WHAT IS CONSENSUS?

I used to think that consensus means everyone unanimously votes in favor of an issue. This is not quite accurate. The word ”consensus” IS derived from the same root as the word “consent.”

Therefore, it means not that everyone votes for it or completely approves every little thing about it. Rather, it means that everyone ”consents” to it. There may be differences, but those differences are not important enough for the dissenter(s) to block passage. Instead, dissenter(s) willingly ”stand aside” and let the action go ahead.

Consensus is a decision-making method in which everyone involved has input to the fullest possible extent. To achieve this, the group facilitation must be nonviolent. As we learned, there are ways through helpful and maintenance roles to provide greater assurance that this happens. The blocking roles tend to obstruct consensus decision making.

The consensus process is not something that takes place solely in the meeting. It is an ongoing process between actual meeting times. It necessitates that the disagreeing parties carry on communications in a less formal way outside the meeting situation.

By using the skills of active listening, clear-stating, proposing options, negotiating, mediating, etc. the parties at odds seek to fully understand each other. Feelings and perceptions, word definitions, the detailed areas of disagreement are clarified. Each person seeks to fully understand why the other has taken the position expressed. What are the areas of agreement which can be enlarged upon? What mutual adjustments or improved knowledge or understanding could reduce or eliminate the areas of disagreement? When such progress can be made in narrowing or ending the areas of disagreement then consensus at the next meeting becomes more likely.

Because the term consensus is little understood, many think they have never used it. However presumably when the family selects a movie to go to, it is one by consensus. Jury verdicts are all by consensus. An article in the New York Times in 1986 indicated that decision making at the new General Motors Saturn plant would be by consensus. Whenever a group decides to do something that no one objects to, and that seems to happen quite often, that is consensus. All Quaker business meetings have been conducted by consensus for over 350 years. When did you last practice consensus?