

MEETING PROCEDURE

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 14:33 says that God is not a God of disorder.

It is thus a logical and basic premise that all assemblies in God's name, also church council meetings, proceed in an orderly way.

This makes proper procedure essential, because incorrect and/or ineffective meeting procedure could not only create disorder, but also have further negative consequences.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHURCH COUNCIL MEETING

A church council meeting differs in various ways from all other meetings. A church council meeting may well have a number of aspects in common with other meetings, but still markedly differs, as described herein. These differences naturally affect the procedure of church council meetings.

A church council does not, for example, have a constitution or set of internal regulations. The church order (CO) serves as guide. The church order is not a law or set of regulations. It provides broad guidelines, based on certain Scriptural principles, also applicable to the procedure for church council meetings.

Art. 37 CO stipulates, for example, the minister of the Word as chairman. Not because they are always the best chairman, in fact some turn out to be the worst of chairmen.

The chairman of a church council meeting (and major assemblies) *must* be the minister, because he is the *minister of God's Word* and Christ rules His church through His *Word and Spirit*.

Should the local minister not be able to attend or the congregation not have a minister at that time, the counsellor is to head the meeting. A church council may not request just any minister to be chairman, except with the express permission of the counsellor.

Only in highly unusual circumstances may an elder chair a church council meeting and any decisions taken must be ratified as soon as possible in a meeting chaired by a minister.

The church council meeting is the only "permanent" meeting in the church environment. Classes and synods "disband" once the agenda has been completed and constitutes anew at each assembly.

AGENDA

As with all church assemblies, a church council meeting only addresses *church* affairs and according to *church procedure*, as stipulated in Art. 30 CO, precisely because church assemblies are unique to all other meetings.

A church council sets its own agenda and this can be done in different ways. Example: The scribe and/or minister draws up a draft agenda, the chairman then provides the opportunity at the start of the meeting to include matters that cannot wait until the next meeting and then the meeting sets the final agenda for the meeting.

The infamous item “General” is not appropriate to the agenda of any church council meeting, because it usually results in the rehashing of much of the already completed agenda or even a whole new meeting without agenda!

Upon conclusion of every meeting, opportunity should be provided for the suggestion of description points at the next meeting.

All stakeholders need to be fully abreast of all matters on the agenda for a church council meeting to proceed smoothly.

QUORUM

The legality of any meeting depends *inter alia* on achieving a quorum and thus the attendance register is completed right after opening the meeting, prior to proceeding to the agenda, in order to establish a quorum.

Establishing a quorum in a church council meeting requires distinguishing between the so-called “narrow” and “broad” church council meeting.

The church council comprises, according to Art. 37 CO, of the minister and the elders. A *church council meeting* is, therefore, an *elder meeting* (the so-called “narrow” church council meeting). The “broad” church council meeting is described in the church order as a meeting of the *church council with the deacons* (see Arts. 4, 5, 10, 22).

Achieving a quorum for a so-called “broad” church council meeting requires confirming that the prescribed number of *elders* is present, it is after all a meeting of the **church council with the deacons**.

Suppose the so-called “broad” church council comprises 10 elders and 10 deacons and nine deacons attend a scheduled meeting, but only four elders (thus a total of 13 out of 20). Since a quorum of elders has not been achieved, it would not be a legal meeting of the *church council with the deacons*.

When the deacons have a separate meeting, however, achieving a quorum requires the attendance of half the total number of deacons plus 1.

Timeous notice must be given of extraordinary meetings (in other words, meetings not listed on the annual calendar) to *every relevant officeholder*. Should even just one (1) brother not have received notification and lodge an objection against the decision(s) of such a meeting, his objection must be upheld, since in *legal terms* the actions of such a meeting is *ultra vires* and thus null and void.

SPEAKING TURNS

The question over the number of speaking turns per person, on any given matter, can be a sensitive issue. Setting rigid guidelines is not possible and yet a chairman cannot afford every officeholder unlimited opportunity to speak. Doing so could lead to chaos and unnecessarily drag out the meeting.

The guiding *principle* should be that **Christ** rules His church *with His **Word and Spirit***. The personal views of one or more office-holders do, therefore, not reign supreme (regardless of what they may think!).

A good *guideline* is to allow the discussion to continue until the meeting is ready to make a decision, i.e. when all have a clear understanding of the matter.

A church council meeting may not turn into a *debate* and be about pushing through personal opinions.

Once the chairman deems all is clear on the matter and the meeting is ready to make a decision, he concludes any further discussion – unless a suggestion or amendment requires further explanation.

The golden rule is for the chairman to only allow a second or even third speaking turn once other brothers have been given the opportunity to speak.

The chairman must also guard against favouring those brothers who share his views on a matter with greater opportunity to speak, than brothers who do not. Affording speaking turns must be a completely unbiased process.

Although the chairman may bring a discussion to a close at any point, it is not a right he may autocratically exploit in promotion of a particular standpoint.

MOTIONS AND POINTS OF ORDER

These two concepts differ in a number of particular ways.

A point of order is often misused to silence another and air or emphasise a personal view.

Points of order may only be posed in the form of a *question* to the chairman and never in the form of an *allegation/claim*.

The *aim* of a point of order is not the promotion of a personal view, but only to indicate the speaker's deviation from certain rules and/or principles. Examples of such are as follows:

- Inappropriate language
- Exceeding the time limit
- Unnecessary repetition
- Distortion of opposing opinions

The chairman evaluates and makes a ruling on such a point of order, **without any discussion!**

The so-called “order motion” or “formal motion” only addresses the method of **attending** to a matter and never its **content**. Example: The suggestion that all further discussion is halted and for the matter to go to a vote.

A motion must be seconded and immediately go to a vote, without discussion, before proceeding with the discussion of the matter.

The chairman may in extraordinary cases refuse to adopt the motion, especially when he views the particular motion as an attempt to “steamroll” the matter towards a particular decision.

Motions should be a rarity in meetings, since it is usually not an instrument of gain.

DECISION MAKING

Once a matter has been properly reviewed and understood, a decision is made.

The normal procedure for decision making takes the form of a motion, duly seconded.

A decision can, however, also be reached *without* any particular motion. **Example:** The meeting must decide whether to continue offering services on Ascension Day, since it is no longer a public holiday. It is clear from all discussions that no one is in favour of doing so. The chairman could then confirm that all present agree that such services be halted OR the chairman could have the meeting vote **for** and **against** continuing with services, since only one of two possible decisions can be reached.

The chairman could also, once a matter has been clearly laid out, guide the meeting toward a motion that would promote the proper review of the matter. **Example:** The subject under discussion is a possible donation to a worthy cause and, if so, the relevant amount. The discussion raised a number of opinions. Some oppose such donation, some suggest a donation of R50, while others an amount of R100, etc. The chairman could have the meeting first vote for or against making a donation *at all*. Should the majority vote *against* a donation, then the matter has been settled. Should the majority vote *for* a donation, then the chairman may request suggestions on the amount and have the meeting vote on this.

Only one motion can be tabled at any given time.

The premise of the so-called “opposing motion” is absurd and impermissible, since all who oppose a motion can simply vote accordingly.

A motion can also be amended, prior to going to a vote. An amendment is the revision or omission of or an addition to a particular part of a motion. Further amendments can also be proposed to thereby revise the originally suggested amendment.

An amendment can, however, never be an opposing motion.

The chairman needs to ensure that only one amendment is tabled at a time. He is to manage proceedings in such a way that good order is maintained at all times and the different amendments are fully understood before proceeding to the vote.

While reviewing an amendment, the original motion is temporarily set aside. Upon adoption of an amendment, the original motion is revised accordingly and the revised motion becomes “the substantive motion”. This substantive motion is then once again tabled to the meeting for a final vote.

All voting on people and matters is subject to an absolute majority. In the case of an even number, e.g. 10, the majority is deemed half the number plus one (thus six). A one is added to an uneven number, e.g. 11 becomes 12, and a majority would then be half (thus six).

Reaching an absolute majority when the vote is e.g. on more than two individuals can sometimes be problematic. Common practice is for the vote total of the individual appointed to exceed the votes of the other voters combined.

There is no difference in effect between a decision reached *unanimously* and one reached through a majority of votes.

Church governance does not provide for a two-third majority.

The chairman does not have a deciding vote in any church meeting (Synod 1910, Art. 176).

Should voting reach a stalemate, another vote can be held. A repeated stalemate of votes is subject to the following (see Synod 1873, Acta p. 46 Art. 173):

- In a stalemate in votes over **persons** a ballot must be cast, solemnly calling on the Name of the Lord.
- A stalemate in votes over a **matter** usually results in the matter being set aside. This is, however, not always a must. The matter could be postponed for consideration at a subsequent meeting or can be referred to a commission for input and reviewed at a subsequent meeting, depending on the importance and/or urgency of the matter.

A counsellor does not have a vote in a church council meeting.

BINDING POWER OF DECISIONS

Art. 31 CO stipulates the following in regard to the effect and validity of decisions: “A decision reached at a church assembly by a majority of votes shall be considered fixed and binding, unless it is subsequently proved that it conflicts with the Word of God or the articles of the church order.”

No individual who opposes or laments a decision or deems it infringes on his rights may not summarily set aside the decision and refuse to consider it “fixed and binding” to him. He is to lodge an official petition or appeal according to set procedure, during which time the decision remains “fixed and binding” **to all**.

The premise of the stipulation regarding the majority vote of Art. 31 CO is one of conformity, the minority accepts the decision of the majority without protest.

Should an individual be unable to accept a decision of the majority, he is to lodge an official objection or appeal. The decision, however, remains **fixed and binding, for all**, until a judgement has been rendered in favour of the appeal! Sulking, going on a go-slow or failing to comply with disputed decisions is completely impermissible in Reformed church governance. Such behaviour would be subject to censure!

The practice of recording the name(s) of the minority votes in the minutes was deemed by the Synod of 1961 to have no implications in terms of church governance (Handelinge, p. 562, Art. 209). It does, therefore, not exempt anyone from compliance with the relevant decision.

It must be noted, in terms of the quorum for a so-called "broad" meeting that the votes of elders and deacons are not tallied *separately* to reach a legitimate majority, but because it is a *legal* meeting of the church council and the deacons all votes are *equal*.

MINUTES

Art. 34 CO stipulates that the scribe is only to record "all the important matters".

Recording the statements of brother A and motion of brother B and brother C seconding the motion is not necessary or desirable.

The number of brothers for and against a motion does not need to be recorded, it is simply minuted that "The church council (of the meeting) decides as follows...", without the mention of a single name.

Minutes must be carefully recorded, preferably in books with numbered pages and all corrections must be initialled by the chairman and scribe.

ARTICLE 81 CO

"Ministers of the Word, elders and deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves and admonish one another in a friendly spirit with regard to the fulfilment of their offices."

The intent of this article is *inter alia* for officeholders to speak **with each other** and not **about each other**.

The article speaks of **Christian** censure and **friendly** admonishment. Mutual admonishment thus takes place in the spirit of the love of Jesus Christ.

Although it only mentions the ministry of the office, it most definitely does not exclude general lifestyle. How can an individual fulfil his *office* to the glory of God if his *lifestyle* is suspect?

Art. 81 CO is in no way an attempt to circumvent Matthew 18 (the personal admonishment of others).

Neither is the article intended to replace Arts. 79/80 CO, but indeed to **prevent** such conduct in accordance with Arts. 79/80! Whatever conduct is to be addressed according to Arts. 79/80 CO, may not be reviewed under Art. 81 CO.

Church councils must be of the utter conviction of the highly important part of this article in Reformed church governance. It would seem that many church councils do not do this article and treat it as a mere formality.

Article 81 CO can feature at every church council meeting, not only at those preceding the Lord's Supper.

THE CHAIRMAN

In conclusion, a few remarks on the role of the chairman. The correct procedure, good order and smooth progression of the affairs of a church council meeting do after all depend large on the chairman's conduct **and** the respect and recognition afforded him.

As mentioned, the church order stipulates that this meeting must be chaired by the minister of the Word. Unfortunately, not all ministers are good chairman and there are often elders and/or deacons who would perform this task better. Such brothers could tactfully guide the chairman and offer an enormous contribution to the good order and smooth progression of the meeting.

They could also, **HOWEVER**, achieve the **opposite** should they tactlessly and confrontationally flaunt their knowledge and skill over the efforts of the chairman!

The chairman must be *fully* abreast of *every* matter on the agenda, otherwise serious mistakes could be made. Thorough preparation is, therefore, an essential component of good chairmanship.

There is no shame in a chairman admitting that he doesn't have an answer at the ready for every possible question and would first have to obtain further information.

The chairman must be fully versed in the church order, general church law and church governance. It is astonishing and tragic how many ministers (**and** other officeholders) lack the requisite knowledge on these cardinal aspects.

The chairman must be committed to remaining calm and unbiased at all times.

Upholding principles and emphasising the significance of certain matters may not fall victim to the effort of remaining unbiased. Example: It is suggested that an individual whose church involvement leaves much to be desired become an officeholder in the church with the idea that if he serves on the church council, his church life will improve. It would only be right for the chairman to exercise his *right* and *duty*, as minister of the Word, to point out to the church council that such an individual does not meet the Scriptural requirements of an officeholder. The church council is not a "reform school"! Should the chairman instead uphold a sense of unbiasedness, *at the expense of clear Scriptural guidance*, he would be shirking his duty as minister of the Word and as such chairman.

Without promoting or forcing his own stance on a matter, the chairman should offer clear guidance.

The chairman must always be decisive. There is nothing worse for maintaining good order, proper procedure and gainful progress in a meeting than a weak and indecisive chairman!

Finally: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 states as follows:

“...respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord...hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.”

This text also applies to the officeholders of a church council meeting. If every elder and deacon conduct themselves in this manner toward the minister of the Word, **as chairman** (even a bad chairman) and show him respect and **recognition**, not because of his gifts or skills, but for the sake of his **work**... then church council meetings will a *pleasant* experience for all, including the chairman!

Then the blessing of the Lord can be expected for every church council meeting!

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