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THE SIMPLEST CONSENSUS-BUILDING
TOOL EVER

The Five-Finger Vote

By **Natalie Hart**

“The primary tool for pastoral leadership outside preaching and teaching is meetings. And so many people lead bad meetings.”

With this line, Rev. Tony Campbell* made everyone at the summer learning retreat give one of those laughs that’s part “ha-ha” and part “ah-ha.”

He characterized a good meeting as one in which conflict is at a minimum so the people are able to work together to make God’s kingdom a reality. But so many meetings do not feel this way.

Campbell contrasted two attitudes: fighting and winning.

“Too many people in our churches would rather fight than win. If you’re going to win rather than fight, there’s hard work to build consensus.”

His definition of *winning* has nothing to do with being the victor. In fact, the need to prevail in arguments prevents his version of winning, which is working together to “do the movement of the kingdom.”

The key to this kind of winning is **consensus building: making sure that when you move ahead on an initiative, the people are united**. He pointed out that “the children of Israel never won anything when they were divided,” so the church shouldn’t expect to either.

And then he introduced us to a simple yet powerful decision-making tool that can help pastors bring about consensus at board meetings: the five-finger vote.

When the board has been going around and around on an issue yet you need to make a decision that night, call for a five-finger vote. Everyone holds up one hand and reveals the strength of their stance:

5 fingers = I strongly agree

4 fingers = I agree

3 fingers = I'll go along with it

2 fingers = I disagree

1 finger = I strongly disagree

Every member of the board—even the quiet ones—can express their opinions this way, and every member is heard.

Sometimes, you'll look around the table and see that the people who had put a lot of heat into their argument were actually a 4 and a 5, and both agreed on the basic decision. Sometimes you'll see that you're all 3s, 4s, and 5s, so you can move ahead with consensus.

When you see 1s and 2s, you can focus on the following questions:

- What would make this path more appealing to you?
- How can we get consensus?

You can target the issues that are blocking you from moving forward, rather than being distracted by arguments between people who agree.

At the end of the discussion period, you call for a second five-finger vote. Hopefully, you've changed the 1s and 2s at least to 3s. If not, and the decision really must be made that day, Campbell pointed out that you will have to go with majority rule. It's never the ideal because there will be victors and losers, which sows the seeds for conflict, but sometimes you must do it.

There it is, a simple consensus-building tool you can put into practice immediately—no special training, no lengthy teaching required.

You can even use it with your kids the next time they disagree about whether to go to the frozen yogurt shop or to the ice cream place (maybe that's just my kids; I'm sure yours always agree about what to do).

For more information on this consensus-building tool:

[International Association of Facilitators](http://www.iaf-methods.org/node/5105) (<http://www.iaf-methods.org/node/5105>)

** Rev. Tony Campbell was the Associate General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America when he spoke to a group of pastors the summer before we started the UCLC. His sudden death in the spring of 2017 has meant that we don't get to have any new conversations with him, but we are so glad that we can continue to share his wisdom.*

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