

RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR A VIRTUAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (PROPOSED)

Guidelines for Discernment Procedures

Background

The 2017 General Council successfully utilized a discernment/consensus model of decision-making, allowing more voices to be heard throughout the entirety of the process and coming together on decisions through consensus. Voices from the participants emphasize the strengths of this process:

“Discernment truly is more about listening than speaking. It is important to listen to what others are saying. It is important to listen to what God is saying. And it’s important to consider your own thoughts with regard to the issue and in light of what you have heard.”

“Church decision-making should look like church, not politics. And the process should make community, not fracture it.”

“Consensus-building does not solve every issue. But the important thing is that we all journey in the same direction. And that we journey together.”

The WCRC Executive Committee adapted the 2017 General Council Rules of Procedure for its own in-person meetings in 2018 and 2019. The restrictions placed on global gatherings have necessitated a slight adaptation of the rules to allow for conducting a virtual meeting, although the spiritual and theological foundations remain the same.

I. DISCERNMENT AND THE CONDUCT OF BUSINESS

1. Theological Basis

At the heart of discernment procedures is a commitment to worship, work, listen, and pray together as a community of faith, seeking to discern God’s will for the way forward on issues under consideration.

As the Body of Christ, the church is always searching for the mind of Christ, seeking to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17). Our common commitment to seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our deliberations is confirmed by the experience of the fruit of the Spirit amongst us as we work: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is intentionally a communion built around a common table for both worship and decision making. The table symbolizes the centrality of Christ and our mutual dependence on the Holy Spirit for our life together. We sit equally before God as sisters and brothers.

The WCRC is a communion that is committed to justice. It is therefore imperative that in its shared life together it operates in a way that fosters communion among its members and which allows them to live justly in relation to one another. All conversations should be edifying and all efforts build *koinonia*.

Our developing *koinonia*, our intentional spiritual fellowship, is dedicated to the prophetic calling to bring God's justice like a mighty river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream to a world thirsty for hope and the grace of the Gospel.

Discernment means a prayerful process that builds community and by which a common mind of the Executive Committee is sought concerning the wisest way forward on a particular issue at that time.

There are no winners and losers—we are all seekers and discerners together, affirming through our common loyalty to Jesus Christ that:

- the Executive Committee is a community of faith earnestly seeking to understand God's will;
- each member of the Executive Committee has been given unique gifts and insights by God;
- everyone's contribution is worthy of respect;
- our aim is to discern what the Spirit is saying to the organization through the Executive Committee;
- our commitment is to find faithful ways forward on which all can agree.

Adopting these Rules of Procedure ensures that the Executive Committee of the WCRC will:

- foster deep **listening** and respect;
- make space for the influence of the Holy Spirit and different perspectives through **dialogue** and **discernment**;
- take the time to **build consensus** in decision making.

2. Building Community

The Executive Committee draws together people from different countries, cultures, and traditions. It takes time to build the trust and relationships that form a community of faith. This is why significant time will be spent in worship and community building.

As we acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and listen for the Word of God in worship together the bonds of community are strengthened. Our diversity and unity in Jesus Christ are also celebrated informally as we work and pray together.

II. RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR THE CONDUCT OF BUSINESS

1. Definitions

Committee means a group appointed by the Executive Committee to bring reports and proposals on particular business through the general secretariat. The following committees have been constituted by previous actions of the Executive Committee and continue to fulfil their mandates:

- Finance Committee
- Membership and Constitution Committee
- Reformed Partnership Fund Committee

Last year, without an Executive Committee meeting called due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the officers constituted a committee which will report to the 2021 Executive Committee:

- General Secretary Search Committee

Discernment Group means a small group of Executive Committee members (with guests and observers brought together in their own discernment group(s)). Discernment Groups are composed according to the values of empowerment and diversity: Each member shall be given the chance to fully contribute to the discussion in dialogue with voices expressing themselves from different perspectives (see part 10 of these rules).

Drafting Team means the committee of the Scribes of the Discernment Groups that amend the proposals coming from the Discernment Groups in the light of the discussions in the groups (see part 10 of these rules).

Facilitator means the person who facilitates the work of a Discernment Group. The main task of the facilitator is to ensure that all delegates can fully participate in the discussion (see part 10 of these rules).

Participants

- *Members* of the Executive Committee have full vote and voice throughout the meeting.
- *Guests* are those individuals who have been invited to attend the Executive Committee meeting. Guests have the right to speak but may not vote.
- *Observers* are representatives from member churches or other communions who are considering becoming members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Observers may participate in the activities of the Executive Committee, but do not have the right to voice or vote.
- *Consultants* may be present at the Executive Committee meeting upon invitation by the officers. A consultant may be asked to address the Executive Committee on the issue for which the consultant is present. A consultant's right to speak is limited to that specific matter, and the consultant may not vote.
- *Visitors* are those individuals who attend the public sessions of the Executive Committee for personal reasons. Visitors do not have the right to speak, make motions or vote.
- *Officers* are the following elected officials of the WCRC: president, vice president, general secretary and general treasurer. The general secretary, by virtue of his office, has the right to speak but may not vote.
- *Staff* of the WCRC may act as resources in the work of the Executive Committee. When requested by the chair, they have voice, but they may not vote.

Scribe means a person appointed to be the secretary of a Discernment Group and to convey its findings to the Drafting Team. At the end of each session the Discernment Group determines which points should be brought to the Drafting Team (see part 10 of these rules).

2. Role of the Officers Group

The Officers Group shall oversee the business coming to the Executive Committee and set its proposed agenda, taking on any of the following tasks as necessary:

- initiate proposals on any matter relating to the efficient working of the Executive Committee;
- consider how matters may best be grouped for consideration, so none is disadvantaged;
- ensure that the Executive Committee is resourced with information from a range of perspectives about each matter, so that an informed way forward may be discerned;
- review the agenda regularly, prioritizing items needing deeper deliberation and more time;
- alter the agenda as needed.

3. Matters for Consideration

Matters for consideration shall be presented through the address of the president, the report of the general secretary, or other means as decided upon by the officers and ratified by the Executive Committee when approving the agenda of the meeting.

4. Interpretation

The Executive Committee conducts its work in English. If a member of the Executive Committee needs translation, that request must come with sufficient notice to obtain translators.

5. Moderator

The officers of the WCRC (president or one of the vice-presidents) shall be Moderator of the plenary sessions of the Executive Committee.

The role of the Moderator is to preside in a manner which assists the Executive Committee in seeking to understand the will of God as far as possible and which meets the needs and purposes of the Executive Committee and its participants.

In so doing, the Moderator:

- ensures that the Rules of Procedure are observed;
- watches with the participants for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for the wisdom of Scripture throughout all contributions;
- is prepared to pause for prayer or silent reflection as appropriate;
- encourages trust and integrity in contributions;
- ensures care and support for those whose honesty may leave them vulnerable;
- invites members to indicate their response to speeches and reflects that mood back to the Executive Committee as it becomes apparent;
- looks for creative modifications of a proposal, incorporating insights expressed by speakers;
- summarizes discussion from time to time to assist in focusing the direction;
- does not participate in discussion (if a Moderator wishes to speak to an issue someone else will act as Moderator during consideration of that particular issue until it is resolved);
- acknowledges those who wish to speak during the meeting. Speakers should address the Executive Committee through the Moderator;
- ensures that different voices are included during plenary sessions.

Participants will respect requests or directions from the Moderator. Out of respect for the office of Moderator, when she or he speaks, all remain silent so the Moderator is heard without interruption.

6. Use of Discernment Procedures

The Executive Committee will use the discernment process to make all decisions except for: approval or changes in procedures, elections, and constitutional and bylaws changes. If a resubmitted matter does not receive approval through the discernment process, and the Executive Committee takes the view that a decision must be made on this item of business at this meeting of the Executive Committee then a vote will be taken.

7. Building Blocks of the Discernment Process

The basic building blocks of the discernment process are:

- Introduce and clarify the issue (listening sessions)
- Explore the issue and look for ideas (Discernment Groups)
- Look for emerging proposals (decision sessions)
- Discuss, clarify, and offer proposals (decision sessions)
- Test for agreement (decision sessions)
- Implement the decision (staff)

8. Listening Sessions to Introduce and Clarify the Issue

The Executive Committee must be fully resourced with information about an issue, proposal or report. Seeking to discern God's will for a faithful response presumes participants hold a clear understanding of the rationale and theological basis for possible ways forward.

Listening sessions shall be prepared in conjunction with the officers group.

During the listening sessions the reports and matters are received. A number of speakers may be invited to present varying aspects of a particular issue before clarification questions.

The "raise hand" reaction will be displayed if a participant wishes to ask a question of clarification on the matter under discussion. When the participant is recognized by the Moderator, s/he will unmute and ask the question, re-muting immediately after.

Reception of a report means agreement to consider the substance of a report. This is approved in the listening sessions after the report is presented and any clarifying questions are answered. Reception means that the proposals in the report are now before the Executive Committee for consideration. A report as a whole must be adopted if its substance is to become policy, or specific proposals arising from a report must be considered before agreement to act can be assumed.

At the end of each listening session draft proposals to be discussed by the Discernment Groups shall be introduced.

9. Discernment Groups to Look for Emerging Consensus

Composition of Discernment Groups

The Discernment Groups will formally be appointed by the president and approved by the Executive Committee. Factors that need to be included (and sometimes weighed against each other) when composing the Discernment Groups:

1. Diversity: Groups should not be geographically driven. It is important not to have a group composed solely from a single country or region.
2. Balances: Besides geographic diversity, each group should be balanced between gender, age, ordained/non-ordained, and abilities.

3. Communication: All members of a group must be able to communicate effectively with one another. Those Executive Committee members who do not speak fluent English will be grouped with those of like language abilities.

Another critical aspect of each group's composition is the *leadership*. Each group needs at least two leaders: one to *facilitate* the group and another one to act as *Scribe*, not only recording the decisions of the group but also taking those decisions to the Drafting Team. The *Facilitator* will need to be able to facilitate a process that respects all members' voices while striving at reaching consensus on the issues within the time allotted.

Process in Discernment Groups

The introductory session of the Discernment Group will re-introduce the discernment process to the group and set the "norms" (rules, guidelines, etc.) of how the group will operate. Setting the norms also gives the members an experience of the discernment process and can be used by the leadership to accommodate differing cultural needs, fix any glitches in the system (especially translation), etc. While structured to produce constructive results that will move the process to the Drafting Team, the discernment process is geared to hear all voices and invite the movement of the Holy Spirit into all groups.

The Discernment Groups are guided by materials they receive; they discuss and amend the proposals that were introduced during the listening session. Decisions within each group should be made through consensus. If consensus cannot be reached the group defines the point of disagreement and requests the Scribe to take the different opinions to the Drafting Team.

The discernment process during the Executive Committee is value driven and should respect each individual and her/his voice even as the process unites the delegates through discussion and consensus. No member should be marginalized based on any factor: "The World Communion of Reformed Churches in its order and actions is called to respect, defend, and advance the dignity of every person. In Jesus Christ all human differences must lose their power to divide. No one shall be disadvantaged for, among other reasons, race, ethnicity, or gender, and no individual or church may claim or exercise dominance over another" (WCRC Constitution, Article III, Section B).

At the end of each Discernment Group session, the Scribes will gather to distil the variety of material produced into a report with specific recommendations. The processes used in the Drafting Team to create the report will also be by consensus and use norms as determined by the group.

10. Decision Sessions to Discuss, Clarify, and Test for Agreement

The final reports of the Drafting Team will be brought to the plenary. The reports should be presented by at least two Scribes, selected by the Drafting Team. Delegates will hear the voice of their Discernment Group in the report and its recommendations, changing the tenor of the discussion positively. The plenary will then discuss and come to consensus on the reports and recommendations.

Procedures in Decision Sessions

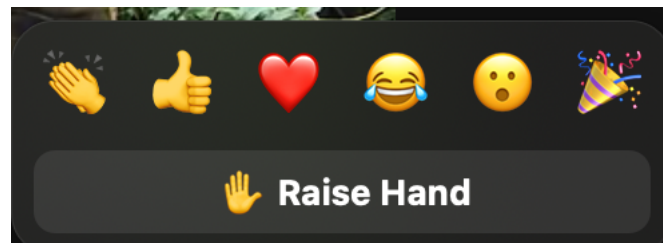
Zoom provides a number of "reactions" through which participants may seek the chance to speak and to indicate their feelings toward proceedings.

The “raise hand” reaction will be displayed if a participant wishes to speak to the matter under discussion. When the participant is recognized by the Moderator, s/he will unmute and speak for the allotted time allowed, re-muting at the conclusion.

At the end of each speech, voting delegates may choose to indicate their response to the content of the speech by displaying the appropriate reaction. The reactions provide a quick and visible indication of the mood of the Executive Committee.

- Showing a “heart” reaction indicates warmth and appreciation towards a point of view.
- Showing an “open mouth” reaction indicates coolness and hesitation towards a point of view, or that more discussion is needed.

Reactions may also be used to indicate to the Moderator that it is time to move on, a speaker may be getting repetitious, or the points may have been well made already. In this case, a member can display the “party cone” reaction as an indication that pursuing debate is not likely to be helpful.



The Moderator alerts the Executive Committee to the strength of feeling expressed through the indicator cards as appropriate.

Possible outcomes of discernment process:

- All in agreement (unanimous);
- Most are in agreement (minority give consent to move forward);
- Consideration on matter postponed;
- Agree no decision can be reached;
- Refer an issue to another body, either to bring advice to the Executive Committee on how to proceed or to determine the referred issue on behalf of the Executive Committee;
- Issue brought to a vote, if this is agreed by a two-thirds majority of voting delegates present (see below).

The Moderator may determine that a proposal be referred to a small group of participants nominated by the Moderator, with a view to the small group bringing an amended proposal likely to receive greater support. The matter is resubmitted to the Executive Committee for decision when the Officers Group determines.

In the event that:

- the resubmitted matter does not receive support, and
- if the Officers group takes the view that a decision must be made on this item of business at this meeting of the Executive Committee,
- then the Executive Committee may determine that a two thirds majority of delegates present and voting is sufficient to determine this item of business.

11. When Voting is Required

Only voting members may vote. The Moderator declares the method of voting (show of hands, display of reactions, electronic ballot, etc).

A majority of members present and voting is required for approval of the proposal.

After the vote, the Moderator declares the proposal approved or not approved.

All participants are encouraged to return to their churches advocating the decisions of the Executive Committee, even if they would have preferred different outcomes. It is the responsibility of those privileged to participate to explain to those who were not present why particular decisions were taken.

12. Recording Dissension

The basis of discernment procedures is that the community of faith listens, prays, discusses, and works together towards discerning God's will for a faithful response. Resolutions are made in that light.

Voting members may record their dissent or abstention on any particular resolution by lodging it in writing with the recording secretary or executive secretary for communications and operations before the next session commences.

13. Procedural Proposals

Procedural proposals may be raised by Executive Committee members and relate to how or when the Executive Committee deals with a particular agenda item. When making a procedural proposal a member may not interrupt a speaker but seeks recognition from the Moderator to speak. Procedural proposals must be seconded, may be debated, and are determined by discernment procedures or a simple majority vote (50 percent plus one of those present).

Procedural proposals include:

- *Fixed order*: proposes that the Executive Committee deals with business previously set for that time. It may be linked to a procedural proposal for the adjournment of the current discussion.
- *Adjournment*: may be proposed by a member who has not spoken in the current discussion. If approved, any person whose speech was interrupted may speak first when discussion resumes.
- *Closed Session*: all who are not members leave the session while the Executive Committee considers an issue in private. If approved, it requires a subsequent procedural proposal ("that the Executive Committee cease sitting in closed session") to return to an open plenary session.
- *Closure of the debate*: may be proposed ("that the vote be now taken") by a member who has not spoken in the current discussion. The Moderator may also propose closure.

14. Points of Concern

"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control..." (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Executive Committee will engage in its business and corporate life in a way that ensures that the fruits of the Spirit are supported and expressed:

- prayerful listening respect for all participants;
- compassion with one another;
- trust;
- encouraging shared goals;
- exhibiting an openness/vulnerability to one another.

A member may raise a concern at any time by gaining the attention of the Moderator and stating, "I have a point of concern." The Moderator asks the delegate to state the concern.

Concerns that may be raised are:

- A speaker is thought to be digressing from the matter under discussion.
- A member may claim the right to make personal explanation if a subsequent speaker grossly misrepresents her/his remarks.
- A member may raise objection if remarks are thought to be offensive or derogatory.

The Moderator may without debate:

- rule on it immediately;
- ask advice from selected participants and then rule on the point;
- ask the Executive Committee to decide the matter by discussion and discernment.

If the Moderator's ruling on a point of concern is challenged, the challenging member may speak, and the Moderator may reply before putting it to a vote to sustain or disallow the ruling, without further discussion. The decision is resolved by simple majority.

15. Adoption of the Rules of Procedure

The Executive Committee in its first business session determines by simple majority vote whether to adopt or modify these Rules of Procedure. During the course of the meeting, suspension or amendment of all or part of the procedures may be agreed by discernment procedures or a two-thirds majority of delegates present and voting.