

The purpose of parliamentary procedure is to give churches and organizations a clear and orderly way to govern their meetings and conduct their business. Parliamentary procedure developed on the premise that order must be maintained if business is to be carried out effectively.

## Common Practices

It is important to be clear about what type of parliamentary procedure will be used. People also recognize that groups can become too preoccupied with parliamentary procedure to the point where common sense is ignored. The parliamentary authority, **Robert's Rules of Order** by Henry M. Robert, III and William J. Evans (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), describes one of the most used sets of rules. It, or some other authority, is normally adopted as containing those rules by which a church or organizations within it will govern meeting procedure. Often that authority is named in the constitution or bylaws of an organization.

Some small groups use a consensus form of decision-making where agreement is reached without a vote. Larger groups need some organized way of making decisions and ordering their life. An accepted form of parliamentary procedure eliminates arbitrary decisions on the part of leaders, as long as members of the group have a working knowledge of the procedure.

## Key Points of Parliamentary Procedure

These key points of procedure are based on **Robert's Rules of Order**.

### Order of Business

Most meetings follow this order:

- Call to order.
- Reading of the minutes of the preceding meeting.
- Treasurer's report.
- Reading of communications and presentation of bills due.
- Report of standing and special committees.
- Unfinished business.
- New business.
- Program for the meeting.
- Adjournment.

### Steps in Handling a Motion

- Member rises and addresses the chair.
- Member is recognized by the chair.
- Member makes the motion ("I move that..." or "I move the adoption of...").
- Another member seconds the motion.
- The chairperson opens the floor to discussion.
- After discussion is closed, the chairperson restates the motion (including any amendments that were adopted) and takes the vote.
- The chairperson announces the result of the vote and the effect of the decision.

### Amending a Motion

Motions are debatable and accepted by a majority vote and can be amended by:

- Striking out words.
- Inserting words.
- Striking out words and inserting others in the same place.
- Adding words at the end of a sentence.
- Substituting a new sentence or paragraph or complete motion for the one pending.

The first or primary amendment may be amended by moving to change words in it. The secondary amendment can apply only to words in the primary amendment and not to any other part of the main motion. Only one primary and one secondary amendment can be on the floor at one time.

### Tabling a Motion

An item of business can be set aside by a motion to "table" the item. If carried, this sets the item under consideration aside until later in the same meeting or the next meeting when any member can move to take the tabled motion from the table.

- Motions to "table" or to "take from the table" require a second and a majority vote.
- Neither tabling nor taking from the table is debatable.
- The motion to table cannot have a specific time indicated.

### Postponing a Motion

If a member wishes to postpone a matter to a specific time, such as a

later time the same day or until the next meeting, the proper motion to use is to "postpone the motion until...."

- This motion requires a second and a majority vote.
- It is debatable.

### Privileged Motions

There are five motions that are of such high rank that they take priority over any other motions pending. They are:

- To adjourn the meeting to another time for completion.
- To adjourn.
- To recess.
- To raise a question of privilege of the assembly or of a member.
- To call for the order of the day (meaning, to return to the adopted agenda).

These have individual special rules and reference should be made to the parliamentary authority.

### Rank of Subsidiary Motions

There are seven motions that may be applied to a main motion. They are ranked according to their priority in meeting. A motion of higher rank takes priority in its making over one of lower rank. These motions are:

- Lay on the table (highest rank of this group).
- Move the previous question.
- Limit the debate.
- Postpone to a certain time.
- Refer to a committee.
- Amend.
- Postpone indefinitely (lowest rank of the group).

# Parliamentary Procedure

Subsidiary motions work this way. Suppose a motion is pending on the floor. A motion to refer a matter to committee has been made, seconded and is open for discussion. At this point, a motion to postpone indefinitely (which has lower rank) would not be in order; a motion to table the matter (which has higher rank) would be in order.

## Motions to Control Debate

Debate can be controlled or limited by making a motion to limit debate. A member can place a general time limit, for example, "15 minutes more" or "until 2 o'clock." Or the speaker can be limited, such as to "three minutes per speaker" or to "three speakers for each pro and con argument."

- This motion requires a second and a two-thirds vote.
- It cannot be debated.

Debate also can be controlled or limited by moving to stop debate. A member can say, "I move to stop debate and vote immediately on ..." or "I move the previous question."

- This motion requires a second and a two-thirds vote.
- It cannot be debated.

Calling out the word "question" is not a proper motion and should be ignored by the chair. It only means that one person is ready to vote.

## Motions to Question a Vote or Procedure

If the result of a close voice vote is doubted, a member may call for a "division" of the house. This requires the chair to retake the vote by having

members stand or raise a hand in order to verify the result.

- This can be passed by majority vote.
- It can also be made by a decision of the chair.

## Point of Order

If it appears that the rules are being disobeyed (bylaws, standing rules, special rules or order of the parliamentary authority), a member can rise to a point of order. It must be raised at the time the rule violation occurs.

- This requires no second.
- It is decided by the chair.
- It can interrupt a speaker, if critical.

## Meeting Rules

- Members of a body can make motions and vote.
- Only members can speak in a meeting unless there are special rules to allow others to participate in discussion.
- Motions made in any group that has a membership of a dozen or more persons, or any motion that consists of more than just a few words, should be submitted in writing at the time it is made. This allows the chair to have the exact wording and the secretary to record it exactly as submitted.
- If a motion is poorly worded or unclear when presented, the chair should request that the motion be put into better shape before it is restated for debate. The chair may do this or can request that someone else do it.

- If there has been a period of discussion and no one else wants the floor, or if discussion has been called for and no one claims the floor, a motion to stop debate is not necessary in order to go ahead with the voting. If a motion to stop debate (the same as moving the previous question) is made at one of these times, the chair should note that no one wants the floor, then should go ahead and take the vote.

## Responsibilities

Your responsibilities may include:

- Knowing when parliamentary procedure is getting in the way.
- Deciding when to use it and when not to.
- Making sure you are using **Robert's Rules of Order** in a constructive way (including education of members).

## Issues Facing the Church

- There can be times when people who do not know parliamentary procedure well can be intimidated by those who do. How can you balance need for order with need for participation?
- When do you need to have an accepted parliamentary procedure rather than work to consensus? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of procedure?

## Questions

- Who needs to have a basic understanding of parliamentary procedure in your church?
- How can these rules be used in a manner that enhances the spirit and flow of the meeting?
- Are there other parliamentary methods which you prefer?
- How can you use your knowledge of parliamentary procedure without making others feel they are being manipulated?