

Your church and smaller groups within it make decisions about how to carry out their ministries. The decisions need to be not only effective but also faithful to the trust God has given them; we are talking not just about our future but about God's future with and through us.

## History and Background

The Bible is filled with examples of diverse decisions and methods of making them, sometimes reflecting the culture. In the early church, decisions were made by small communal groups. Later, the church adopted the hierarchical forms of the Roman Empire, including a complex system of rules and procedures. After the Reformation, decision-making in the church became more democratic. Some groups, like the Society of Friends, "wait upon the Spirit." There remains a tension between having decisions made by some people for others, and people's participation in making decisions.

Faithful decision-making is based on good information and involves people who come to agreement. Faithful, sound decisions can be implemented to produce the desired results.

## Common Practices

Churches make all kinds of decisions, some with more impact than others: who the pastor will be, how much the

budget is, who can use the kitchen or when to undertake a new mission project. Decisions are made about policy, administration and program. The importance of the decisions influences how much time is given to making them, who makes them and the style of making them. Sometimes decisions are made by deciding not to decide.

Most churches look to their constitution and bylaws for an indication of who makes what kinds of decisions on behalf of the church. Following these guidelines will help avoid conflict. Major decisions may be made by the whole congregation in quarterly meetings. A governing board may make many decisions, with an annual congregational meeting to accept the budget and elect officers. Some decisions that affect the church are made by committees. Individuals, especially the pastor, other worship leaders and committee chairpersons, make decisions that influence the ministry of the church.

Many decisions are not entirely new but are like earlier decisions. When you find yourselves making similar decisions over and over, it probably is time to write down a policy or guidelines. It may be that community groups want to use your church. First the Arts Council asked to have a workshop there. Then an ecumenical refugee council wanted to meet. When the local neighborhood association called, you realized that you were using the same information to make decisions. A building-use

policy would allow you not to have to consider all aspects of the decision each time. Writing down traditions and creating policy saves time and allows everyone in the church to be aware of the policy and use it.

All policies and guidelines, however formal or informal, need to be reviewed periodically and challenged. Occasionally they will have outlived their capacity to enable the church to be faithful and effective. Then new decisions and policies need to be made.

## Responsibilities

The church needs to choose a style of decision-making for each decision. Styles include:

- **Delegated.** A person or group is delegated to make a decision on behalf of a wider number of people. These people are given the authority to make decisions and are most effective when they help others understand the decision.
- **Majority agreement.** A group works through a democratic process with a vote at the end. Usually **Robert's Rules of Order** is followed. The majority may be simply more than half of those present or a larger percentage. Very close votes may be divisive unless care is taken. Important decisions might require a higher percentage vote.
- **Consensus.** A vote isn't taken but possibilities are presented to see whether people can agree. When people can express enough comfort

with the decision, it is made by the leader announcing it. This style is more effective in a small group than in a large one, where not all may be able to speak or be heard.

- **Unanimity.** On some major decisions, nothing is done until everyone agrees.  
When you are responsible for seeing that a decision is made for the church, you need to know:
  - What you want to accomplish.
  - How to determine if the decision is faithful.
  - What the options are.
  - What you have going for you.
  - Who will be affected by the decision?
  - How to get input from the people who will be affected.
  - How to state the decision.
  - How to determine if the decision is effective.
  - How to implement the decision

## Decision-Making

### Hints

- Be familiar with **Robert's Rules of Order** or another set of parliamentary procedures.
- Examine how decisions are made in order to learn how to make decisions in the church. Include experience from all life's settings and adapt them for the needs of church life.
- Provide as broad a base of involvement of people as practical, possible and appropriate.

- Consider a group's values, goals, priorities and long-range plans as data in the process.
- Understand commonly held biblical and Christian principles in the data gathering.
- Consider all alternatives.
- Consider the consequences of the decision to determine whether solving one problem will create more problems.
- Gather appropriate data, but don't delay a decision just to pile up data for its own sake.
- On a matter very important to the life of the church, don't make a decision the first time the matter is discussed. Allow time for people to think about its implications.
- Understand that people who participate in decision-making are more likely to feel ownership for the decision.
- Communicate your decision to all those it affects and help them understand reasons for it.
- Ask what impact this will have on your church, other United Church of Christ churches, the conference, etc.
- Once the decision has been made, implement it (or delegate implementation as appropriate).
- Establish a time and process for evaluating the results of the decision.
- For very important decisions, try following these steps:
  - State briefly and concisely the issue. "The issue for us is ...."
  - State assumptions about the issue. Why is it an issue? What do people think about it? What are the consequences of dealing with it? What are the consequences of not dealing with it? What would make us faithful in dealing with it? Write down all the assumptions as they tumble out in a brainstorm fashion.
  - Analyze the assumptions to affirm or modify the statement of the issue.
  - Analyze the issue and assumptions to determine conditions which need to be met.
  - Determine three or more possible decisions based on thinking about the issue and conditions to be met. Alternatives expand possibilities.
  - Decide among the alternatives. Sometimes it will mean combining aspects from more than one.
  - Ask whether the chosen alternative is appropriate and faithful.
  - State and affirm the decision.
  - Implement the decision.
  - Later, evaluate the decision and revise it, if necessary.

## Issues Facing the Church

- How inclusive does a group or congregation need to be when making decisions? Does everyone need to be part of every decision?
- When a group makes a decision that is contrary to basic policy and tradition of the church, what ought the leaders of the church to do?

## Questions

- What is the difference between effective and faithful decision-making? How does that impact the life of your church and you as one who seeks to help decision-making?
- What are three criteria your church could use in deciding whether your church is being faithful as it makes decisions?
- How do you determine what you think the will of God is as you make decisions?
- How can you determine whether your decisions will lead toward an increase of justice and peace?
- Are there some policies your church needs to set rather than make similar decisions over and over?
- What styles of decision-making are used in your church or your group? Which are most useful?
- Personalities and needs differ when it comes to making decisions. How can you accommodate those who like to gather a lot of data as well as those who favor quick decisions and action?