



## Making Critical Decisions as a Congregation

by Rev. David Fleming

“The problem lately is that there are so many decisions every day,” said a pastor friend with a sigh. If there were many important decisions even before a crisis, in the midst of a crisis these decisions multiply and become even more critical. The goal of this study is to examine our Lord’s Word for guidance in making decisions together as a congregation — especially critical, challenging decisions. Sometimes decisions are fun (which dessert to grab from a stunning array at a potluck); sometimes decisions loom before us, especially when the matter is grave, knowledge is murky, or we’re depleted. Regardless, as responsible Christians we must make decisions, not avoid them.

Oddly, I’ve been at a few congregations where voters assemblies were actually enjoyable (and I’ve been at those where they aren’t). The common features of enjoyable meetings are: a community that strives to love each other and values their shared salvation in Christ; a common understanding of the roles of the officers, pastor(s) and laity and trust of the people who fill those roles; a realistic view of the church (rather than some idealized panacea); and an ability to disagree about various decisions without being disagreeable — having a humility that respects the other people at the table, confident that no one has a corner on the truth, except our Lord and His Word.

### 1. RECOGNIZE WHO THE ENEMY IS (AND ISN’T).

In our polarized political culture, we don’t so much unite with people who agree with us as we share common outrage at extreme individuals on the other side. Ben Sasse’s insightful book *Them* calls this community of shared rage “anti-tribes.” A good deal of internet headlines and televised news is designed to feed this rage and build “anti-tribes.” This is not healthy for building real community.

But our Lord’s church is a real community; we baptized believers are the Body of Christ, drawing our love and forgiveness from Christ.

**Read Ephesians 6:12–20.** Who is our enemy? Who isn’t our enemy? It’s sinful, lazy and sloppy to put the worst spin on those who disagree with our opinion.

It’s been said, “Anger is the flip side of love.” For example, Jesus became indignant when the disciples kept little children from Him, because He loves and values people of all ages. **Read Ephesians 4:25–32 and James 1:19–20.** Is it sinful to be angry? How can anger be misused? How can anger be helpful?

Before and after making decisions, pray! Ask the Lord to guide and direct the congregation's decision-making as Ephesians 6 urges us. Consider these prayers from *Lutheran Service Book Pastoral Care Companion* (CPH 2007, p. 622):

Almighty God and Lord, as You have called us to labor in Your vineyard, so grant us now Your presence. Enlighten and guide us by Your Word that in all matters of deliberation we may always consider the best interests of Your Church and this congregation. Let Your Holy Spirit rule and direct our hearts that, in the spirit of Christian love, we may present and discuss matters and be kindly disposed toward one another, to the end that all we say and do may please You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Almighty God, direct and guide us by Your Holy Spirit both to plan and to accomplish those things that will benefit Your Church and glorify Your name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Almighty God, we give thanks that through the varied gifts of the members of this committee / task force / group You provide for the ongoing care of this congregation. Cause us to recognize and to act on every opportunity for fruitful service. Send Your Holy Spirit that everything we think, say, and do may be for the common good of the Church and the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

## 2. KNOW THE NON-NEGOTIABLES.

In our confused times some people are not sure of many things, such as who is a male or a female. We need to know from the beginning what we won't be deciding about — what's already established, clear and unchanging.

**Read Matthew 28:18–20.** What is the relationship between mission (“Go and make disciples”) and faithfulness to our Lord’s teaching (“teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you”)? Why can these not be divided? Why could we never suggest that one is more important than the other?

**Read Hebrews 13:17.** (Note: “Leaders” in this context means pastors/teachers; see Luther’s *Small Catechism*, The Table of Duties, “What Hearers Owe Their Pastors.” “Obey” is a form of the word to listen.) In what are we to “obey” our “leaders”?

**Read Ephesians 4:9–16.** The ascended Lord Jesus gave, among other gifts, pastor-teachers to keep us on a solid foundation of our Lord’s truth. Why do we especially need such a solid foundation in our day?

## 3. RESEARCH.

Decisions require us to do our homework. It’s easy to give an opinion or to react with or against the opinion of others. Critical decisions benefit from careful, timely research and consideration.

The book of Proverbs not only points to the coming Christ, but also gives wise practical direction for living in the real world. We’re urged to obtain the guidance of many prudent, knowledgeable counselors. See Proverbs 11:24; 15:2, 28; 24:6; 27:9, 13.

**Here are three suggestions:**

- a. Gather information that can be obtained for the decision.
- b. Ask wise counselors for their recommendations. Ask members with special insights, staff, your circuit visitor and your district president.
- c. Seek the input of other faithful pastors, congregations, laity and appropriate community experts.

#### 4. SHOW RESPECT TO ALL.

- a. **Read 1 Peter 5:1–11.** Note: The word “elder” in the New Testament Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions is what we would call today the office of pastor (see Luther’s *Small Catechism*, The Table of Duties, “What Hearers Owe Their Pastors.”) There are responsibilities for both pastors and people. What are these responsibilities?
- b. **Read Proverbs 15:1.** How might disagreement and criticism be delivered as a “soft answer”? How could we say that Jesus is the softest answer?
- c. **Read Colossians 3:12–17.** How does this passage fit so well with our life as a congregation?

#### 5. COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.

Acts 15 is the account of an open disagreement about weighty matters concerning the acceptance of Gentiles and what to require of them. There was the following: a careful listening to the issue (v. 1–15); a clear decision (v. 16–21); and then agreement on a plan for open communication of the answer (v. 22–31).

##### Some suggestions based on Acts 15:

- a. Some matters need to be kept confidential, at least for a while, but most do not. Whenever possible be transparent with the congregation to squelch rumors, misunderstanding and undue fear.
- b. Establish and communicate a timeline for large decisions when possible, so that no one is surprised.
- c. Listen carefully and respectfully to all opinions on a negotiable matter.
- d. As much as is possible put in writing the issue, the possible choices, and the best rationale for what is recommended by the appropriate leaders.
- e. When a decision has been made, let everyone know in a clear way. Repeatedly communicate.
- f. Strive to work together, especially if the decision has not gone the way you’d like. The community is more important than your personal will.

#### 6. BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE CONGREGATION AND THANKFUL THAT THE LORD HAS CALLED YOU TOGETHER.

Interestingly, right after delivering the decision of the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Silas had a sharp disagreement over Mark. It is recorded in Acts 15:36–41. This transparent account of challenges in the early church is a reminder to us that the church is not a utopian community, but made up of real sinners to whom is delivered real forgiveness. Later Paul recognized that Mark was useful (2 Timothy 4:11).

In Acts we find that the church, even while growing rapidly, had major challenges, confusion, disagreements, lies, selfishness and manipulation. Why didn’t Christianity just fold? Because our Lord didn’t give up on His church and the apostles and members of the church continued to receive our Lord’s forgiveness, accept correction from others, confess their failures and stand up for one another.

For a closing, consider singing or reading together the insightful hymn “O God, My Faithful God” (especially stanzas 2–4) with its applicable prayer for our work together as our Lord’s body in this place.

## LSB 696 O GOD, MY FAITHFUL GOD

- 1 O God, my faithful God,  
True fountain ever flowing,  
Without whom nothing is,  
All perfect gifts bestowing:  
Give me a healthy frame,  
And may I have within  
A conscience free from blame,  
A soul unstained by sin.
- 2 Grant me the strength to do  
With ready heart and willing  
Whatever You command,  
My calling here fulfilling;  
That I do what I should  
While trusting You to bless  
The outcome for my good,  
For You must give success.
- 3 Keep me from saying words  
That later need recalling;  
Guard me lest idle speech  
May from my lips be falling;  
But when within my place  
I must and ought to speak,  
Then to my words give grace  
Lest I offend the weak.
- 4 Lord, let me win my foes  
With kindly words and actions,  
And let me find good friends  
For counsel and correction.  
Help me, as You have taught,  
To love both great and small  
And by Your Spirit's might  
To live in peace with all.
- 5 Let me depart this life  
Confiding in my Savior;  
By grace receive my soul  
That it may live forever;  
And let my body have  
A quiet resting place  
Within a Christian grave;  
And let it sleep in peace.
- 6 And on that final day  
When all the dead are waking,  
Stretch out Your mighty hand,  
My deathly slumber breaking.  
Then let me hear Your voice,  
Redeem this earthly frame,  
And bid me to rejoice  
With those who love Your name.