

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE
FOR
UNDERSTANDING A SYNOD ASSEMBLY

The basic purpose of Robert's Rules of Order is to provide an orderly way for a large group of people to do business. Familiarity with a few basic motions and rules of procedure permits a voting member to participate appropriately and to have opinions heard and tested in discussion and by vote of the Synod Assembly.

A smooth, orderly, and penetrating discussion of issues at a Synod Assembly depends on the ability of the chair and also on the responsibility and knowledge of the voting members.

The chair is responsible (with the advice of the parliamentarian) to assure good order, encourage full freedom of discussion of all germane or pertinent motions, remove from discussion non-germane motions or debate (to declare out of order), assure a fair hearing to all who wish to be heard (including calling for speakers' pro and con on an issue), to interpret to the Assembly the meaning of the actions to be voted on, to determine when the Assembly is ready to vote on a motion (unless the Previous Question is voted), to prevent "steam-rolling", and to attempt to move the business along to keep the Assembly within the time frame required. The chair must remain as neutral as possible on issues, and has no real control over what issues are brought to the floor as long as they are germane, and within the power of the synod to act. The chair cannot debate issues without stepping down from the chair.

The chair cannot limit debate (only the Assembly can vote to limit debate) and cannot control the wording of resolutions that come to the floor. The chair can attempt to clarify wording, recommend that certain resolutions be referred to the Committee of Reference and Counsel for clarification, and welcome consultation from any voting member prior to the Assembly to determine when and if a given resolution would be in order and also welcomes consultation to clarify the wording of resolutions.

The voting members are individually and corporately responsible for cooperating with the chair in the maintenance of good order. This includes care in the preparation of motions or resolutions, speaking concisely and to the point, and not using the Rules of Order to inhibit discussion of actual issues.

SOME MOTIONS MOST OFTEN USED:

1. ADOPTION OF AGENDA (simple majority). At the beginning of an Assembly, voting members are asked to consider the order of business. This order is proposed by the Synod Council, but any voting member is free to propose an amendment of the proposed agenda by addition of an issue, by delegation of an issue, or by changing the sequence of the order of business. After all amendments to the agenda are voted on, the agenda is adopted. Once adopted, the Assembly must proceed according to this agenda, unless subsequently the Assembly should vote to amend the agenda which requires 2/3 vote.

2. AMENDMENT OF MAIN MOTION (simple majority). Once an amendment has been moved and seconded to change, add, or omit words in the original motion, debate must be confined to the amendment itself. Debate cannot continue on the original main motion until the amendment has been voted upon and either adopted or lost.
3. TO AMEND THE AMENDMENT (simple majority). Once a motion to amend the amendment has been moved and seconded, debate must be confined to this matter. Debate cannot continue on the main motion or the first amendment. No more than one amendment may be made to an amendment.
4. TO SUBSTITUTE (simple majority). A term referred to an amendment which is not less than a complete paragraph and amends by replacing a paragraph, or a whole motion.
5. COMMIT OR REFER TO A COMMITTEE (simple majority). If the Assembly feels that a given issue can be adequately handled by a committee of the Assembly or the Synod Council, it can vote to "Refer with power to act". If the Assembly feels that adequate study of an issue requires more in-depth consideration than a full Assembly can give, or the Assembly feels that it needs more information, it can vote to "Refer to an appropriate committee or to the Synod Council for 'study and recommendation' ". Such a motion should include the time or date that the committee is directed to reply to the Assembly.
6. CONSIDER BY PARAGRAPH OR SERIATIM (simple majority). A lengthy statement or resolution (example: the budget) is best considered line by line or paragraph by paragraph. This permits voting members to focus their discussion, rather than to allow discussion to range in no particular order from one part of the statement or resolution to another. This is an important device to assist an assembly to deal with the many parts of a complex issue.
7. LIMIT DEBATE or EXTEND LIMIT OF DEBATE (two-thirds vote). The first of these motions permits the Assembly to prevent filibuster by a small minority of voting members. The second of these motions permits the assembly to provide additional time to adequately conclude discussion on an issue.
8. DIVISION OF THE HOUSE (any voting member can call for division without rising or making a motion and the chair must honor the request). If a voice vote does not give clear indication of the will of the Assembly, "ayes" and "nays" are asked to stand or raise their hands. If it is not visually clear whether or not the motion has carried or has been lost, an actual count is taken by tellers.
9. TO TABLE (simple majority, not debatable). A motion to table is appropriate when the Assembly does not wish to take immediate action on a resolution. It should be tabled at least until the next meeting when a motion to "take from the table" must be made to return the question to the floor of the Assembly.
10. CLOSE NOMINATIONS (2/3 vote, not debatable). Appropriate when it is clear that voting members do not wish to add nominees to a ballot.

11. TO POSTPONE (simple majority). If the voting members feel that they do not have sufficient information to vote intelligently on a resolution before the Assembly, it is appropriate to "postpone action" on the motion to a later time or after supportive information has been presented.
12. TO REFER (simple majority). It is also appropriate to refer a question to a committee requesting future information to be presented at a later time to complete the action on the question, or the committee can be charged to act on the question on behalf of the synod.
13. PREVIOUS QUESTION (2/3 vote, not debatable). Adoption of the Previous Question closes debate, and brings the Assembly immediately to a vote on the question before the house. A second vote is then taken on the resolution or main motion to adopt it or defeat it. Note: Many voting members think that by calling out "Question", they are requiring the chair to proceed immediately to a vote on the question before the Assembly, or that they are requiring the chair to close off debate. This is not so! Debate can be closed only by moving the Previous Question, without comment by the mover, and by the Previous Question receiving a vote of at least 2/3 of the Assembly. This is appropriate to prevent filibuster by a majority of the voting members, but is inappropriate when it is introduced too early in a debate, thus choking off legitimate discussion.
14. TO RECONSIDER (simple majority). This enables the Assembly to bring back further consideration a matter already voted upon. It must be moved by a voting member who originally voted with "winning" side ("aye" or "nay"). This is appropriate to permit correction of hasty or ill-advised action, or to take into account new information or a changed situation that has developed since the taking of the original vote. The making of this motion is subject to time limits: it may be made only on the same day (in a one-day assembly) as the original motion was made, or on the next succeeding day (in an assembly of more than one day). It is inappropriate, if used as a device to reverse the will of the Assembly when only a small number of members are on the floor.
15. POINT OF ORDER (no vote). To be used if a voting member wishes to present an objection to a ruling of the chair or some method of parliamentary procedure.
16. POINT OF INFORMATION (no vote). If a voting member wishes information relating to pending business, he/she addresses the chair stating, "I rise to a point of information".
17. A QUESTION OF PRIVILEGE (no second, no vote). This action can be taken by a voting member at any time except during the actual voting process or its verification for various reasons--not being able to hear, poor lighting or ventilation, excessive noise or other disorder and discomforts.