

# Guidelines for a Christlike Church Conference

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A pastor's wife once asked, "Why would any organization schedule one time a month for Christians to be entirely out of character?" Sadly, the monthly church conference is often a time of disorder, distrust, and disruption; however, with a few adjustments, the church conference can be a model of the character of Christ.

Parliamentary procedure, usually associated with *Robert's Rules of Order*, is a fair, logical, and reasonable manner in which to conduct a church conference. The information in this guide is designed to be a brief introduction to parliamentary procedure. It should be immediately helpful. A more exhaustive study of parliamentary procedure is not of interest to most casual students, and professional parliamentarians are not readily available to the local church. If the church conference presents an unfamiliar situation, you may want to follow these three suggestions.

1. First, what would Jesus do?
2. Second, what is the fairest course of action for the church?
3. Third, what procedures are the most logical.

My prayer for you is that church conference will become a blessing and a witness of the character of Christ in church members everywhere.

## Lines of Authority

Church conference is to be conducted by the rules adopted by the church. These rules are listed and discussed below in order of precedence. The first listed is the highest authority.

### **(1) Bible**

While the Bible is not adopted by the church as a rule book, it is God's written standard for Christian conduct. Every church conference should testify of our love for Jesus and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **(2) Law**

Although the church is exempt from laws governing the nature of faith, the church is not exempt from laws that govern previous notice, the right to vote, due process in disciplinary matters, and the adherence

of the church to its corporate charter, constitution, bylaws, and parliamentary authority. The courts have overturned church actions that were found to be in violation of the law.

### **(3) Corporate charter**

If the church is incorporated, this document supersedes all bodies of rules adopted by the church. The corporate charter (Articles of Incorporation) should be as generic as possible to provide the church with maximum flexibility in conducting its business.

### **(4) Constitution and Bylaws**

The current trend is to combine these documents into one document called bylaws. The only reason to separate them is to make the constitution more difficult to amend than the bylaws. The constitution and bylaws contain the rules unique to each individual church. The constitution and bylaws may never be suspended no matter how inconvenient the rule may be even if there is unanimous agreement.

### **(5) Rules of Order**

Rules of Order are rules of parliamentary procedure that the church has agreed to adopt. In most churches, *Robert's Rules of Order* (latest edition) has been adopted as their parliamentary manual. The rules contained therein are their rules of order.

## **Most Frequently Used Motions**

### **◆ Main Motion**

Only one main motion may be considered at a time. The main motion is the customary method of introducing business.

### **◆ Amend**

The motion to amend is usually applied to main motions in order to make simple changes. Only one amendment and one amendment to the amendment may be considered at one time. After these two amendments have been disposed, new amendments may be introduced.

### **◆ Refer**

The motion to refer is applied to the main motion when more study is needed before putting the main motion to a vote. The motion to refer should specify to whom it is referred and when a report and/or recommendation is to be brought back to the church.

◆ **Postpone**

The motion to postpone is used to delay consideration of a main motion to a future date and/or time. The motion is fully debatable with regards to the merits of postponement but not the merits of the main motion.

◆ **Table**

The motion to table is frequently confused with the motion to postpone. The situation for which this motion was designed is extremely rare. It generally should be restated as a motion to postpone.

◆ **Previous Question**

The previous question is a motion to end debate and proceed to an immediate vote. This motion requires recognition of the maker by the chair, a second, and a two-thirds vote for adoption. This motion is one of two of the most abused motions in parliamentary procedure. Debate is not suspended just because someone shouts “question.” Such actions are not in order. The ending of debate requires a two-thirds vote.

◆ **Point of Order**

When a mistake has been made, a member should rise immediately and without waiting for recognition say, “I rise to a point of order.” The chair then recognizes the member who states what rule has been broken. The chair then rules as to the correctness of the point of order and what actions, if any, will be taken to correct it.

◆ **Appeal**

If the response of the chair to a point of order is not satisfactory to the member, they may appeal the decision of the chair. After brief debate, the church then votes on the ruling by the chair. An appeal is only possible when two opinions on a particular matter are possible.

### **Practical Pointers for the Presider**

- ❑ The presiding officer should always embody the spirit of Christ.
- ❑ The meeting should begin on time.
- ❑ The presider should have copies of all governing documents.
- ❑ The presider should have a copy of the minutes and review them before meeting.
- ❑ The presider should have a copy of all recommendations and review them before the meeting.

- ❑ The presider should adhere to the agenda for the meeting.
- ❑ The presider should remain impartial in all matters under discussion and relinquish the chair if he or she feels the need to engage in the discussion.
- ❑ The presider treats every member the same.
- ❑ The presider seeks to help the member do what they are trying to do.

### **Decorum and Debate**

- ✓ Every member should embody the spirit of Christ and remember that “a soft answer turneth away wrath.”
- ✓ No one speaks without first standing and being recognized by the chair.
- ✓ All remarks are to be addressed to and through the chair.
- ✓ No discussion is permitted until a motion has been made, seconded (if required), and stated by the chair.
- ✓ The maker of a motion has the privilege of speaking first.
- ✓ After the maker of a motion speaks, the debate then alternates between those for and against the motion.
- ✓ After speaking once to a motion, you may not speak again until everyone wishing to speak has spoken and after speaking a second time, you may not address that subject again.
- ✓ In all discussion, remarks are always confined to the merits of the proposal and never are allowed to focus on persons, personalities, or motives.

### **Words of Wisdom**

- Never hesitate to say, “I’m sorry. I was wrong.”
- It is not your church.
- Committees solve problems. Meetings approve solutions.
- A bulldog can whip a skunk, but it’s not worth it.
- You don’t have to win every battle to win the war.
- Patience will gain more than haste.
- People are more important than procedures.
- You cannot take an organization where it does not want to go.

- Tell the truth and trust the people.
- If you continue doing things the way that you have always done them, things will continue being what they have always been!

## Changing Previous Decisions

### ➤ **Reconsider**

The motion to reconsider is used to change decisions made during a meeting. The motion must be made by someone who voted with the prevailing side and must be seconded. The adoption of the motion to reconsider brings the motion being reconsidered back to the floor for discussion.

### ➤ **Rescind or Amend Something Previously Adopted**

These motions are used to change actions taken at previous meetings. Without previous notice, these motions require a two-thirds vote for adoption. With previous notice, the motion requires a majority vote for adoption.

## Eight Steps in Handling a Motion

- (1) The member stands and addresses the chair.
- (2) The chair recognizes the member.
- (3) The member makes a motion.
- (4) A member seconds the motion.
- (5) The chair states the motion.
- (6) The members debate the motion.
- (7) The chair puts the motion to a vote.
- (8) The chair announces the results of the vote.

**Author's Note:** The materials contained in this paper are intentionally brief and far from exhaustive. Rather than provide endless details, the author has sought to be practical and share what the reader will usually encounter in the average church conference. For more detailed information, the reader should refer to *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (latest edition).