

## "DISCERNMENT MEANS FINDING OUR WAY"

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Picture this scenario: the church gathers for a congregational meeting to act on plans to put a new roof with solar panels atop the church. A lengthy presentation is made, then a motion to approve the plan, followed by a second. The moderator asks, "Is there any discussion?"

Of course, discussion abounds. After lots of debate a man makes an amendment, requiring more bids from additional contractors. It is seconded. Someone rises to ask about the building plans and is called "out of order" because the amendment is now on the floor. Confusion brews. A lady rises to say, "I'd have a different amendment, requiring modifications to the building plans to tighten up the budget." The Moderator asks, "Is this an amendment to the original amendment?" She responds, "Yeah, I guess." "Is there a second?" There is.

Someone else rises to say, "But I had a comment on the first amendment." The Moderator responds, "I'm sorry, but we are now discussing the second amendment." The man who offered the original amendment stands and says, "Point of privilege!" The Moderator, looking like C. C. Sabathia on his bum knee getting shelled and casting longing looks to the bullpen, says, "Do we have a parliamentarian?" Someone says, "Jerry is away this weekend." Someone way in the back shouts out, "I call the question!" The Moderator, visibly relieved, responds, "The question has been called. We will now vote on whether to close debate."

The woman who offered the second amendment says, "But may I ask something?" The Moderator says, "Sorry, Betty, but as we call the question all discussion must stop, unless we vote to proceed with debate." Betty counters, "But when do I get to ask my question?" The Moderator says, "Not quite sure. Let's see. Maybe never." The congregation chuckles, then votes to close debate. Betty only gets to ask her question in the parking lot afterward.

Perhaps you've scratched your head at some version of this. And you felt a question rise within you, a question others ponder, but few articulate. *Is this method serving the church?* It sure doesn't feel like "church", all the ideals we espouse in worship, prayer, and service. Why is that? Such a meeting could happen anywhere. Nothing about its *ethos* suggests the spiritual practices at the heart of our faith. Why is that? It tilts in favor of the individual over the gathered community. Also, majority rules voting creates winners and losers, not to mention "sides" taken that some don't forget for years. And the process is stacked toward those who specialize in working the rules. Some fond of memorizing tracts of Roberts Rules and By-Laws, I've noticed, do so with a fervor sanctifying them in a way they never treat the Bible. Also, notice how such a meeting biases us to institutional maintenance rather than venturing out of ourselves, into the world, to dream dreams, see visions, and live the faith.

Is this any way for the church to do business? It doesn't sound consistent with the business we're in, which is following Christ and living such that others can glimpse God's reign in us. So why do we hallow Robert's Rules of Order? Did you know they were written by one man, a Baptist from New Bedford, Massachusetts? In 1876 Henry Robert devised these rules

of order after—get this—frustration with how a church meeting had gone earlier that night. As a former Army officer, he turned toward parliamentary law, seeking a more orderly way.

That's how we got Robert's Rules of Order. Today many churches and other deliberative assemblies choose to be governed by them. And guess what, at times they do help. I'm not saying toss them out and cancel the By-Laws. I am saying they are not a one-size-fits-all answer to making decisions and finding our way forward as a people. I am saying sometimes the church can grind through minutes read, motions and seconds, calling the question and point of privilege, imagining we accomplish something, whether it is of God or not.

Are there other ways of making decisions more like a spiritual practice than a business procedure? More like Jesus relating to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount than predictable harangues on the floor of Congress or organizing mergers and acquisitions. I'm not criticizing politicians or businesspeople. I'm just saying the church needs its own protocols.

You've heard of the Quakers. The so-called "Friends" discern God's leading in silence. In what they call the Meeting of Friends they open themselves to the leading of the Spirit. When a Friend experiences an "opening" (that is, a revelation or insight), it is shared with others in the Meeting. The rest of the time they wait silently. When they meet to make decisions, Friends strive after the "sense of the meeting" from all present before taking action.

Votes are not taken and, in fact, the Meeting proceeds in a way that outshines establishing a simple consensus. For if a minority viewpoint is deeply felt, and continues to be lifted up, the Meeting will continue to hear it until such a time as a "sense of the Meeting" is achieved. Of course, these discernment practices are outside our Christian tradition. And frankly, I do not see Congregationalists sitting for long in silence. We're, ahem, fond of self-expression.

But what about the history of our own practices? More to the point, what did our churches do before Henry Robert, the Baptist, devised his Rules of Order? I am so glad you asked. For Congregational life and ministry in the colonial era is something I've enjoyed studying.

The Congregational tradition can be traced back to England in the early 17th Century. At that time there were those who felt called to a different kind of church than what was represented within the state church, the Church of England. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the Congregationalists was their belief that no individual—be it a bishop, priest, or lay leader—is fully equipped all alone to discern and declare God's will. These early Congregationalists believed that the workings of the Holy Spirit can be discerned by receptive hearts living in community willing to be shaped by prayer. Indeed, the very name "Congregational" derives from the understanding that it is the congregation--informed by scripture and molded in prayer--that is best able to discern what Christ would have us do.

The Puritans and Pilgrims who became Congregationalists put into practice their sense that the gathered community is the true vessel of the Spirit of Christ—a term they used often. They met often and their meetings were seen as opportunities to encounter God in their

midst. So their gatherings were more like worship than legislative sessions. The community never considered it “decision-making” so much as discerning the will of God. They listened to one another, not out of some abstract notion that voters of opposing views are worthy of respect, but because they knew one can never predict whom the Spirit will choose to speak through at any given occasion. In other words, our ancestors in the Congregational tradition approached decision-making much as the Quakers still do—only we talked much more.

You’ve heard me say before in sermons and elsewhere that the Congregational way of life is a real mess without a high doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Maybe now you see what I mean. Absent of this profound respect for shared deep listening for God to speak to us anew in our own day—which Congregationalism has always trusted—the clergy tend to revert to trying to control everything, and the laypeople get mired in a bureaucratic mentality where new insight and initiative are discouraged, and preserving the status quo is the default setting. As we fail to seek the Holy Spirit, our way collapses like a lung with the air knocked out of it.

Søren Kierkegaard said the church of his era drew so little on the richness of the Christian tradition it was like they’d inherited a grand estate but chose to live in a tent in the front yard. I am concerned about our Congregational way—which I love—in the same way. We can’t trade the mysteries of shared discernment for the mechanics of parliamentarianism and act like nothing is lost. As we live in that tent, I gaze longingly at the grand estate in front of us. We can’t afford to neglect our spiritual riches for tidy, convenient or reductive approaches.

We hear this in phrases that are more half-truth than real truth. We say, for example, maybe to visitors, “here individuals are free to believe whatever he or she wants.” That is more new age Sedona than anything like our way. Or we say, “each one of us decides alone by ourselves what is God’s will for us.” Our way represents a healthier, holier balance of the individual and community than that. Or we say, “our way is a democracy, we’re all about voting.” Actually, we’re a Christocracy, and the purpose of voting is to confirm consensus.

But I do see hope as churches experiment with shared discernment. Let’s end on that note. For example, four years ago a daughter of the church I served on Cape Cod wanted to get married in her home church. She was raised in our Church School and later taught there. She occasionally sang solos during morning worship. She grew up to attend divinity school. And our Board of Deacons sponsored her within the In Care process toward her ordination. The only wrinkle here was her fiancée was also female. And Dennis Union Church had not dealt with the issue of same-sex marriage. Fear was palpable on the faces of our Deacons.

As we assembled to decide whether this was possible or not, you might think we’d sharpen up parliamentary procedure and punctiliously enforce the rules to prevent ugliness. We went in the other direction. The Deacons asked me to preach on the matter, then hold a talkback for the airing of members’ insights. The Assoc. Minister next did the same. So by the time we met to decide, all had had ample opportunity to listen and speak. We gathered one evening, softened the lights, lit the candles. We began with prayer. We sang a hymn. We were going for Evening Prayers more than Board of Selectmen. We decided that at any

point, if things went bad, anyone could stand up and ask that we pray, silently or together. Prayer became our point of privilege. I decided to say nothing further on the issue, having spoken amply from the pulpit. Instead I acted as the equivalent of parliamentarian, not that there were lots of rules to enforce. As shepherd to the flock, if I saw anyone treating anyone else as anything less than brother or sister in Christ, it was my call to remind us who we are.

A clear consensus emerged affirming the Holy Spirit moving among us so as to extend the lofty covenantal bonds of Christian marriage to committed same-sex couples seeking them. In the end, the opponents asked for a vote; but the vote was to affirm and clarify consensus. In three short months, we went from a No Blessing church—gay people are beyond the reach of God’s favor as couples--to a Partial Blessing church—clergy may marry such as these, but not here in our sanctuary--to a Full Blessing church, which is just as it sounds. Only one couple left our church. And it was a beautiful, historic, momentous June wedding. You could have knocked me over with a feather, that we would emerge so united together.

Congregationalism is about something greater than “majority rules”. Can you hear how that very phrase excludes God from our deliberations? It is about hearing Christ’s voice speak. It is about listening to one another because we trust the Holy Spirit to speak through us. It’s very much like Pentecost, waiting for the Holy Spirit, as God fashions unity out of diversity. Amen.