

# Consensus Based Decision Making in the Indiana Crossroads Sisters

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## Introduction to Consensus Based Decision Making

Consensus decision making is used by a variety of organizations, including the World Trade Organization (WTO). The process seeks to arrive at decisions that everyone can agree to, by seeking to resolve or mitigate the concerns of the minority. In contrast, the will of the minority is simply overridden in majority rule. The consensus process is based on the assumption that every member of the group has a valid perspective that is potentially crucial to making good decisions. It requires everyone in the group be committed to clearly understand common goals, and to be able to differentiate between their personal preferences and what will help the group achieve its goals.

The consensus process has several foundational supports:

**Common Goal:** everyone present at the meeting needs to share a common goal and be willing to work together towards it. This could be the desire to take action at a specific event, or the shared vision of the Sisters as a whole.

**Commitment to reach consensus:** consensus can require a lot of commitment and patience to make it work. Everyone must be willing to really give it a go. This means not only being deeply honest about what it is you want or don't want but also able to properly listen to what others have to say. Everyone must be willing to shift their positions, to be open to alternative solutions and be able to reassess what they consider to be their needs.

**Trust and openness:** we all need to be able to trust that everyone shares our commitment to creating true consensus decisions. This includes being able to trust people not to abuse the process or to manipulate the outcome of the discussion. If we're scared that other people are putting their own wishes and needs before everyone else's then we're more likely to become defensive, and behave in the same way ourselves.

Making decisions by consensus is based on openness - this means learning to openly express both our desires (what we'd like to see happening), and our needs (what we have to see happen in order to support a decision). It takes time to learn how to distinguish between wants and needs - after all most of us are more used to decision making where one wins and the other loses. In this kind of adversarial system, we are often forced to claim we need more than we really do so we can concede points without giving up any significant ground. But if everyone is able to talk openly then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone's positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.

**Sufficient time** for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. Taking time to make a good decision now so you can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.

**Clear Process:** it's essential for everyone to have a shared understanding of the process that the meeting is using.

**Active participation:** if we want a decision we can all agree on then we all need to play an active role in the decision making. This means listening to what everyone has to say, voicing thoughts and feelings about the matter and pro-actively looking for solutions that include everyone.

**Good facilitation:** When your group is larger than just a handful of people or you are trying to make difficult decisions, appoint facilitators to help your meeting run more smoothly. Good facilitation helps the group to work harmoniously, creatively and democratically. It also ensures that the tasks of the meeting get done, that decisions are made and implemented.

## ICS Consensus Decisions

The Indiana Crossroads Sisters' vow to promulgate joy is the cornerstone of the consensus process. A minority opinion that is squashed in a "yes - no" vote does not bring joy to the whole group. A consensus decision, by contrast, allows all members to be heard and to share their opinions on the decision, and to be a joyful part of the outcome.

### The Process

The decision process includes the following steps:

- 1) Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided
- 2) Explore the issue and look for ideas
- 3) Gather initial thoughts and reactions. Are there concerns that haven't been addressed?
- 4) Collect possible solutions to concerns
- 5) Look for proposals that include the best elements of the discussion and address people's key concerns
- 6) Clarify and amend the proposal - find elements or amendments that address remaining concerns or make the proposal more acceptable to the group
- 7) Test for agreement - there are four general categories:
- 8) Blocks - "I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that has not been resolved. We need to look for a new proposal"
- 9) Stand Asides - "I cannot support this proposal because... But I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me."
- 10) Reservations - "I have some reservations, but generally agree with the proposal."
- 11) Agreements - "I support the proposal and am willing to implement it."
- 12) If there are no blocks, and few stand-asides, then there is consensus.
- 13) Implementation - Who, when, how, where? Set tasks and deadlines.

## **Types of Decisions**

Most decisions made by the Indiana Crossroads Sisters will fall into three categories - Financial, Membership, and Events.

\* Financial decisions are decided by full consensus.

\* Membership decisions are decided by full consensus except in the case of Suspension or Excommunication.

\* Basic decisions about events (the desirability of doing an event, the point-person, date & time) are decided by full consensus, though details of the event may be decided by either full consensus or "Primary Person in Charge." (see below)

## **Primary Person in Charge**

Many events and other tasks of the Indiana Crossroads Sisters are entrusted to an individual or to a small group of people. In such cases, the Primary Person in Charge (PPC), which may be an individual or a small group, has the final say in any decisions relating to their event or task. This is done for two reasons. We trust that the PPC is acting in the best interests of the group. We also realize that there is often not enough time to fully discuss in a group setting all the details.

While it is often difficult to give up control, and often an individual may have a strong opinion about a detail of an event or task, it is important to allow a PPC the freedom to make their own decisions. This helps further develop the ability to make decisions and lead others to a shared outcome.

The other side of the coin is for the PPC to listen - to remember that other members have talents and skills that the PPC may lack, and that other opinions can lead to the same outcome, and that it might be a *better* outcome.

The delicate dance of PPC mixed with opinions from others can lead to several options: the PPC may make a decision on their own, the PPC may ask the full membership for opinions or solutions that the PPC may not have thought of, or the PPC may ask for a full consensus for a particular decision.

However, when the event or task is accomplished, regular monthly meetings have the ability to review the event or task. At such time, feedback should be given about how well the PPC accomplished things, and ideas for improvement should be considered.