

## A Consensus Observed

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It was my privilege this summer to attend the tenth General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA) in Melbourne, Australia. The Uniting Church was formed twenty-seven years ago by the union of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational denominations in Australia. Latest statistics indicate the UCA has around 2,500 congregations, fifty-two presbyteries, and six synods. Uniting Church members number 300,000; another 1.3 million people claim an association.

The General Assembly of the Uniting Church meets every three years. Two hundred and seventy delegates gather from the six synods and are based on categories such as age, sex, ministers, and laity. The parity that exists between ministers and elders at a PC(USA) assembly is not the experience of the Uniting Church. However, in many ways their assembly does parallel a PC(USA) assembly—the meeting lasts for seven days, delegates have a notebook full of reports (though much smaller), and the usual array of humanity is present.

I attended the Uniting Church's assembly to observe the process used to make decisions. There, a consensus method is used instead of *Roberts Rules of Order* (RONR). But before I go on, I need to provide a bit of autobiographical information. I have been involved in various capacities at our General Assembly as a parliamentarian. I teach parliamentary procedure to new governing body clerks and moderators. Some people think I sleep with RONR under my pillow. So, to say the least, I was very curious about the UCA's use of consensus. I have been taught by Marianne Wolfe that consensus is a manipulative system that can use group pressure to dominate the minority. I would need to see with my own eyes how Presbyterians could function in a different way.

The manual for meetings of the UCA begins with a section of the formation of community. (To see the manual, go to [http://nat/uca/org.au/regulations/2001/pdf/manual\\_for\\_meetings.pdf](http://nat/uca/org.au/regulations/2001/pdf/manual_for_meetings.pdf).) They are very intentional that the basis for their discernment of the Spirit in response to the word of God is done in a Christian community. It is expected that twenty percent of their meeting time will be spent in worship and community building. At the assembly I observed, each plenary began with worship and Bible study in the same space that was used for business. Each delegate was assigned to a discussion group that met in the afternoon to talk about the issues before the assembly. Some of the best community building exercises were the morning and afternoon teas.

The presentation of building consensus followed a threefold pattern outlined in the manual. First was the information session. A proposal was presented, followed by questions for clarification or further information. This session lasted until the presiding officer (the president) was satisfied that the group had asked all of the questions it needed. The next stage was the deliberation session. Discussion of the various viewpoints and vigorous debate around different opinions were encouraged.

Every delegate was given an orange and a blue card. Orange cards signified support for an item; blue meant opposition. (This suited me quite well since I am a graduate from the University of Tennessee, where orange is the school color.) The cards were to be shown after each speech in the deliberation phase to give an indication of support for or opposition to the points in the speech. This helped to give the group and the president a sense of the mind of the assembly. These indications of opinion helped to avoid repetitious speeches and enabled the president and the whole assembly to gauge the strength of feelings for various ideas. Movement toward consensus was thus assisted.

Sometimes several amendments were proposed during the deliberation stage. If consensus on the amendments seemed apparent, they were then incorporated into the original proposal. If larger or more complicated amendments were proposed, it became necessary to stop discussion on the issue at hand. At that point, the original presenters and the amendment presenters were expected to develop a common proposal and bring it back to the plenary.

The third stage was the decision stage. Only minor changes were allowed at this point. (This is similar to when we declare an item perfected under *Roberts Rules of Order*.) The benefits and disadvantages of the proposal were then discussed. The cards were used to indicate the agreement or disagreement of the assembly members to the points raised in the discussion. The president was focused on both the process and the content of the discussion.

When the debate seemed to have reached its conclusion, the president asked, “Do you believe we have reached consensus on this proposal?” If delegates held up a significant of blue cards, the discussion continued. If only orange cards were displayed, consensus had been reached. If, however, a few blue cards were displayed, the delegates who held up the cards were encouraged to share their misgivings with the assembly. If their misgivings could be handled by changing a word or two, then it was still possible to reach consensus.

If the objections continued, then the president sought to bring the assembly to agreement. Agreement is understood to mean there is not unanimity. The president asked a series of questions to the assembly that sought to discern if those who were unable to support the proposal believed their views to have been heard by the majority. They were also asked if they were willing to live with the majority view and allow the assembly to record an agreement. The assembly was asked if it wanted to record an agreement on the issue.

If there was continued opposition, the assembly had two choices. The first was to determine if the issue had to be decided at that point. This allowed the assembly to revisit the issue at a later meeting. The other choice was the one most familiar to those of us in the PC(USA)—a majority vote.

These procedures may seem strange to you, as they did to me. It would seem difficult to cover a large number of business items in this manner. The UCA limited assembly business to what we would consider macro issues. The business committee carefully

arranged the needed business of the assembly to help it focus on major items. It would probably also appear to us that the consensus mechanics seem fuzzy and give a great deal of power to the president who is moderating the meeting. It is interesting that, even though the consensus method is used by the UCA at all levels of the church, there were just as many people second-guessing the procedure rulings of the president as there are at our assembly.

The major impression on me from observing the consensus method in action was that the skill most needed by delegates was that of listening. Focusing only on what one was going to say next would take one away from the flow of the meeting. This is not to say that *Roberts Rules of Order* doesn't require the body to listen during debate. It is an important understanding in our polity that it is the sharing of ideas among the body that helps us to make the best decisions. But still, it seemed to me that being attentive to individuals and developing awareness of the leading of the group required a greater listening skill.

I am far from suggesting that we leave behind *Roberts' Rules of Order* and embrace the consensus method. RONR may be flawed at points, but it is the process we know. I think that many sessions already operate in a consensus mode most of the time. However, some observations from the UCA use of consensus would be worth exploring further:

1. It would be worth exploring having a clear division between the information stage and the deliberation stage of an issue. At the General Assembly level, the debaters tend to get ahead of the questioners, which causes some misinformation that has to be clarified later.
2. Many legislative bodies use reference committees to handle negotiations between various amendments. It would be worth exploring how a committee of this sort could help facilitate a deliberation.
3. Smaller discussions groups were helpful in allowing more people to talk through issues. This could be useful in deliberating controversial issues.
4. The volume of business at our General Assemblies needs to be reviewed. Our GA time logs show that from 1998-2002 we spent fifty percent of plenary time on the same five issues. If the other items don't capture our interest, could they be handled in another way?

The way we discuss issues should reflect our understanding of Christian community. That understanding should include the willingness to listen to each other beyond mere politeness. It should also include awareness that losing a vote on an issue causes pain to the minority and can create some fractures in the community. Winning a vote on an issue can create a triumphant spirit that can also fracture community. In the Confession of 1967 we are reminded, "This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate men from God and from each other" (9.31). The resolution of any issue should enable that ministry of reconciliation, whether we use the consensus method or dear ole *Roberts Rules of Order*.