

Deciding Together

Report of the Canadian Unitarian Council's

Decision-Making Exploration Team

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Executive Summary

Over the last two years, the Decision-Making Exploration Team (DMET) has reviewed the existing decision-making process of the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) and possible alternatives. The team surveyed Unitarian Universalists (UUs) in Canada, conducted targeted consultations, researched potential options, and hosted a series of workshops to learn about different systems and co-create potential solutions.

DMET identified three key challenges with our existing processes: relationships, constructive conversation, and amendments. The CUC's members are congregations who are represented by delegates at CUC meetings. Those delegates change from year-to-year, are spread across the country, and may not know each other at all when they gather in a group of 100-200 to make decisions collectively. The existing process has sometimes promoted adversarial rather than constructive dialogue. Systems in which decisions are made by majority vote may encourage this behaviour, but it is not present in all such systems. Finally, the resolutions process adopted in 2011 requires that no substantive amendments to a proposal be allowed at a business meeting of CUC members, allowing congregations to debate the final form of a motion before sending delegates to vote. Any proposed amendments must be submitted months in advance and can be adopted or rejected at the sole discretion of the motion's mover.

Broad Recommendations

DMET recommends that the members of the CUC adopt mechanisms that:

- 1. Actively work to build connections among delegates to CUC meetings;
- Encourage non-adversarial deliberation about the essence of a motion, individuals' or congregations' perspectives on the motion, and possible amendments to improve the motion; and
- 3. Allow delegates other than the mover of a motion the ability to propose substantive amendments that can be considered by other delegates.

Potential Solutions

Relationships

- 1. Provide opportunities for delegates to interact prior to the AGM.
- 2. Have small group introductions or check-ins at the start of meetings.
- 3. Make delegate registration a two-year term by default (allowing withdrawals).
- 4. Have delegates serve as congregational leads for feedback on motions.
- 5. Reduce the number of delegates.

Constructive Conversation and Amendments

- A. Retain the existing process, but augment written feedback on motions with information and discussion sessions (amendments remain with the mover).
- B. Allow substantive amendments at CUC AGMs and special meetings.
- C. Prior to a CUC meeting, conduct an additional formal meeting where motions are discussed and substantive amendments are permitted, but motions are not considered for adoption.

Decision Mechanisms

For option A, the CUC could consider using Democratic Rules of Order in place of Robert's Rules to simplify procedures. Options B or C would allow a consensus-based decision-making mechanism (these are not relevant for option A, since substantive amendments are not permitted). We propose three options: Formal Consensus, Gradients of Agreement, or a sociocracy-consensus hybrid.

Specific Recommendations

The Decision-Making Exploration Team recommends that the members of the CUC adopt as many of the five Relationship options as possible. DMET strongly recommends option 2 and only cautiously recommends option 5.

The Decision-Making Exploration Team recommends that the members of the CUC adopt option B or option C. DMET also recommends that the CUC use one of the three proposed decision-making mechanisms (formal consensus, gradients of agreement, or a sociocracy-consensus hybrid).

Next Steps

Canadian UUs are invited to a feedback session on Saturday, June 22 to discuss the findings of this report. A survey will also be available in September. DMET will consolidate this feedback and report to the CUC Board in fall 2024. The Board will decide whether to bring forward a proposal for changes to the AGM in 2025.

Background

The Decision-Making Exploration Team (DMET) convened in early 2022 with the following mandate from the Board of the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC):

To explore viable decision-making processes for the CUC to use on a national level that are collaborative and inclusive, and that can realistically be used throughout the year as needed, and in annual general and special meetings of the CUC. The discoveries of the team may also be useful to congregations.

The previous review of the CUC's decision-making process occurred more than a decade earlier. In 2011, members of the CUC voted to adopt the <u>resolutions</u> process proposed by the Resolutions Study Group, summarized in the table at right (see also their <u>full</u> report). The members of the CUC are its congregations, so this process aimed to allow congregations the ability to consider and debate a proposal before sending delegates to vote. In 2013, the Active Democracy Study Group brought forward 18 <u>additional recommendations</u> relating to decision-making processes, 13 of which were adopted by the Council's members.

In 2021, delegates to the CUC's Annual General Meeting (AGM) attempted to suspend the usual rules of procedure relating to resolutions to allow an immediate vote on a proposal contained within the report of the Dismantling Racism Study Group to adopt an 8th principle. This was ruled out of order by the Chair of the meeting, but a motion to defeat this ruling was successful and the vote went ahead. This vote was later found to be inconsistent with the CUC's by-laws, which require advance notice of any business to be conducted to be sent to congregations. As such, the motion was declared null and a special meeting was called for November of that year (2021), with a number of conversations carried out in between to deliberate on the motion. This event was not the sole reason for the

Current Resolutions Process

By Dec 15 Proposers draft resolution and submit to CUC's Executive Director

<u>January 15</u> Resolutions are distributed to congregations

January 15 - February 28
Congregations discuss
resolutions, delegate selection &
voting decisions

February 28 All proposed amendments must be submitted to Proposers to be eligible for consideration

<u>February 28 - March 10</u> Proposers consider feedback

March 10 Proposers send resolution in final form to Executive Director

<u>March 15</u> Amended resolutions are distributed to congregations

March 15 - AGM Congregations discuss amended resolutions & revise voting decisions if necessary

<u>Urgent Resolutions</u> For matters arising after December 15: submit to Executive Director as soon as possible but no later than 6 p.m. seven days before the AGM is to occur

formation of the committee, as questions about ensuring inclusive decision-making preceded it, but it did serve as one precipitating factor.

The Team's Work

Phase 1 (Jan-Jun 2022): Visioning, planning, and exploratory survey

The DMET group developed a plan to consult Canadian UUs and explore the questions at hand in depth. The team conducted a survey of Unitarians and Universalists in Canada in the spring of 2022. The <u>full results</u> are available online and key findings are summarized here.

Participants were asked to rank five principles. Consensus / Consent; Equity,
Diversity and Inclusion; and Actionability were rated as somewhat more important
than Majority Support and Timeliness. However, each principle was considered the
most important by at least some respondents.

Please rank the following principles in the order that you think is most important at meetings of the Canadian Unitarian Council (1 = most important; 5 = least important)

Principle	Average score	First place votes
Consensus / Consent All delegates can live with the decision	2.6	34
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Groups who usually have less power are proactively included	2.6	27
Actionability Decisions made can be effectively implemented	2.7	18
Majority Support Most delegates support the decision	3.4	14
<u>Timeliness</u> Decisions are made in a timely manner	3.8	5

- Respondents recommended exploring: consensus models, sociocracy, Democratic Rules of Order, Convergent Facilitation, Deep Democracy, Indigenous circles, several resources on the principles of decision-making and governance, and some individual ideas for decision-making mechanisms.
- Participants were asked to reflect on positive and negative aspects of three systems that the DMET team expected to be among others under consideration. Responses are summarized here; a grounded coding statement summarizing all comments received is available in the survey results.

Robert's Rules of Order.

- Positive: widely used, logical, comprehensive, and has a clearly outlined process for debate and procedure, which makes meetings efficient, impartial, accountable to public record, and fair.
- Negative: controlling, stifling/inaccessible to those unfamiliar with process, tends to be inherently conservative, doesn't build relationships and consensus, fairness dependent on chairperson.

o Formal Consensus.

- Positive: encourages listening, avoids potential hierarchy, centres people over process, requires care for concerns of minorities, avoids tyranny of the majority, allows room for discussion, encourages buyin to decisions.
- Negative: takes a long time. Worries about how to handle small but persistent dissent, formally recording dissent, challenges of culture shift to this model, being "bullied" into consensus, need for highly skilled facilitator.

o Sociocracy.

- Positive: inclusive, allows everyone to speak, decentralizes decision making, equalizes power, efficient, predictable, allows focus on problems and solutions, supports creativity, trust-building.
- Negative: complexity in system design, requirement for smaller groups, taking more time, how to address deadlocks, possible lack of transparency, challenges learning a new system.
- Respondents provided additional feedback on four other aspects of decisionmaking: who gets to vote, who gets to speak, how proposals are developed, and which proposals are considered by a meeting. Responses to these questions are summarized in the <u>full report</u>.
- Among respondents who completed the demographic questions, a greater share were age 65+ (70%) and a lower share were IBPOC (7%) than among the general Canadian population. However, all questions in the survey were optional and almost half of respondents did not complete the demographic questions.

Phase 2 (Jul 2022-Jun 2023): Consultations, research, and initial workshops

The DMET team coded and analyzed the data from the survey. Concurrently, the team conducted consultations with a handful of key actors, including a small advisory group

convened to provide additional perspectives and expertise, CUC Elder-in-residence Sharon Jinkerson Brass, and the facilitators of the CUC's Widening the Circle work.

Members of the team explored each of the decision-making systems proposed by more than one respondent in the survey. The team had already been considering Robert's Rules of Order, formal consensus, and sociocracy. Responses to the survey added Democratic Rules of Order as an alternative majoritarian system to Robert's and gradients of agreement as an alternative consensus mechanism. It also surfaced several interesting facilitation techniques, but none of these were seen as viable decision-making systems within the committee's mandate. Members of the team participated in the Uncolonizing Democracy workshop, which included presentations on consensus and sociocracy (see resources).

In June 2023, DMET hosted a workshop exploring what elements individuals prioritize in a decision-making system and options for building relationships among participants in CUC meetings, given the constraints of time and distance.

Phase 3 (Jul 2023-May 2024): In-depth workshops and developing options

In the fall of 2023, DMET organized workshops to learn about and practice decision-making using formal consensus and sociocracy methods. The team then assessed all of the information collected and began to formulate the challenges and major pathways identified in this report. DMET hosted a longer working session in January 2024 where participants used sociocractic and consensus methods to assess the options proposed and suggest modifications. A trial session using one of the proposed options was run in March 2024. The ideas and experiences from these sessions inform the recommendations in this report.

DMET would like to thank the following people who served as expert leaders or facilitators in the team's workshops: Anna Isaacs, Aukje Byker, Diana Smith, Mel Rutherford, and members of the CUC Board.

Membership

The team was deliberately comprised of younger UUs, ranging in age from teens to 30s. The premise of this was twofold: to draw on the experience of younger UUs in alternative decision-making models and to embed the voices of one demographic that is frequently underrepresented in major decisions of the Canadian Unitarian Council. The group deliberately structured consultations to include middle-aged and older UUs.

One challenge of a younger membership is the higher frequency of major life changes, including graduations, relocations, and new academic or work responsibilities. Between a number of these changes and a extension of the work timeline to two and a half years, not all members who began the project continued to the end. The following members participated in various stages of the work:

- o Phase 1: William Ward and Linnea Granberg
- Phases 1-2: Eric James and Juensung Kim
- o Phases 1-3: Robbie Brydon and Danie Webber

Identifying Challenges

Over the course of DMET's work and consultations, we identified three key challenges, which we outline below.

Relationships

Elder Sharon Jinkerson Brass highlighted the importance of relationships in decision-making. The CUC faces unique challenges in our decision-making processes. Our members are not people. Our members are congregations who are represented by individuals when we gather to make decisions. Those delegates may not know each other at all when they gather in a group of 100-200 to make decisions collectively. Further, they frequently change from year to year, limiting the ability to build connections over time (one of the resolutions from the Democracy Working Group (DMG) approved in 2013 encouraged congregations to appoint delegates for two-year terms and to create ongoing communication with delegates in between meetings, but this has not significantly occurred in practice). The advent of virtual and hybrid meetings has facilitated access for many by lowering the barriers of cost of and time, but it has removed the opportunity for many delegates to meet in person and to benefit from the shared sense of purpose and community acquired from being in the same physical space.

These limitations are significant challenges to effective decision-making. As Edward Marshall wrote almost 25 years ago: "You do not get speed by going faster. You create speed by breaking through the barriers of distrust in our...relationships." The committee would like to thank Sharon Jinkerson Brass for lifting up the importance of relationship clearly in our consultations and helping to shape the direction of our work.

Constructive Conversation

Between the team's survey and workshops, a number of participants identified that the existing process has sometimes promoted adversarial rather than constructive dialogue. This may manifest in speakers working to persuade others to vote for or against a proposal rather than considering how to bring together the desires and concerns expressed by a group to find a common path forward. Systems in which decisions are made by majority vote may encourage this behaviour, but it is not present in all such systems. However, the other challenges identified in this section likely exacerbate this tendency.

Amendments

The resolutions process adopted in 2011 requires that no substantive amendments to a proposal be allowed at a business meeting of CUC members, allowing congregations to debate the final (substantive) form of a motion before sending delegates to vote. Any proposed amendments must be submitted in the consultation period (by the end of February for an AGM) and can be adopted or rejected at the sole discretion of the motion's mover.

This has caused frustration for some delegates. Some have proposed amendments in the consultation period that were not adopted by the resolution's movers and could not be introduced at a business meeting. Some attendees at meetings did not participate in the consultation phase or did not have the idea to propose an amendment until hearing others speak in response to a motion. The only recourse available to these groups was to table a motion until the next meeting (a year later) or to encourage others to vote against it.

Identifying Potential Solutions

Relationships

There are numerous options that could help to build relationships among delegates. We present four options here:

Provide opportunities for delegates to interact prior to the AGM. This could take
many different forms: a consultation session (see below) specifically for delegates;
a virtual hot chocolate social with a bit of meeting-related information; for in-person
meetings, a social event or youth-inspired "touch group" on the evening prior to the
meeting with delegates deliberately grouped together (rather than mixed with other
conference participants).

- 2. At the start of an annual or special meeting, begin with small group introductions or check-ins. While delegates would not meet everyone, they would start with a personal relationship with other participants. This could work particularly well online, where meeting participants could be assigned to break-out rooms as they arrive and encouraged to hold a check-in once their room is full, providing some activity during the credentialling process.
- 3. Implement the Democracy Working Group's recommendation of a two-year term by automatically registering new delegates for two consecutive AGMs (and any intervening special meetings). A congregation may withdraw a delegate from future meetings, but two years would be the default option.
- 4. Move the delegate selection deadline prior to the date when resolutions are circulated to congregations for comment. Address communication to congregations through their delegates (copying the president and newsletter editor) and place the onus on delegates to provide responses. Provide discounted conference registrations for delegates who register by the deadline. If option 3 is adopted, delegates continuing from the prior year could be included, even if the congregation has not submitted additional delegates for the upcoming AGM.
- 5. Reduce the number of delegates to allow deeper conversation among those present. Possible systems include one delegate per congregation or a simplified two-tier system with congregations above 100 members allotted a second delegate. Given that this would reduce many or all congregations to a single delegate, it may be prudent to identify an alternate who could attend if the congregation's original delegate is unable to participate for any reason.

Constructive Conversation and Amendments

The Decision-Making Exploration Team has examined different decision-making models, including majoritarian systems like the one currently used in CUC meetings (Robert's Rules of Order), consensus models, and sociocracy. We have concluded that consensus and sociocracy models exist to hear and address concerns. Under our current model, where no substantive changes are permitted at a meeting, these models add no value. We have identified three broad courses of potential action:

- A. Retain the major components of the existing process. Conduct consultations in February or March to supplement the current written feedback on resolutions. The ability to amend a motion would remain solely with the mover.
- B. Allow substantive amendments at CUC AGMs and special meetings, empowering delegates to act on behalf of their congregations, but eliminating the ability for

broad consultation on the final form of a motion. While substantive amendments would be allowed, they would be limited to those in line with the general intent of the initial motion. Any amendment introducing new business would be inconsistent with the CUC by-law, which requires that member congregations receive prior notice of matters to be addressed at a meeting.

C. Conduct a formal meeting prior to the business meeting where motions are discussed and substantive amendments are permitted, but motions are not considered for adoption. This would allow for substantive amendments to be made and then shared back to congregations before voting takes place. One possible schedule for how this could work is presented below (timelines prior to March 1 are unchanged from the current process).

Option C Potential Process

<u>March 1 - March 15</u> Delegates attend session to review resolutions and resolve concerns. *If consensus reached:* Meeting secretary sends resolution in final form to Executive Director

If no consensus reached:

<u>March 15 - April 10</u> Proposers consider feedback and may incorporate amendments. Proposers send final motion to Executive Director or withdraw motion.

April 15 Amended resolutions are distributed to congregations

April 15 - AGM Congregations discuss amended resolutions & voting decisions

Decision Mechanisms

For option A, the CUC could consider using <u>Democratic Rules of Order</u> in place of Robert's Rules to simplify procedures. For either option B or option C, additional consideration could be given to a consensus- or consent-based decision-making mechanism (these are not relevant for option A). For Option C, this would only occur at the amendment meeting, not at the general meeting where a vote is taken on the final form of the motion. We present three possible mechanisms below.

Formal Consensus

In this process, agreement is achieved when the question "Are there any unresolved concerns?" receives no responses. The steps of the process are (see <u>chart</u>):

- 1. Presentation of proposal and clarifying questions
- 2. Discussion and call for consensus
- 3. (If needed) Identify and group concerns
- 4. (If needed) Resolve grouped concerns and call for consensus
- 5. (If needed) Restate remaining concerns, resolve individually, and call for consensus

If consensus cannot be reached, one of the following options is used to close discussion:

- 1. Refer to committee for further work
- 2. Stand aside decision adopted with unresolved concerns listed. Requires consent of those holding the unresolved concern(s).
- 3. Declare block the proposal is not adopted

One important part of the process is explaining to participants that concerns – particularly those that warrant blocking a proposal – should be grounded in the shared covenant of the group. Thus, a motion should be prevented from moving forward because an individual believes it is harmful to the group, not because an individual does not like the motion. The formal consensus method of decision-making was detailed in the short book by C.T. Butler and Amy Rothstein (they published a free copy available here).

Gradients of Agreement

The Gradients of Agreement model seeks to elicit more information from an assembled group to allow the group to make better decisions. This may be implemented as a consensus model where one of the survey options is "block" or not by making the strongest option "oppose". Capital Unitarian allows this to vary depending on the topic, such that different options are available for different decisions, even at the same meeting.

- 1. Motion, clarifying questions, statements for or against, and discussion.
- 2. Survey with five choices:
 - a. Endorse: You will support the idea with your effort and/or money.
 - b. Support: You approve of the motion and would like it passed.
 - c. Neutral: You are unsure if the motion should pass.
 - d. Don't Like: You don't like the motion but don't want to block it.
 - e. Oppose / Block: You strongly oppose the motion and feel it will be detrimental to the life of the congregation.
- 3. Discussion based on survey results. Persons who voted Oppose / Block should be given the opportunity to express their concerns, if not previously stated. Discussion should focus on new information from the survey, not restating points from earlier, or attempt to resolve concerns. The motion may only proceed to a decision vote if there are no Block votes (if Block votes are permitted). A motion may also be changed by the mover and subjected to another survey or referred to a committee, which should include some of the people blocking, if any.
- 4. Decision vote with three choices:
 - a. Approve
 - b. Develop: The idea should be developed for further consideration.
 - c. Set Aside: The motion is not adopted.

For simple or non-contentious items, the chair may declare the use of a Fast Track process (though any member may request return to full process):

- 1. Motion
- 2. Discussion and amendments
- 3. Question: Is there anyone who does not endorse or support this motion?

Anna Isaacs provided a two-page explanation of the process as implemented at Capital Unitarian, along with her own notes on facilitation techniques and a list of sources <u>here</u>.

Sociocracy/consensus hybrid

DMET developed a hybrid option that draws on the strengths of sociocracy models for small group discussion and consensus for large group decision-making. This model features three rounds of conversation, with the first two using a sociocracy model and the third using one of the consensus models identified above:

- 1. Small group discussion of the proposal(s) under consideration, where members focus on raising and addressing concerns. All concerns are recorded.
- 2. A "fishbowl" conversation where the working group is comprised of one member from each small group and all others observe the conversation. Each member is responsible for sharing all of the concerns raised in their group, knowing that all members will have the option to block consensus in the next round. This small group works to resolve concerns and may opt to invite in some additional individuals who raised concerns during deliberation if this is beneficial to understanding or resolving the concern.
- 3. The entire group meets using a consensus model, starting with the revised proposal developed in step 2.

This model has only been trialed once and would likely require additional testing and refinement if it were to be implemented.

Recommendations

The Decision-Making Exploration Team recommends that the members of the CUC adopt mechanisms that:

- Actively work to build connections among delegates to CUC meetings;
- Encourage non-adversarial deliberation about the essence of a motion, individuals' or congregations' perspectives on the motion, and possible amendments to improve the motion; and

3. Allow delegates other than the mover of a motion the ability to propose substantive amendments that can be considered by other delegates.

There are multiple ways to accomplish these ends and we explore several below.

Relationships

Any or all of the first four solutions proposed under the relationship heading could help to address recommendation #1. We think it is particularly important to enter into working space with a focus on relationship and we strongly encourage allotting time for small group check-ins at the start of a business meeting (option 2).

DMET in principle supports the stability and continuity offered by two-year terms for delegates as a default (option 3). In practice, this needs to ensure sufficient flexibility that groups with less ability to make longer commitments (notably youth and young adults) are not discouraged from participating and can serve for only one year if that is all that is feasible.

Option 5 (reducing the number of delegates) would require deeper conversations with member congregations about effective representation. The current system of delegate allocation places a high value on representation by population. DMET believes that smaller meetings tend to produce richer conversation and that the value of having fewer delegates may outweigh the value of having a more precise system of representation by population. Further, some congregations already struggle to fill their allocated complement of delegates. However, if delegates are expected or encouraged to attend an additional meeting prior to an AGM, having more than one delegate per congregation may help in ensuring at least one can participate. Further, there is some concern that reducing the number of delegates per congregation could reduce the diversity of delegates. DMET cautiously supports option 5, with a preference for a system that allocates two delegates per congregation with membership over 100, one delegate for all other congregations, and identifies an alternate who can replace a delegate, if required.

Constructive Conversation, Amendments and Decision Mechanisms

An information and discussion session prior to CUC meetings (option A) requires no change to existing policy and could contribute to recommendation #2, so we would encourage the CUC to continue with this practice prior to the 2025 AGM, as was done before this year's AGM. However, this option does not address recommendation #3.

As such, the Decision-Making Exploration Team encourages the members of the CUC to adopt either option B or option C. While it is possible to do both, it may be redundant: if amendments are permitted at CUC meetings (option B), then a prior formal meeting to

consider amendments (option C) may not be necessary; an information and discussion session (as proposed in option A) may be sufficient.

Each of these options has strengths and weaknesses. Option C is compatible with the principle that congregations should be able to debate the final substantive form of a motion prior to delegates voting at a CUC meeting; option B is not fully compatible with this principle and was opposed by some participants in the January 2024 workshop on these grounds. However, option C requires that delegates participate in an additional meeting, which may erect additional barriers to participation and would place additional burden on staff.

Whether the Council pursues option B or option C, we believe using any of the three proposed decision-making mechanisms (formal consensus, gradients of agreement, or a sociocracy-consensus hybrid) would dramatically change discourse at CUC meetings in the direction of fulfilling recommendation #2.

We did not present an option in the section on decision mechanisms using sociocracy alone. Sociocracy operates effectively in small circles, usually around 5-10 people. We believe it is possible to design a system that would work for the CUC, but it would take significant change management and we do not believe the CUC has either the committed champions or the broad base of support to design and implement sociocracy-based decision-making at this time. We believe this should remain on the radar and additional opportunities to learn from congregations or other organizations employing the methodology would be valuable, as this could be an option in the future.

Next Steps

Canadian UUs are invited to a feedback session on Saturday, June 22 to discuss the findings of this report. A survey will also be available in September. DMET will consolidate this feedback and report to the CUC Board in fall 2024. The Board will then decide whether to bring forward a proposal for changes (via the existing process) to the AGM in 2025.

Report written by
Robbie Brydon
DMET Team Lead

