

GNW Area United Methodists Stand Against Racism Inventory of **Decision-making** Mechanisms

Philippians 2:1, 3-5

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy...Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Bishop Elaine Stanovsky, in [Part 2 of her 2020 Episcopal address](#), called on all local congregations to enter into multiple explorations related to racism and white-centeredness. For purposes of this study:

- Reflect on traditions, decision-making, and communication styles that assume and privilege Euro-centric culture and values.

INTRODUCTION

(For a video introduction, click [here](#).)

Have you ever wondered why so many congregations in the United States use some form of Robert's Rules of Order in decision-making? According to [Wikipedia, Henry Robert](#) felt the need to manage decision-making in 'ordinary societies' in San Francisco where the diversity of people made for 'chaos' in managing meetings. *Robert came to this conclusion when presiding over a church meeting.*

Well...!

According to Wikipedia,

- Robert wrote these rules in the mid- to late-19th Century
- "loosely modeled [them] after those used in the United States House of Representatives, with such adaptations as Robert saw fit for use in ordinary societies"
- Incorporating principles of "one question at a time; one person, one vote; and a vote being limited to members present"

According to Wikipedia (and current experience), Robert's Rules of Order represent "the most widely used reference for meeting procedure and business rules in the English-speaking world."

Why start here in a study about addressing systemic racism in church and society? What in this short history might give us pause to question use of Robert's Rules (in whatever strict or loose form) in our church today? What in this short history might cause us to raise questions associated with white supremacy culture?

Let me say at the outset that the use of the terms 'systemic racism' or 'white supremacy culture' may cause defensiveness, anger or a sense of hopelessness given the pervasive nature of these issues. But I encourage you to hold, and to put your hearts and minds to Wesleyan practice: do no harm; do good; and stay in love with God. I assure you that Jesus did not use parliamentary procedure in working with the disciples or in making decisions on who was worthy of healing. If your inclination is to turn away at use of these terms (systemic racism and white supremacy culture), I encourage you instead to turn toward Philippians 2:1, 3-5 and open your hearts to this scripture. For this exploration is about how we, in humility, "...look not to our own interests but the interests of others." Even in attempting to be effective or efficient, we might exclude.

Too often, the processes of the church favor those who are:

- English-as-a-first-language speakers
- From cultures that value public debate and advocacy, cultures where it is common to speak and disagree publicly
- Knowledgeable and have practiced the decision-making processes

- Are direct communicators, where the meaning is almost solely in the words
- Persons with formal or informal power in the congregation

The decision-making processes of the church may over-emphasize some voices and de-emphasize or exclude other voices. If our goal is to include, then uncovering the places where exclusion takes place helps us better align our values and practices. And this alignment helps us to make decisions that are better informed, more sensitive to others and more respectful of differences.

Two Stories

Privilege comes with knowing the system (how things really work), having greater access to the system (relationships that permit entry or influence), and sometimes the ability to manipulate the system to one's own advantage. Consider these two stories from my experience with Robert's Rules of Order.

I was a delegate to the 2004 General Conference on behalf of the laity of the Pacific Northwest Conference. Through great support of my delegation and those around me, I gained the microphone to address terminology associated with non-dominant cultures in the church – then called 'minorities.' I was about to make a statement about use of this term, when another delegate came up behind me and said, 'Don't waste your time at the microphone. Make a proposal.'

This was a wise statement and born of experience. For if one simply makes a speech, no matter how eloquent, the assembly can do nothing with that statement. Only when a proposal is brought before the body, can the body act. I did not know. I quickly modified my approach, made a motion, which ultimately passed changing the language in the Book of Discipline to 'racial/ethnic.' I had to know the rules, *and* I had to know the strategy for making something happen in that setting. The voice in my ear was a gift.

I attended the 2012 General Conference on behalf of the Western Jurisdiction Inter-Ethnic Coordinating Committee to observe the consideration of a proposal to radically change the structure of The United Methodist Church. I watched, with no hope of influencing the situation, as an intricate, well-designed strategy was employed to slow the committee process such that delegates would be pressured to make a quick decision as the committee time neared completion. The committee was chaired by a person of color, the same person who had given me the gift of strategy referred to above. Though the chair knew the process, he was powerless to interrupt the strategy playing out before his eyes, which was fully orchestrated among powerful players in the church and within Robert's Rules of Order.

To be sure, many congregations create more accessible processes for decision-making. Still, an analysis of our decision-making systems is helpful in uncovering who might be favored in our processes and who might be excluded. Even if the congregation is largely monocultural (single culture), it is possible – even likely – that certain voices are centered and others decentered. If your congregation has little racial diversity, then consider gender, generation, economic status, LBTQIA+ status, and physical abilities, among others as you do this study. If your congregation is multi-cultural, consider race and the intersections of race and other marginalized identities when you consider who is heard and how persons are heard in the life of the church.

So, how do you make decisions in the local church?

GUIDE

The following is a guide to help you and your congregation analyze its decision-making processes and practices including:

- Formal decision-making processes (congregational or leadership decisions, usually made by an elected Administrative Council, Staff Parish Relations Committee, Board of Trustees, Single Board or another formalized group)
- Informal decision-making processes (decisions made in the parking lot, at choir practice or in coffee-time, some of which may impact or even effectively over-turn decisions made in the formal decision-making processes)
- Methods for speaking and listening (the 'rules' for engaging in conversation, debate or advocacy)
- Evaluation of the decision-making processes and what was decided

Important factors, such as differences in communication styles, understanding of hierarchy, and orientation to getting work accomplished will be addressed in the Communication Styles exploration as a part of this series.

SUGGESTED EXERCISE

Step 1: Individual Reflection on Past Experiences

A. Formalized Decision Processes

1. Recall a significant decision made by or on behalf of the congregation over the last 3 years.
 - a. What decision was made?
 - b. What conversation preceded the decision? Who expressed an opinion? Who did not express an opinion?
 - c. What church body (Administrative Council etc.) was charged with the decision?
 - d. What process was used to make the final decision? (Roberts Rules of Order; consensus model; no formalized process)
 - e. Was the decision widely affirmed by the congregation? If yes, why do you think the decision was affirmed? If no, why do you think the decision was disaffirmed and what did disaffirmation look and feel like?
2. Is this example typical of how the congregation makes formal decisions?
3. Have you felt included in the formal decisions of the congregation? If yes, what told you that you mattered in the process? If no, what told you that you did not matter in the process?
4. Think about this experience from the perspective of someone new to the congregation. Would this new person's opinion have been sought? How hard would the person have had to work to be involved in the process? What if this person was from a race different from most members? What if the person's first language was not English? How difficult would it have been to enter the process and make a difference in the outcome?
5. Did the decision impact people outside of the church body? If so, were the experiences of those impacted considered in the process? If so, how was this accomplished?

B. Informal Decision Processes

1. Recall a decision that was made through an informal process (in the parking lot; among a self-selected few; in private).
 - a. What decision was made?
 - b. What conversation preceded the decision? Who was involved?
 - c. Was the decision widely affirmed by the congregation? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. What factors led to this decision being made through an informal process?
3. Think about this experience from the perspective of someone new to the congregation. Would this new person's opinion have been sought? How hard would the person have had to work to be involved in the process? What if this person was from a race different from most members?

What if the person's first language was not English? How difficult would it have been to make a difference in the outcome?

4. What is your evaluation of the importance of this decision relative to decisions that are made through a more formal process?
5. Did the decision impact people outside of the congregation? If so, were the experiences of those impacted considered in the process?

C. Speaking and Listening

1. How intentional has the congregation been in ensuring that many voices are heard prior to making decisions about congregational life and ministry? Very..... Somewhat..... Not very.....
2. If 'very,' what intentional processes are employed to elicit and consider input? For example, do you use Mutual Invitation as a communication tool? [Check out the discussion among [PNW/Alaska district superintendents on Mutual Invitation](#)] Do you use intentional 1 to 1 conversation in the community to seek input or evaluate ministry? [Check out the ['recipe' card providing instructions on 1 to 1 conversations](#)]
3. If you answered 'somewhat' or 'not very' to question 1, what processes might you use to center listening and decenter speaking?
4. If you are in community with persons whose first languages are other than English, have you employed translation services for written and verbal exchanges to ensure quality of input by the community?
5. What have you noticed about how differently people communicate, discuss and advocate?

D. Evaluation

1. How do you evaluate your ministry with those inside the church? With those outside of the church? What mechanisms do you employ in evaluating your ministries to mitigate for power dynamics (financial resources; race, ethnicity and language; gender and gender identity; physical abilities etc.)?
2. How do you share these evaluations with leaders? With the congregation?
3. How do the evaluations inform your decision-making processes moving forward?

Step 2: Group Reflection and Evaluation

Draw together leaders of your church to reflect on responses to the questions above. Please remember that we do this in a spirit of curiosity and a desire to be humble followers of Jesus in the world. And so, we converse using two tools to govern our conversations:

- Respectful Communication Guidelines and Mutual Invitation [see below]
 - <https://www.kscopeinstitute.org/free-resources>

Reflection questions:

1. What did we learn from reflecting on past decisions?
2. Who have we centered in our decisions? Who have we decentered?
3. What are we conscious of now that we were not prior to this reflection? What has been our culture of decision-making?
4. What must we change to better align aspirations and practices for seeking, receiving and valuing input amid differences?
5. How will we know if we are making progress?
6. How might we design our decision-making processes through an equity lens (see resources below)? What might this do for our relationships internally? Externally?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Intentionally Inclusive by Marcia Patton. Consider a book study to spark your thinking on different forms of decision-making. This book is the story of Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, its formation and governance structure amid diversity. The story is readable, accessible and teaches a great deal about intentionality in decision-making for the purpose of including.

National Innovation Service is an independent public benefit corporation that partners with governments to engage in systems-level transformation to advance equity-based policy. Its [Equity Based Decision Making Framework](#) has implications for the church, particularly in community work. YouTube on this [equity-based process centered in issues of homelessness](#)

Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race & Equity has published a Racial Equity Toolkit for use in the public and non-profit sectors. You will see examples from our region on this website. How might [this toolkit](#) be useable in designing community ministries through our churches? What do you draw from these processes in thinking through ministries internal to the congregation?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation focuses on strengthening families and communities to ensure opportunities for children and youth to succeed. [This offering](#) explores the importance of considering a community's culture, values, assets and history in implementing social change programs:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (a full communion partner of the UMC) is engaging issues of racial equity in its ministry design. [Check out this website](#) and consider taking the free Introduction to equityXdesign found at the bottom of this web page.

General Commission on Religion and Race provides resources for The United Methodist Church in exploring race and equity. New resources on understanding and combatting racism are added frequently. Visit the [General Commission on Religion and Race](#) and click on 'resources.'

For additional resources, visit the [Greater Northwest Area website](#) and click on racism.

RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

R = take **RESPONSIBILITY** for what you say and feel without blaming others

E = use **EMPATHETIC** listening

S = be **SENSITIVE** to differences in communication styles

P = **PONDER** what you hear and feel before you speak

E = **EXAMINE** your own assumptions and perceptions

C = keep **CONFIDENTIALITY**

T = **TRUST** ambiguity because we are **NOT** here to debate who is right and who is wrong

The Bush Was Blazing but Not Consumed by Eric H. F. Law.

See <https://www.kscopeinstitute.org/ki-toolbox> for further explanation and additional languages

MUTUAL INVITATION

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, and to foster brave and safe space, we will proceed in the following manner:

A designated person will share first.

After sharing, he/she/they will invite another person to share.

Each person has three options in response to the invitation to speak:

- Share and invite.
- “Pass for now” and invite. The group will return to this person later.
- “Pass” and invite. When a person chooses to ‘pass,’ the group will respect the person’s decision and will not return to this person in this round.

Do this until everyone is invited remembering to return to those who ‘pass for now.’

Note: Only the person invited may speak. Save questions or connections until after Mutual Invitation has concluded.

The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb, by Eric H. F. Law. See <https://www.kscopeinstitute.org/ki-toolbox> for further explanation and additional languages