

Achieving Consensus

A Guide for Conducting Meetings

World Council of Churches

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Cover design and typesetting: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

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Foreword

THIS GUIDE IS INTENDED TO INTRODUCE THE READER TO CONSENSUS decision-making in the World Council of Churches and to the procedures for implementing it in the conduct of meetings. Both the rule for the conduct of meetings (Rule XIX) and these guidelines are worded so as to apply to a meeting of the assembly of the Council, and they are to be used also in meetings of all its governing and consultative bodies. Finally, the flowchart of consensus procedures outlines the different steps involved in achieving consensus during the meetings.

Guidelines for the Conduct of Meetings

The rule for the conduct of meetings (rule XIX), and these guidelines, are worded as applying to a meeting of the assembly of the World Council of Churches.

They are to be used similarly in meetings of all governing and consultative bodies of the World Council of Churches.

1. Consensus procedures

In the interval between the 1998 Harare assembly and Porto Alegre in 2006, the central committee accepted the recommendation of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, to adopt a consensus model of decision-making as an alternative to the parliamentary model. More precisely the central committee in 2005 adopted amendments to its rule for the conduct of meetings.

The rules of the World Council of Churches, including revised rule XIX, “Conduct of Meetings”, provide the authority for how meetings of all World Council of Churches bodies are expected to function. These guidelines are offered as a supplementary resource to help participants appreciate the potential of consensus procedures, as well as to explain some other features of the World Council of Churches.

2. Theological basis

The World Council of Churches is called to bear witness to unity in a world which is marked by tensions, antagonisms, conflicts, wars and rumours of wars (cf. Matt. 24:6). In this situation the Council can bear witness not only by its programmes and resolutions, but also by the way it does its business. It can shape its rules and procedures in such a way as to express a faith “made effective in love” (Gal. 5:6). This means that member churches, as well as representatives of those churches, will treat each other with respect and will seek to build one another up in love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-6, 14:12).

Some churches around the world, and some parts of the Council itself, have found that making decisions by consensus is a better way of reflecting the nature of the church as described in the New Testament than is the “parliamentary” approach. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, St Paul speaks of parts of the body needing each other. A fully functioning body integrates the gifts of all its members. Similarly, any ecumenical body will function best when it makes optimum use of the abilities, history, experience, commitment and spiritual tradition of all the members.

Consensus procedures allow more room for consultation, exploration, questioning and prayerful reflection, with less rigidity than formal voting procedures. By promoting collaboration rather than adversarial debate, consensus procedures help the assembly (or a commission or committee) to seek the mind of Christ together. Rather than striving to succeed in debate, participants are encouraged to submit to one another and to seek to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:17).

The consensus model for decision-making also encourages prayerful listening to one another and growth in understanding between ecclesial traditions. At the same time it requires discipline on the part of participants and moderators. There must also be rules. But the aim is to arrive at a common mind rather than simply the will of the majority. When consensus is declared, all who have participated can confidently affirm: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28).

3. Building community

Developing consensus outcomes requires a culture in which there is willingness mutually to seek God’s will in humility and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because the World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches with a common basis in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour,¹ each time an assembly gathers there is fresh opportunity to affirm and express the rich relationship of being a community in Christ. Through those appointed to represent them, the member churches “seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of God.”² This assumes an awareness and appreciation of the contribution fellow participants bring to the meeting. As we seek to discern God’s will on issues (often starting from very different viewpoints), we acknowledge that each has unique God-given gifts and insights, and that all contributions are worthy of respect and consideration.

1. WCC constitution article 1.

2. *Ibid.*

An assembly draws together people from many different countries, cultures and church traditions. It takes time to build the trust and relationships that form real *koinonia*. As we acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and listen for the word of God in daily prayer and Bible study together, the bonds of community are strengthened. Our diversity and unity in Jesus Christ is celebrated also as we grow to understand each other better while eating, working, relaxing, talking and praying together in more informal ways throughout the life of the assembly. Gradually a climate of trust is able to be developed.

4. Small groups

Each member of an assembly is part of a small “home” Bible study group throughout the time of the meeting, providing valuable opportunity within that small unit of the whole to experience *koinonia*, through:

- forming fellowship bonds which are necessary for the care and support of each other throughout the time of the assembly;
- feeling safe, in a context where concerns and confidences can be shared, where prayer requests and probing questions can be raised; and
- finding that theological differences can be enriching and that prior stereotyping is irrelevant as friendships form.

In the course of plenary sessions, another type of small group may be used. From time to time this may be helpful for a brief period of discussion, perhaps in table groups (which is possible during central committee meetings) or among three or four neighbours of the same language preference are seated close together in a plenary session. Complex issues can become clearer after a brief sharing time, and fresh approaches to a seemingly impossible dilemma may develop into a creative solution when the plenary resumes.

5. Categories of session

At the beginning of each session, the moderator announces whether it is to be a general, a hearing or a decision session. On occasions it may be necessary to move from one category to another within the same sitting of the assembly. Where this occurs, the moderator may announce a brief pause in proceedings for a time of prayerful reflection or the singing of a song.

a) General session

General sessions are the formal, ceremonial occasions. No discussion or decision occurs, and the content is pre-determined by the central committee or the business committee.

b) Hearing session

In a hearing session, information about reports or proposals is presented. All participants (delegates plus others who have the right to speak but not to participate in decision-making) may contribute in a hearing session when recognized by the moderator. The moderator encourages participants to explore a wide range of perspectives through question and comment, so that the meeting is fully resourced about possible options before a way forward is discerned by the assembly.

This may mean, if time allows and others are not left unheard, that participants are given the opportunity to speak more than once in the course of the discussion. Participants signify to the moderator their desire to speak by standing at one of the microphones until called by the moderator to contribute or by written request via a steward.

A moderator may call upon those who have queued to speak or those who have submitted written requests. Participants who had submitted written requests to speak may join those queuing for a turn to speak. A moderator may use the final portion of a hearing session to return to previously submitted written requests to speak.

No decisions are taken in a hearing session, except to deal with a point of order or procedural proposal if one arises, or to change to a decision session if it is agreed to finalize a particular matter in that same sitting.

c) Decision session

In a decision session, only delegates may speak. (Delegates will have been resourced in their decision-making responsibility by other participants when the issue was presented in an earlier hearing session.) Contributions are expected to develop a proposal progressively, each speaker's taking heed of insights from other contributors in discerning the common mind of the meeting about the way forward for the assembly.

Because changes to an original proposal can occur during the discussion, care needs to be taken that the agreed wording at all stages is clear to

everybody, and that time for interpretation is allowed as necessary. The session recorder³ has an important part in assisting the moderator in this role.

For the few agenda items where the rules specify that voting procedures are to be used, the rules provide an outline of how that is regulated.⁴ On rare occasions in a decision session when a consensus outcome cannot be reached, the meeting may choose to decide an urgent polarized issue by formal voting procedures also.⁵

6. Role of moderators

A number of different people share the work of moderating sessions throughout the assembly meeting. Moderators are designated prior to the assembly by the outgoing central committee, and if necessary during an assembly by the business committee.⁶ Each moderator is expected to have been trained in consensus procedures and to be familiar with the ethos and functioning of the World Council of Churches.

The responsibilities of a moderator are:

- to preside in a manner that assists the assembly to be open to discerning the will of God;
- to encourage the meeting to move towards a common mind; and
- to ensure that the needs and purposes of the Council are met in the way business is carried out.

In so doing, a moderator is expected:

- to facilitate the exchange and development of ideas, encouraging trust and integrity in contributions;
- to ensure respect and support for all who participate;
- to seek indications of the delegates' response to each speech, and reflect back the mood of the meeting as it becomes apparent;

3. Person appointed by the business committee to follow the discussion of a decision session, to record the languages of the emerging consensus, including final language of decisions taken, and to assist the moderator of the session in discerning an emerging consensus. Recorders shall also assist the moderator in ensuring that the final agreed wording of a proposal is translated and available to delegates before a decision is made. Normally a delegate will be appointed recorder. Rule XIX.5.

4. Rule XIX.10.

5. Rule XIX.9.e, 9.f.

6. Rule XIX.3.

- to summarize the discussion from time to time, assisting the assembly to focus the move towards a consensus outcome;
- to encourage creative modifications of a proposal which take heed of insights expressed by earlier speakers;
- to invite participants, as occasion demands, to spend a few minutes in conversation with near neighbours;
- to test emerging agreement in decision sessions, to ascertain if the meeting is ready to move to a decision by consensus.

A moderator's role as a non-partisan facilitator is crucial to the flow of the meeting towards a consensus outcome. To that end, the moderator:

- convenes the session, announcing which category of session it is;
- announces any change in session category which may occur during a session, and may provide a brief break in the sitting at that time for reflective prayer or the singing of a song;
- encourages a fair range of views in selecting speakers from those whose desire to contribute has been indicated either in writing or by queuing at the microphone;
- liaises frequently with the recorder throughout the session, ensuring the wording of any agreed variation to a proposal is available to participants in an appropriately clear form;
- does not participate in deliberations (unless arrangements are made to relinquish the role of moderator while the particular matter is being decided);
- is entitled to a personal vote as a delegate of her/his own church in formal voting procedures, but not to a deciding vote where the outcome of a count is tied; and
- closes the session.

7. Setting the agenda

a) Programme agenda

The broad outcomes for the programmatic activities of the World Council of Churches are set by the assembly, upon recommendation of the assembly programme guidelines committee. After the assembly, the central committee,

assisted by its programme committee, engages to determine and develop the strategies that will deliver these outcomes, setting programme strategies and goals. In between two assemblies, the programme committee assists the central committee to hear, with respect to programme work, the views and hopes of the churches, respond to key issues identified by commissions, and review, reshape and develop the goals of programme work in light of changing circumstances and needs. The executive committee ensures the implementation of the strategic programmatic objectives set by the central committee.

An additional advisory body to the central committee and its executive committee is the permanent committee on consensus and collaboration (resulting from the work of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC). It helps between assembly meetings in guiding the process of programme agenda setting and in monitoring the overall balance of the work of the Council, and during assemblies advises the business committee.

b) Business agenda

The business agenda of this assembly meeting is proposed by the central committee (through its assembly planning committee) to the first decision session of the assembly. A delegate may suggest an item of business through the business committee, which has the responsibility during the assembly of monitoring when agenda changes should be brought to a plenary for approval.

The governing bodies each have responsibility for specifically identified areas of governance, including, but not limited to:

- **Assembly:** reception of the accounts and report of the outgoing central committee; election of presidents; election of central committee members; revision of the constitution and confirmation of certain rules changes; determination of overall policies, including programme policies;
- **Central committee:** election of the leadership of the central committee (moderator, vice-moderators, general secretary); election of executive committee; appointment of commissions and advisory groups; elaboration of institutional policies and strategic plans for programme and finance; initiation and termination of programmes.

- **Executive committee:** ensuring implementation of strategic objectives set by the central committee; overseeing finances, institutional risk and resource management; monitoring programmes and activities; staff appointments.

Normally, the leadership of the central committee and the executive committee monitor the setting of the business agenda of an assembly or the central committee, ensuring that an annotated agenda with supporting documents is made available well ahead of the meeting. Some smaller agenda items may be included on the agenda of a sub-committee right from the start, rather than waiting for listing in a plenary before being referred to the sub-committee for more detailed consideration. To ensure widespread awareness of matters being considered, all participants will be issued annotated agendas of the different reference or sub-committees. Hence those not involved with a particular sub-committee, who have any concerns or insights on a particular agenda item, can share them with the sub-committee before the matter comes back to the plenary for decision-making.

How individual members of governing bodies introduce a matter to the business agenda of an assembly is addressed in the sub-section: “How to raise concerns” under “Role of delegates and participants” in section 8.

8. Role of delegates and participants

a) How to contribute

When a participant wishes to contribute in a plenary session, she/he indicates this to the moderator and waits to be called. This can be done either by queuing at a microphone when the moderator so invites or by submitting a written request (name, church, country and essence of contribution) via a steward.

When called to speak, all remarks are addressed to the moderator. A participant states her/his name, church, country, language preference, and (in a hearing session) whether she/he is a delegate or other participant. If one of the working languages of the Council is used, simultaneous interpretation will be provided. If participants speak in another language, it is their responsibility to provide interpretation.

Remarks are limited to three minutes to enable as many contributions as possible within one session. Speakers should have a clear idea beforehand of what they will say, with the main points crystallized to as few words as possible.

b) How to raise concerns

Any participant may raise concerns outside of sessions with a member of the business committee. Concerns may include the appropriateness of a proposal, its priority in the agenda or the manner in which it is to be addressed, or suggestions for additions to the proposed agenda.⁷

During a hearing session, procedural suggestions about how an issue is handled can be raised if necessary in the course of the discussion (consensus procedures are used for hearing sessions).

During a decision session, a delegate:

- may raise questions about procedure;
- may challenge the result of a vote if there is doubt about the outcome: a counted vote is then taken immediately;
- may request a secret written ballot, such request needing to be seconded and agreed by a two-thirds majority before proceeding;
- may appeal against a moderator's ruling on a point of order; the moderator will put to the meeting without discussion the question of whether delegates concur with the moderator's ruling, and it is decided by either consensus or voting procedures (according to which are in place at the time).

In either a hearing session or a decision session, if a delegate considers that a matter under discussion goes against the ecclesiological self-understanding⁸ of her/his church, there is a process for bringing that concern to the attention of the assembly.⁹

c) How to listen and respond (ethics of participation)

Consensus procedures assume all are listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as each speaker contributes. So participants try to build creatively on the insights of earlier contributions as much as possible, always keeping in mind the goal of discerning a way forward for the assembly on which the meeting can agree.

It is assumed that all contributions are made with integrity and conviction, and so all speakers are treated with respect even where their understanding

7. Rule XIX.6.a, 6.c.

8. The self-understanding of a church on matters of faith, doctrine and ethics.

9. Section 12: safety valves; rule XIX.6.d.

is quite different from one's own. Growth in participants' awareness of the richness and diversity of the Christian church is always the outcome of World Council of Churches gatherings, whatever specific decisions are taken on particular matters.

Because a consensus outcome usually arises from progressive development of a proposal during the course of hearing and decision sessions, there is no place for proxy or absentee votes when the mind of the meeting is being discerned (or when a formal vote is taken). Only those present and participating can be part of the communal discernment which develops, about God's will for the way forward at this time.

Similarly, where a participant has chosen not to attend a designated sub-committee that has been part of the process of considering a particular report or issue, it is generally inappropriate for her/him to raise objection to the outcome, or to record a minority opinion, when the report is presented in a subsequent plenary session. The place for the objection to be heard would have been in the smaller committee forum, where a different conclusion might have been reached in listening to others' contributions.

In central committee where a substitute for a delegate is allowed in certain circumstances, it is the responsibility of the delegate to fully brief the person taking her/his place.

d) How to report afterwards (advocacy for decisions of assembly)

Participating in a World Council of Churches assembly is a rare privilege. It is the responsibility of participants to ensure that the fruits of the experience are made known back in their home churches. This means advocacy for the resolutions of the assembly, even when in some particular instances the outcome might not have been the participant's first preference for wording.

And of course the rich ecumenical encounters will colour participants' total involvement in the life of their home church for years to come!

9. Making decisions – consensus¹⁰

a) Understanding consensus

Consensus is a process of seeking the common mind of the meeting without resort to a formal vote, engaging in genuine dialogue that is respectful, mutually supportive and empowering whilst prayerfully seeking to discern God's will.

10. See appendix A: flow chart of consensus procedures.

A consensus outcome is declared when one of the following occurs:

- all those entitled to make decisions are in agreement about an outcome (unanimity); or
- most are in agreement and the few for whom it is not their first preference nonetheless accept they have been fairly heard and could live with that outcome, and so agree to consensus being recorded as the mind of the meeting.

Agreement about an outcome is not limited merely to approving the wording of a proposal. That *may* be what is agreed. But it may be that consensus is reached about another outcome, including such possibilities as agreeing to reject a proposal, or to refer a matter for further work, or to affirm that a variety of positions may be held by Christian churches on this issue.

There are no formal amendments in consensus procedures. Speakers may suggest variations to the wording of a proposal as discussion proceeds, and incremental changes can be agreed by the meeting as a possible outcome progressively becomes apparent. Consensus procedures assume all are eager to listen for insights from others that may help in the search to discern God's will for the way forward. Hence there will be an attitude of respectful anticipation, as all delegates work towards the common goal.

b) Indicator cards

In a big gathering, hearing all contributions and being aware of how delegates are responding to the ideas expressed by each speaker may be difficult. Indicator cards can assist in this process in both hearing and decision sessions. Blue and orange cards are provided for each delegate's use.¹¹ After a speaker finishes his or her remarks, the moderator gauges the proportion of those supportive of that point of view by calling for delegates to hold a card discreetly at chest level – orange to indicate warmth towards an idea or acceptance of it, blue to show coolness or disapproval. By reporting to the meeting what is visible in response each time, the moderator is able to help the meeting understand what aspects need more exploration, and thus gradually move forward to an outcome acceptable to all.

Indicator cards may also be used to show the moderator that a delegate considers it is time to move on – a speaker may be getting repetitious or

11. These colours are chosen because even those who are colour blind can distinguish between orange and blue.

irrelevant, or the points may have been well made already by other speakers. In this case, a delegate may hold the two coloured cards crossed in front of the chest as a silent indication to the moderator that prolonging debate does not seem helpful. If the number of crossed cards indicates that many delegates are of the same mind, the moderator may ask the speaker to conclude, or invite one with a different perspective to contribute next, or check whether the meeting is ready to move to recording a consensus decision.

c) Small conversation groups

Breaking into small conversation groups is one way of enabling fuller participation - just turning to near neighbours of the same language preference in a plenary setting for a few moments of sharing ideas. Often an apparent deadlock can be relieved by such a technique, and when the plenary resumes, fresh insights may have emerged which lead to a creative way for an outcome to be achieved.

d) Checking for consensus

As discussion proceeds, it may become clear there are basic principles the meeting is able to affirm immediately, before the continuing search for a common mind on more diverse aspects of the proposal. The moderator can state what seems to be an underlying agreement, and then check with the meeting with such a question as: “Do we have consensus on this aspect at this stage?” Delegates are invited to show indicator cards, and the moderator is able to see if:

- all are in agreement (orange), in which case the consensus agreement is recorded, and continuing discussion can focus on the more contentious aspects;
- there is still a mixed response (many of both orange and blue), in which case more discussion on the whole issue is clearly needed; or
- only one or two are unable to agree at this point (mostly orange, one or two blue), in which case the moderator’s next questions can check whether those few feel their point of view has been heard, and whether they can accept the position reached by the others and agree to a consensus outcome being recorded, even though the wording is not their first preference.

e) When consensus seems elusive

After a reasonable attempt to achieve an agreed outcome, if it seems a consensus outcome is still elusive and the meeting is polarized with more than one potential outcome, one of a number of possibilities is available to the meeting (perhaps guided by the moderator), including:

- agreeing to refer the matter to a select working group to report back to a later session (ensuring the group's membership includes people from each of the firmly held positions);
- agreeing to refer the matter to another body or to member churches for more work, and not considering it further at this assembly;
- agreeing to affirm that there are various opinions Christian churches may hold;
- agreeing that the matter be no longer considered.

f) In reaching any of these conclusions, certain questions should be asked, such as:

- “Must a decision on this matter be made today?” If no, the matter should be deferred to a later session (tomorrow, next week, or some other time). Further seasoning by a committee and informal discussion among those with strong views will often bring the meeting to a different level of agreement at a later session. If yes (and this is quite rare), the attention of the meeting must shift from approving or not approving the proposal at hand to finding other ways of meeting the pressing or time-critical need. Interim solutions can sometimes be found while the meeting searches for consensus on the original question.
- “Can this proposal be acted upon, on the understanding that some members (or member churches) cannot support it?” If no, the proposal should be deferred for further work, as above. If yes, the effect is that those persons, or member churches, or parts of the Council, being of a dissenting opinion, nevertheless allow a policy or programme to go forward without endorsing it. This is sometimes called “standing aside”. In social and political issues it may sometimes be appropriate for some member churches or some committee

or commission of the World Council of Churches to speak without committing the Council as a whole to one point of view.

- “Have we asked the right question?” When agreement on the issue, as posed, is not possible, this should not be regarded as failure. Sometimes a different question will yield a consensus. Sometimes it is helpful to ask, “What can we say together?” The meeting may not be of one mind on a particular statement on a difficult issue, but may find great value in articulating its various perspectives and the fruits of its discussion. There may be foundational principles on which we all agree. A clear articulation of these, followed by a description of the diverse conclusions that Christians of good conscience have reached, can be a powerful product of a discussion.

g) When a decision must be taken NOW

If in the opinion of the general secretary or the moderator or vice moderator(s) of the central committee or the business committee it is vital for a decision to be made before the meeting concludes and yet the meeting is nowhere near a consensus outcome, the rules provide a process for the business committee to re-formulate the proposal.¹² When the reworded proposal is then brought back to a later session, it is the responsibility of the meeting to decide (by consensus procedures) whether it agrees a decision must be made at this meeting, and whether it is prepared to continue working towards a consensus outcome on the reformulated proposal. If a decision must be made immediately, but opinion remains divided about what that decision should be, the meeting can agree by at least an eighty-five (85) percent majority to decide the matter by formal voting procedures.

10. Making decisions—formal voting procedures

a) Exceptions to using consensus

It is expected that all decisions of the WCC will be made by consensus, except for:¹³

- changes to the constitution;
- elections;
- selection of an assembly venue; and

12. Rule XIX.9.e.

13. Rule XIX.10.a.

- adoption of yearly accounts, financial audit reports and appointment of the auditors.

Each of these matters will initially be presented in a hearing session, where questions and discussion using consensus procedures may occur. At the start of the decision session where the matter will be decided, the moderator announces that the method to be used is voting by show of hands or cards. Simplified rules for formal voting procedures¹⁴ are then employed for determining the matter, in which:

- all motions must be moved and seconded by a delegate;
- the mover has the right to speak first;
- an amendment may be introduced and if seconded it will be considered along with the motion;
- no one may speak more than once except that the mover may answer objections immediately before the vote is taken;
- withdrawal of a motion requires the permission of the meeting;
- any delegate may move to close the discussion, waiting for a call from the moderator before so doing;
- voting is by show of hands or cards, those in favour first, those against next and then those abstaining;
- anyone voting with the minority or abstaining may have his or her opinion recorded in the minutes, the report of the meeting and the session record;
- there is provision for reconsideration of an earlier decision of the meeting;
- points of order and procedural proposals may be raised;
- approval requires two-thirds of those present to be in favour (unless otherwise specified or agreed by the meeting).

b) Moving from consensus to formal vote

Very rarely it may be necessary to resort to formal voting procedures when it is imperative that an outcome be decided immediately and it has not been possible to reach consensus. The process for moving from consensus to

14. Rule XIX.10.; appendix B: flow chart for formal voting procedures.

formal voting procedures requires the moderator to announce that a vote to decide this change will be taken, eighty-five (85) percent of delegates present being needed to agree to do so.¹⁵

11. Procedural proposals and points of order

a) Procedural proposals

Any delegate in the course of either a hearing session or a decision session, or any participant in the course of a hearing session, may ask for clarification of the pending matter or may raise suggestions about procedure which can be considered by the meeting and decided immediately. A delegate seeking to do so may not interrupt a speaker but must wait for the call of the moderator.

b) Points of order

Points of order may be raised by any participant during either hearing or decision sessions at any time, even by interrupting another speaker. A participant gains the attention of the moderator with the words, “point of order!” The moderator asks the participant to state the point of order and then (without debate):

- rules on it immediately; or
- asks the assembly to decide the matter.

Points of order which may be raised are:

- to question whether procedures being followed are in accordance with the rules which allow for a personal explanation if a subsequent speaker grossly misrepresents his/her remarks;
- to raise objection if remarks are thought to be offensive or derogatory;
- to request that the meeting move to a closed session until the matter under discussion is decided (closed session requires that all but delegates leave the session).

c) If the moderator’s ruling on a point of order or a procedural proposal is challenged, the challenger may speak and the moderator reply before the delegates present decide the question either by consensus or by

15. Rule XIX.9.f.

two-thirds majority vote, according to the decision-making procedures then being employed.

12. Safety valves

Seeking the common mind of a meeting about the way forward needs some safeguards. No delegate or member church need feel pressured into an unacceptable position. All opinions are valued and on the occasions when, after careful consideration and listening, a minority cannot accept what has become the general mind of the meeting, there is reassurance in the following provisions.

a) Consensus outcome on what?

A consensus outcome may be reached that a variety of stances are appropriate for member churches to hold on a particular issue, and so the wording of the agreed resolution notes and affirms those differing perspectives.

b) Definition of consensus—not only unanimity

The definition of consensus is not confined to unanimity. It also includes the situation where most are in agreement and those few who cannot completely agree are satisfied that their point of view has been heard, that the discussion has been both full and fair, and that their church is not compromised in having a consensus outcome recorded on this matter.

c) Recording minority opinions

After every effort to discern a consensus outcome, occasionally a decision cannot be reached even though it is necessary to finalize the matter immediately. Among the possible outcomes for such a scenario is the provision for accepting the discernment of most delegates with some few others recording a different point of view. This can occur when those who cannot agree with the majority are yet satisfied with the outcome and exercise the right to record their opinion opposing the resolution in the minutes and to have their viewpoint noted in the record of the session.

d) Ecclesiological self-understanding¹⁶

Where a matter being raised is considered by a delegate to go against the ecclesiological self-understanding of his or her church, the delegate may

16. Rule XIX.6.d.

request that it not be submitted for decision. The moderator shall seek the advice of the business committee in consultation with this delegate and other members of the same church or confession present at the session. If agreed that the matter does in fact go against the ecclesiological self-understanding of the delegate's church, the moderator shall announce that the matter will be removed from the agenda of the decision session and may be considered in a hearing session. The materials and minutes of the discussion shall be sent to the member churches for their study and comment.

e) A member church may act after the assembly

If after the close of an assembly a member church finds it cannot support a decision of the assembly, there is provision for that to be officially recorded.¹⁷

13. Language

Normally there are five working languages of the assembly – English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. Participants may contribute in another language if they can provide interpretation into one of these. The business committee will assist such participants to be able to contribute as fully as possible.

14. Election process

a) Assembly committees

During the first decision session of the assembly, the business committee will present nominations for election of the membership of all assembly committees (including the nominations committee). Committees begin their work immediately.

b) Central committee

- Prior to the assembly, member churches are invited to nominate candidates for the central committee from amongst assembly delegates. Consultation between churches in each region is encouraged, such that a name supported by more than one church will carry more weight for the nominations committee.
- During the assembly, regional meetings provide opportunity for discussion about particular nominations.
- Principles guiding the work of the nominations committee:¹⁸

17. Rule XIX.5.e.

18. Rule IV.4.c,d,e,and f.

- the personal qualifications of the individual for the task for which she/he is being nominated;
 - fair and adequate confessional representation;
 - fair and adequate geographical and cultural representation;
 - fair and adequate representation of the major interests of the Council;
 - the general acceptability of the nominations to the churches to which the nominees belong;
 - not more than seven persons from any one member church;
 - adequate representation of lay persons and an adequate balance of men, women and young people.
- Early in the life of the assembly, the nominations committee presents a first proposal on the anticipated profile of the central committee (without names) for consideration and approval by the assembly.
 - Subsequently, a first reading of nominations is presented in a hearing session, during which discussion about the list in general is encouraged. No proposed changes to names will be considered in this session.
 - Delegates may bring proposals for changes to specific nominations to the nominations committee outside of the plenary meeting. Any proposal needs to be in writing, must be signed by six delegates from at least three member churches, and must propose an alternative nominee as an alternative to a particular nominee. Alternative nominations need to offer a replacement with the same demographic profile (region, gender, age, etc.), unless the replacement nominee will improve the balances sought.
 - When the second reading of the list of nominations is brought to a decision session, the nominations committee gives an account of the proposals suggested for changes to the slate of names, and any variations resulting from them. If the assembly is not ready to approve the list, further time is given for out-of-session proposals as described above, and the list is brought to a subsequent decision session for the election.

c) Presidents

Prior to an assembly, staff will seek advice from regional ecumenical organizations and pre-assembly regional meetings about appropriate names to be considered by the nominations committee, in preparing nominations for the eight presidents of the World Council of Churches.

d) Voting

Elections are determined by formal voting procedures.

Rule XIX: Conduct of meetings

1. General

- a. These provisions for conduct of meetings shall apply to meetings of the assembly, the central committee, the executive committee and all other bodies of the World Council of Churches. During an assembly, the titles “president, moderator and vice-moderators of the central committee” shall refer to the persons holding those offices in the outgoing central committee. During the term of a central committee such titles shall refer to the current presidents and leadership of that central committee.
- b. “Delegate” shall mean an official representative of a member church to an assembly with the right to speak and the responsibility to participate in decision-making (rule IV.1.a). For meetings of the central committee, “delegate” shall mean a member of the central committee or that member’s substitute (rule VI.1.b), with the right to speak and the responsibility to participate in decision-making.
- c. “Participant” shall include delegates as well as persons invited to the assembly or a meeting of the central committee as persons with the right to speak but not to participate in decision-making (rule IV.1.b and VI.2).

2. Categories of sessions

The assembly shall sit in one of the following categories of sessions: general, hearing or decision. The business committee shall determine the category of session appropriate for different parts of the agenda.

a. *General session*

General sessions shall be reserved for ceremonial occasions, public acts of witness and formal addresses. Only matters proposed by the central committee or by the business committee shall be included in general sessions. No decisions shall be made during general sessions.

b. *Hearing session*

Hearing sessions shall be designated for plenary presentations, discussion, dialogue, and exchange of ideas as a resource for developing understanding, deepening fellowship among member churches and coming to a common mind on matters on the agenda. A wide range of perspectives shall be encouraged during hearing sessions. No decisions shall be made during hearing sessions, other than to move to a decision session, if deemed necessary or to deal with a point of order or procedural proposals.

c. *Decision session*

Decision sessions shall be designated for matters requiring a decision, including:

- i. adoption of the agenda;
- ii. proposal for change in the agenda;
- iii. appointments and elections;
- iv. reception or adoption of reports or recommendations;
- v. actions to be taken on recommendations or proposals of committees or commissions, or arising out of hearing sessions;
- vi. adoption of accounts and financial audits; and
- vii. amendment of constitution or rules.

3. Moderating sessions

- a. A moderator for each session of the assembly shall be designated before an assembly by the outgoing central committee, and during an assembly by the business committee, as follows:
 - i. in general sessions one of the presidents or the moderator of the central committee shall preside;
 - ii. in hearing sessions one of the presidents, the moderator or a vice-moderator of the central committee, or a delegate with specific expertise in the subject matter of the hearing, shall preside;
 - iii. in decision sessions the moderator or a vice-moderator of the central committee or delegate to the assembly who was a member of the outgoing central committee shall preside.
- b. The role of session moderators shall be:
 - i. to convene the session, including announcing the category of session;

- ii. to facilitate and encourage discussion and dialogue, for the exchange and development of ideas, and to assist the meeting to come to a common mind;
 - iii. during decision sessions, to test any emerging agreement on a particular point and whether the meeting is ready to move to a decision by consensus;
 - iv. in the event the category of session is to change during a session, to announce the change in category, providing a break in the session to mark the change in category; and
 - v. to close the session.
- c. The moderator shall consult with the recorder for the session to ensure that the developing consensus is accurately noted and any changed wording promptly made available to the meeting.
 - d. All moderators shall undertake specific training in conducting meetings based upon the consensus model of decision-making, as described in these rules and the accompanying guidelines.

4. Moderator of the assembly

The moderator of the assembly shall announce the opening, suspension and the adjournment of the assembly.

5. Official minutes, records and reports

- a. The business committee shall appoint recorders from among delegates for each decision session. Their role shall be to follow the discussion of a decision session, to record the language of the emerging consensus, including final language of decisions taken, and to assist the moderator of the session in discerning an emerging consensus. Recorders shall also assist the moderator in ensuring that the final agreed wording of a proposal is translated and available to delegates before a decision is made.
- b. The business committee shall appoint rapporteurs for each hearing session and for committee meetings for which official minutes are not maintained, to prepare a report of the meeting including major themes and specific proposals. A rapporteur appointed for a committee meeting shall function as a recorder of that meeting.
- c. The business committee shall appoint minute-takers to record the official minutes of general, hearing and decision sessions of an assembly or any meeting for which formal minutes must be kept,

and shall include a record of the discussion, motions and decisions. The minutes will normally incorporate by reference any report of the meeting. The minutes shall be signed by the moderator and the minute-taker for the session and shall be sent to the participants of the meeting. For all minutes other than minutes of an assembly, if there is no objection within six months from the sending of the minutes, the minutes shall be considered to be accepted. The first full central committee meeting following an assembly shall confirm the minutes of the assembly.

- d. Decision sessions shall produce official minutes, a record and/or report.
- e. If, after the close of a meeting, a member church declares that it cannot support a decision of the meeting, the member church may submit its objection in writing and have its position recorded in the minutes or report of a subsequent meeting. The decision itself shall not be rescinded by this action.

6. Agenda

- a. Matters may be included on the agenda of a meeting according to rule IV.3 and procedures established by the business and programme committees, and any other committee established by central committee for that purpose. Normally, matters included on an agenda will be based upon reports, recommendations or proposals that previously have been fully considered and have the consensus support of the proposing group or committee.
- b. The business committee shall ensure that the moderator is advised before each session, and if appropriate during breaks within a session, as to the conduct of the business and the priority of various agenda items.
- c. A delegate may propose to the business committee an item of business to be included on, or any change in, the agenda. If after consideration the business committee has not agreed to the proposal, the delegate may appeal the decision to the moderator of the assembly in writing. The moderator shall at a convenient time inform the assembly of the proposal, and a member of the business committee shall explain the reasons for this refusal. The delegate may give reasons for proposing it. The moderator shall then without further debate put the following question: Shall the assembly accept this

proposal? If the assembly agrees to accept the proposal, the business committee as soon as possible shall bring proposals for the inclusion of the matter or the change in the agenda.

- d. Matters concerning ecclesiological self-understanding: Where a matter being raised is considered by a delegate to go against the ecclesiological self-understanding of his or her church, the delegate may request that it not be submitted for decision. The moderator shall seek the advice of the business committee in consultation with this delegate and other members of the same church or confession present at the session. If agreed that the matter does in fact go against the ecclesiological self-understanding of the delegate's church, the moderator shall announce that the matter will be removed from the agenda of the decision session and may be considered in a hearing session. The materials and minutes of the discussion shall be sent to the member churches for their study and comment.
- e. Subject to the provisions of this rule, the agenda shall be proposed, amended and/or adopted in accordance with rule IV.3, IV.5, and VI.3.d.

7. Speaking

- a. In hearing sessions, participants wishing to speak either may submit to the moderator a written request or may queue at the microphones when the moderator so invites, but may speak only when called by the moderator.
- b. In decision sessions of the assembly or central committee, only delegates may speak. Delegates wishing to speak either may submit to the moderator a written request or may queue at the microphones when the moderator so invites, but may speak only when called by the moderator.
- c. In sessions of committees and advisory bodies where both hearing and decision may take place, participants who are not delegates have the right to speak but not to take part in decision-making.
- d. The moderator shall decide who shall speak, ensuring that a fair distribution of opinions is heard, and may take advice on the order of speakers from a small sub-committee of the business committee. If time allows and others are not left unheard, the moderator may permit speakers to intervene more than once.

- e. When called by the moderator, a speaker shall speak from a microphone, first stating his or her name, church, country, and role at the meeting, and shall address all remarks to the moderator.
 - f. Remarks will normally be limited to three minutes; however, the moderator may use discretion in allowing extra time if there is a difficulty in language or interpretation or if the issues being discussed are unusually complex.
 - g. Procedural proposals – hearing or decision sessions: Provided that a speaker is not interrupted, a delegate may ask for clarification of the pending matter or may raise suggestions about procedure. The moderator immediately shall provide clarification or respond to the suggestion for change of procedure.
 - h. Points of order – hearing or decision sessions: This provision is available to question whether procedures being followed are in accordance with these rules, to object to offensive language, to make a point of personal explanation, or to request that a meeting move to closed session. Points of order may be raised by a participant at any time, even by interrupting another speaker. A participant gains the attention of the moderator by standing and calling, “point of order!” The moderator shall ask the participant to state the point of order and then (without discussion) shall rule on it immediately.
 - i. If any delegate disagrees with the moderator’s decision on a procedural proposal or point of order, the delegate may appeal against it. In this case the moderator will put this question, without discussion, to the meeting: “Does the meeting concur with the decision of the moderator?” The delegates present shall decide the question according to the decision-making procedures then being employed.
8. Reaching consensus: seeking the common mind of the meeting
- a. Consensus shall be understood as seeking the common mind of the meeting without resort to a formal vote, in a process of genuine dialogue that is respectful, mutually supportive and empowering, whilst prayerfully seeking to discern God’s will.
 - b. Decisions will normally be by consensus, unless otherwise specified by the rules.
 - c. A consensus decision on a particular matter shall be recorded when one of the following occurs:
 - i. all delegates are in agreement (unanimity); or

- ii. most are in agreement and those who disagree are satisfied that the discussion has been both full and fair and do not object that the proposal expresses the general mind of the meeting.
 - d. A consensus decision shall mean that there is agreement about the outcome of a discussion. This may mean agreement to accept a proposal or a variation of a proposal; it also may mean agreement about another outcome, including agreement to reject a proposal, to postpone a matter, that no decision can be reached, or that there are various opinions that may be held. When consensus has been reached that various opinions can be held concerning a matter, those various opinions shall be recorded in the final wording of the minutes and the report and the record of the meeting.
- 9. Decision-making by consensus
 - a. A proposal or recommendation considered in a decision session may be affirmed, modified or rejected. Delegates may suggest modifications, and the moderator may allow discussion on more than one modification at a time. Reaching a common mind may require a series of steps, if there is a variety of opinions being expressed. As discussion proceeds, the moderator may ask the meeting to affirm what is held in common before encouraging discussion on those aspects of a proposal about which more diverse opinions have been voiced.
 - b. To assist the moderator in discerning the mind of the meeting and to move efficiently towards consensus, the recorder of the session shall maintain a record of the discussion. Delegates may be provided with indicator cards to facilitate participation.
 - c. A delegate or the moderator may suggest that the matter under discussion be referred for further work to an appropriate group holding a range of points of view. This suggestion itself shall be tested to discern the mind of the meeting. If agreed, the business committee shall schedule consideration of the matter for a later session.
 - d. When it seems that the meeting is close to agreement on an outcome, the moderator shall ensure that the wording of the proposal (or the proposal as varied during the course of the discussion) is clear to all delegates, and then test whether there is consensus on that outcome. If all are agreed consistent with rule XIX.8.c.i, the moderator shall declare that consensus has been reached and the

decision made. If the meeting is not unanimous, the moderator shall invite those who hold a minority view to explain their reasons if they wish and to indicate whether they can agree with a decision pursuant to rule XIX.8.c.ii. If so, consensus shall be declared.

- e. If, after every effort has been made to reach consensus, agreement cannot be reached and it is the opinion of a member of the leadership of the central committee or the business committee that a decision must be made before the meeting concludes, the moderator shall ask the business committee to formulate a proposal for how the matter may be considered again in a new form. At the later decision session where this new approach is considered, the meeting itself shall decide whether a decision must be made at this meeting, and, if so, shall proceed on any one of the following courses, which may be followed sequentially:
 - i. to work further towards consensus on the proposal in its new form;
 - ii. to work to reach agreement among most delegates with some delegates recording an objection, in which event a meeting shall record acceptance of the proposal, providing that each delegate who does not agree is satisfied with that outcome and has the right to have his or her viewpoint recorded in the minutes, in the report, and in the record of the meeting; or
 - iii. to move into voting procedures to decide the matter (rule XIX.10).
- f. When a meeting discusses by consensus procedures a matter for which decision must be reached at that meeting and there is no ready agreement in accordance with rule XIX.9.e.i or ii, the moderator may offer a procedural proposal: “That the meeting resolve the proposal now by vote”. Except for matters described in rule XIX.6.d, “matters concerning ecclesiological self-understanding”, the moderator shall announce that a vote to decide this change of procedure shall be taken. Delegates shall indicate by voting whether they agree that the matter shall be decided by a vote. If 85 percent of delegates present vote in favour of moving the matter to a voting process, the matter shall so move. If fewer than 85 percent of delegates present vote in favour of moving the matter to a voting process, the matter shall not so move, and the meeting shall decide, again by vote of 85

percent of delegates present, whether discussion should continue to achieve consensus or whether discussion should be discontinued.

10. Decision-making by vote

- a. Some matters require decision by vote, rather than by consensus. These include:
 - i. constitutional changes (two-thirds majority);
 - ii. elections (simple majority with specific procedures for election of the general secretary);
 - iii. selection of assembly venue (simple majority);
 - iv. adoption of yearly accounts, financial audit reports and appointment of the auditors (simple majority).
- b. For matters that have been moved from consensus procedures to decision-making by vote in accordance with rule XIX.9.e.iii or rule XIX.9.f, and for matters reserved to a voting procedure according to subsection a. of this section, the following procedures shall be followed:
 - i. All motions must be moved and seconded by a delegate, and the mover has the right to speak first.
 - ii. In discussion following the seconding of a motion, no delegate may speak more than once, except that the delegate who moved the motion may answer objections at the end of the discussion.
 - iii. Any delegate may move an amendment, and if a seconder supports it, the amendment shall be considered simultaneously with the original proposal.
 - iv. When discussion is concluded, including the right of the mover to reply (XIX.10.b.ii.), the moderator shall call for the vote and shall put any amendment first. If approved, it will be incorporated in the original proposal, which will then be put to the vote without further discussion.
 - v. If the mover seeks to withdraw a motion or amendment during the discussion, the moderator will seek the consent of the meeting for the withdrawal.
- c. A delegate may move to close the discussion, but in doing so shall not interrupt a speaker. If seconded, the moderator shall call for a vote on this motion immediately without discussion. If two-thirds of the meeting agree, the voting process will then begin. If the motion fails, discussion will proceed, but the same motion to close

discussion may be moved again as the discussion continues, but not by the delegate who moved it the first time.

- d. Voting shall be by show of hands or indicator cards and the moderator shall ask first for those in favour, then for those against, and finally for those who wish to abstain from voting. The moderator shall announce the result of the vote immediately.
- e. If the moderator is in doubt, or for any other reason decides to do so, or if a delegate requests it, a vote on the matter shall be taken immediately by count of a show of hands or indicator cards. The moderator may call tellers to count those voting and abstaining. A delegate may ask that voting be by secret written ballot, and if seconded and if a majority of delegates present and voting agree, a secret written ballot shall be taken. The moderator shall announce the result of any count or secret written ballot.
- f. A majority of the delegates present, including those who choose to abstain from voting, shall determine a matter being decided by vote unless a higher proportion is required by the constitution or these rules. If the vote results in a tie, the matter shall be regarded as defeated.
- g. If the moderator wishes to participate in the discussion, he or she shall relinquish the position of moderator of the session to another member of the leadership of the central committee until the matter has been resolved.
- h. A moderator entitled to vote as a delegate may do so, but may not cast the decisive vote in the event of a tie.
- i. Any two delegates who voted with the majority for a previously approved matter may request that the business committee propose reconsideration of the matter. The business committee shall bring the proposal to the next decision session and may express an opinion as to whether the matter should be reconsidered. Reconsideration shall take place only if two-thirds of delegates present agree.
- j. Anyone voting with a minority or abstaining from voting may have his or her opinion recorded in the minutes, in the report, and/or the record of the meeting.

11. Languages

The working languages in use in the World Council of Churches are English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. The general secretary shall make reasonable effort to provide interpretation for any one of those languages into the others and shall endeavour to provide written translation of the specific wording of proposals. A participant may speak in another language only if he or she provides for interpretation into one of the working languages. The general secretary shall provide all possible assistance to any participant requiring an interpreter.

Flowchart of Consensus Procedures





