

# ***GROUP DECISION-MAKING IN A FAITH MODE***

*Faith communities are often faced with making major decisions. Ignatian spirituality offers a simple format for discerning these decisions. John Veltri s.j. and [Rev. Jean Mitchell](#) developed this hypothetical case as a tool to help train parish leaders in this process.*

*While the following case study describes such a process involving an Anglican/Episcopal parish, it can be adapted to reflect the organizational structure of any group that desires to work together to make a decision in a faith context.*

## **A Case Study**

We are in the economic climate of 2000. Trinity Anglican Church in Capital City is located downtown and has a two-hundred-year history in that location. A number of stores on the main street have closed as a large mall west of the city has attracted many similar businesses. About a block from the church, a large hotel is being renovated for a senior citizens' complex in which varying levels of care will be available. In addition to the various church activities, many community groups use the church's facilities - the local Chamber Choir and other musical groups, a small Drama Club, the Kiwanis Music Festival, 2 AA and 1 NA group, a Quilters' Club, a Dancefit group, etc. There is also a group that rents the hall and holds monthly dances which attract a minimum of 300 teenagers each time. The majority of the congregation is aging, but in recent years, some young families have become members. During the last six months, a cooperative nursery school was established by the parish. The young parents who are bringing their children to it do so because parenting skills are taught experientially as an integral part of this program.

The building is aging. Major leaks in the roof have caused serious water damage. Pieces of plaster are falling from the ceiling and paint is peeling in several areas in the building. The build-up of heat between the stained glass windows and their protective coverings has caused some of the sections to bulge; and a few of these sections are ready to pop out. While the heating system still functions adequately, it is more than thirty-five years old. The church is not accessible to physically challenged people and within the building there are many different floor levels.

A feasibility study has been done for the restoration. The total cost of a complete restoration, which should solve all the major problems, except for the heating system, for the next twenty-five years, would be \$827,000. This would be in addition to the \$340,000 already spent within the past 10 years to re-point the stone exterior and the \$55,000 spent to computerize the console of the pipe organ. An accessibility plan which would make the most important areas of the building accessible would cost \$70,000 of which \$40,000 might be recovered from a government grant. There is pressure from the historical society to preserve the building, but no financial assistance is provided by it. The church does have some endowments, but in keeping with the terms of several of them, the interest earned from them continues to be used for general operating expenses. For the past fifteen years, the parish has relied on this interest income to offset the deficit in the budget for general operating expenses. However, some of the endowments do not have any conditions attached to them, and so the capital from them could be used in whatever way the corporation (that is, the rector and the two wardens) decides to use it.

You are a member of the parish council of this church. What should the council advise the rector and wardens to do?

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### **Some Roles For The Case Study**

#### **Rector**

who has a "history of building" and gets meaning in life from these activities.

#### **Rector's Warden**

who externally agrees with the rector but cannot presently give much financial support to the parish as she has just lost a good paying job. She is a single parent whose two young teenagers often attend the dances at the church.

#### **People's Warden**

who is looking for some project to make a name for himself. He is a person of some financial means and has always supported the church generously whenever there has been some kind of "building project."

#### **Deputy Warden**

who has been a member of the congregation for over fifty years and has memories of a major building campaign that left some bad feelings in the parish.

#### **Another Deputy Warden**

whose aging parents are lifelong members of the parish but who are finding it

increasingly difficult to participate in church activities because of their diminishing physical mobility.

### **Chair Of Physical Resources**

who is the most knowledgeable member in the parish about the physical structure. He is the person who usually negotiates with the companies doing the repairs. He has taken on this position because he has a keen interest in maintaining the building.

### **Six Other Members Of Parish Council**

who represent various aspects of parish life. Three are elected to the council; three are appointed by the rector.

## **Phase One: Zeroing In On The Key Issue**

You have to discover the various understandings of the participants and develop a realistic focus in order to zero in on the particular issues/concerns you want addressed. The decision-making group must have common and harmonious agreement that this is the important issue to be solved. This is formulated as a specific question. Here is an example: How are we going to repair and upgrade our building?

## **Phase Two: Formulating The Possible Answers**

What are the various answers to the question? Presume this listing as THE possible answers that have been generated.

A. We sell this building, move to another area of the city which is growing, and build a new structure which would be much less expensive to maintain.

B. We sell the building and the members of the congregation are helped to establish membership in the other five Anglican congregations which are in the city.

C. We have a major restoration campaign which encompasses all the present repairs and alterations.

D. We develop a specific list of priorities and then have a series of campaigns over the next twenty years to complete these specific projects.

E. We repair the leaks in the roof and develop a list of other priorities. Then we wait until we receive another request that would cover the cost of the next item on our priority list.

F. If we receive the \$40,000 government grant, we proceed with that part of the accessibility plan that could be completed for the \$40,000.

In the discussion to prioritize, presume agreement on the following which are listed on a flip-chart:

- |                   |                                                                                |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority 3</b> | <b>A.</b> We sell... move... build new structure...                            |
| <b>cancel out</b> | <b>B.</b> We sell... help members to move to other congregations...            |
| <b>Priority 1</b> | <b>C.</b> We have major restoration campaign... all projects...                |
| <b>Priority 2</b> | <b>D.</b> We develop priorities... series of campaigns... specific projects... |
| <b>wait</b>       | <b>E.</b> We repair leaks... develop other priorities... wait for requests...  |
| <b>wait</b>       | <b>F.</b> If we receive the \$40,000... part of the accessibility...           |

### **Phase Three: Gathering The Data And Praying Over Them**

Everyone is asked to spend time praying over the possible solution before them. During this time each is asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative.

We will not have a major restoration campaign		We will not have a major restoration campaign	
Advantages to us	Disadvantages to us	Advantages to us	Disadvantages to us

After time spent by themselves everyone comes together and shares their reasons in the group. The facilitator lists these on newsprint. No comments are permitted except for clarification. Go around the group round robin, for each column. Everything that is said is listened to with respect.

Determine what will constitute a consensual majority. For example, everyone agrees that this particular issue needs an 80% majority, or a 90% majority, or a 2/3 majority, etc. Each member then prays privately over the list of advantages and disadvantages and decides "yes" or "no". Each member then writes down his/her provisional decision on a piece of paper and gives the one or two reasons which had the most weight in his/her decision.

#### **Phase Four: Making The Decision**

Members come together in quiet. Each member in turn reads what he/she has written on the paper, namely the individual decision reached in prayer along with the key reason. (Or the papers could be given to the facilitator as the members come back together. The facilitator would then read aloud what each member has written).

The facilitator then declares the decision that has surfaced in the group. After a brief period of silent reflection, members share their feelings about the decision the group has reached.

#### **Find Where Consensus Resides In The Group**

If a decision has not been reached, the group will then have to discover through dialogue where consensus actually exists in the matter under consideration. (In light of this consensus, another decision or some important issue may become evident. Consequently a group may re-focus the question, formulate other answers, or consider some of the alternative answers previously formulated.)

#### **An Example .....**

Including the rector, wardens, deputy wardens, and chair of the physical resources committee, there is a total of 12 members on the parish council. To have the

80% level of consensus they felt was needed to proceed with the campaign, 10 members of the council would have to vote "yes." However, there were three dissenting votes.

When each person who voted "no" was asked to explain why he/she came to a negative vote, these were their explanations:

1. The rector explained that he was concerned that if the parish had to borrow money to finish the project while waiting for the committed funds to come in, the interest costs of borrowing the amount of money that might be needed would add greatly to the expenditures.
2. The rector's warden said that she felt that too many families were suffering financially because of poor economic conditions, and she knew of several people like herself who would not be able to make any commitment until after they had found new jobs and had some financial stability.
3. One of the deputy wardens informed the council that he came to realize during the prayer time that over the past years the greatest portion of the parish's spending was for the maintenance and restoration of the physical structure. He went on to say that the parish needed to put less emphasis on maintaining its building and a greater emphasis on people.

In the course of the ensuing discussion, it became known that a wealthy benefactor was ready to make a major financial contribution for such a restoration project as this, and thus, the issues regarding the financial concerns expressed by the first two negative voters would be taken care of.

However, the members on the council began to pay heed to what the deputy warden had said about the parish placing too much emphasis on maintaining a physical structure. As they reflected theologically, they realized that what he was saying was based on sound theology because the Kingdom of God was not being furthered by so much time, effort, and money being put into buildings.

After further discussion, the parish council agreed to make the immediate repairs to the roof to prevent any further water damage, and that they would use the next year to discern if God might be calling them to move from this structure which would continue to require expensive restoration in the future. They agreed also to begin to bring the rest of the congregation "on board" with this.

### **Phase Five: Seeking Confirmation**

If the issue warrants it, pray for confirmation. The experience of confirmation is shared by the group. (Confirmation is an experience of knowing and feeling in the group. There is a sense of fitness/congruity/continuity with the charism of the group and its history.) It should be sought in prayer, at some point before the decision moves toward implementation. In other words, if there was a consensual majority in Phase Four, confirmation now indicates that everyone, including those that voted against, can support the group's decision. If the group has not received this sense of confirmation, then the group has to return to some point in the decision making process and re-do it.

### **Phase Six: Implementing The Decision**

The "end product" of the decision should be spelled out as concretely and specifically as possible so that all the necessary steps may be taken to assure the proper implementation of the decision.

#### **Implementation**

1. Describe as clearly and as concretely as possible the immediate outcome/result of this decision. If a snapshot could be taken, what would the "product" look like?
2. Brainstorm all the steps to be taken to produce the outcome.
3. Designate the realistic steps.
4. Determine which steps are necessary for the outcome and which are helpful but not absolutely necessary.
5. Determine the chronological order in which the steps must be taken.
6. Determine the resources necessary to take these steps. Determine the resources at hand and the resources which will have to be sought elsewhere.
7. Spell out clearly:
  - what is to be done?
  - who is to do it ?
  - when must it be done?
  - how?
  - where?

- how much will it cost? etc.

[Note that phases one to five may have to be repeated for particular choices involved in the implementation of the decision.][\(1\)](#)

## Some "Working" Definitions

### Consensual Majority

By this term we mean that there is not unanimity in the voting, but there is a high degree of agreement that can be verified by the voting -- that is, they have the agreed-upon majority. There is sufficient agreement that there will be enough energy to implement the decision. Refer to Phase Three which indicates how a group at that point has to determine what constitutes a consensual majority.

### Consensus

Consensus is not a compromise in which various parties accept a proposal by swapping parts of their positions in order to gain other parts. Nor is consensus only a simple unanimity in which everyone accepts a proposal. By consensus, we mean that even though there may or may not be universal agreement in voting, there is a universal felt agreement in each other's hearts. In the process we are outlining, this can emerge in two or three ways:

1. Consensus can emerge as a result of the processes in Phases Three and Four.
2. Consensus can emerge after Phase Four. Refer to the sheet entitled *Finding Where Consensus Resides in the Group*. Here a group works together to 'discover' a new alternative, which is acceptable in all of its components to all of the members, even though some desired aspects are not involved.[\(2\)](#) We use the word 'discover' to indicate that some level of consensus already resides in the group and needs to be brought to the group's consciousness. This can be arrived at by a facilitated dialogue in a comfortable atmosphere of openness and listening. The context is one of faith. As this experience is taking place, often we recognize the work of grace -- God's Spirit.[\(3\)](#)
3. At times this consensus can emerge even earlier -- for example, an '*aha experience*' as the group is discussing the data or the alternatives in earlier phases of this process.[\(4\)](#)

### Confirmation

By this term we mean something different from consensus. If you have full consensus in Phase Four, confirmation is the unfolding and deepening of it. If you have only consensual agreement in Phase Four, confirmation is the felt experience in the group that there is energy to go with the decision. In confirmation all the members

of the group realize that they are experiencing something more than a sense of union together. It is a sense of God's presence manifested through the work together and through the decision they have made. They experience in a deep-felt way that "...when two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in their midst" (Matt 18:20 and 1Cor 5:4).

1. The material on implementation has been adapted from a "Manual for Groups" by John A. Veltri, sj and from material from the Institute For Communal Life (ICL), Ignatius College, Guelph, Ont. NIH 6N6.

2. These aspects may be included later in other decision-making processes in other circumstances at a different time and place.

3. In the terminology of the Spiritual Exercises, this is called "**Consolation**." Refer to the notation [\[316\]](#) where the description applies to an individual's personal spiritual experience with God. This concept can fittingly be applied to a group which shares common faith values and acts as a corporate person. In such moments, we can say that the group is practising Communal Spirituality.

4. Depending on the nature of the "aha experience," this could be an example of what is called in Ignatian Spiritual Exercises terminology "**Consolation Without Previous Cause**." Confer Spiritual Exercises notation [\[336\]](#).