel they were excluded or ignored. Some issues will require the consensus of a particular group. Other issues will warrant only informational updates on what is happening.
 7. Consensus is often more time-consuming than simple voting. While voting allows for all members of the group to participate before a conclusion is reached, it is also competitive and tends to produce winners and losers. Furthermore, voting tends to become legalistic.
 8. Some guidelines for the successful use of the consensus method are:
 - The proper attitude for consensus requires a desire to arrive at a common conclusion and a willingness to compromise. This compromise is not yielding to an inferior solution, but recognizing the validity of another point of view. Members may disagree, but should avoid being argumentative.
 - Determining the areas of agreement and isolating the areas of disagreement will minimize the level of polarization in the group.
 - Dealing with the interests behind a declared position of disagreement will help to reach a general consensus.

- The aim of consensus is to reach a common conclusion after the members have had a fair opportunity to express options and opinions.
 - The ability of the person to lead and unify the group is a dominant factor in achieving consensus.
9. Before they are enacted, recommendations of the Commission need to be accepted by the Pastor. If the Pastor and Commission deal with issues openly and honestly from the beginning of the consensus process, in a consistent environment of mutual respect, disagreements on issues will be minimized and an exceptional disagreement will not damage the relationship between Pastor and the Commission.

Outline of a process for reaching group consensus efficiently

- Appoint a clock-watcher (other than chair facilitator)
- Present “decision item” or “discussion item”
- Stipulate allotted time
- Solicit opinions from all BEFORE open discussion
- Limit those who talk too much
- Draw out those who tend not to speak or look “uncomfortable”
- When 2/3 are in agreement, state “consensus “position and test it with the group.
- Allow for revision of the stated “consensus “position by other group members
- Poll members to see if the revised or original stated consensus position is more reflective of the group.
- Go with the majority

If 2/3 agreement is not reached...

- Negotiate more time, or...
- Table discussion
- Determine what is unresolved and assign members to address it
- Schedule a time to return to the topic

