

Consensus

by [Sarah Voss](#)

Tom B-the-first, how glad I was to see you disagree with Tom B-the-second on the important issue of consensus. I, for one, like consensus. I rarely see it, of course, but that, like most items of scarcity, just makes it all the more precious. Your strong rejection of it made me rethink the sermon I had just finished preaching to a small church in transition. I'd urged them to work for consensus, not just majority approval. Majority approval always leaves losers to grumble in the shadows, or wherever. There is, as the second-you recognized, some worth in consensus. Actually, there's a great deal of worth in it, although, like everything else, consensus has its downside too. The Borg might be a good metaphor for the ultimate downside of consensus.

Consensus and diversity are not opposites. Ideally, dialogue leads to consensus. Majority rule is simply a crutch for those who have difficulty dealing with patience, which is most of us. And although I said only a few sentences ago that I rarely see consensus, it's probably more accurate to say that I rarely recognize consensus when I do see it. I see it all the time. I subscribe to an Internet list called Quantum-Mind. Recently, one of the frequent activists on the list observed that there's an enormous lack of convergence in the offered comments.

"It is like a cocktail party with conversations and arguments in different parts of a room and very little circulation," said one individual yesterday.

The analogy reminds me of some church meetings I've attended. . Reminds me of some churches, too, for that matter.

Today, another person posted a response, acknowledging the lack of convergence of opinion, but pointing out that science operates on consensus all the time.

"Imagine a team of engineers who do not have a consensus on what would be 'meter,' 'kilogram,' and 'second'? And everyone trying to suggest his own version?"

That got me thinking of the many ways in which we do routinely use consensus in our lives. Most of language operates on some sort of consensus of meaning. Drivers in my city generally stop at a red light and go when the light turns green, and if they don't, they are not generally applauded for promoting a diversity of opinion about traffic lights. When two individuals walk toward each other on a sidewalk they usually don't bump into each other; instead they somehow manage to move over enough that they pass each other without collision. Usually they do this almost reflexively, as though it were an unconscious consensus, but I submit that it is consensus nonetheless, and a good thing for it, too.

And, lest you think my example trivial, how about our spiritual consensus. Tom, you and I concur that we are human beings occupying a space we agree to call Earth and both of us like to dabble at something we call a computer. Maybe we'll quibble about the details, as in maybe we don't both like to dabble at the computer and maybe you won't even agree that this is a spiritual

consensus, but there's some kind of consensus going on here, and thank God for it, too.

In Unitarian Universalism those last five words are often challenging, diversity-promoting, throw-down-the-gauntlet type words. Nonetheless, you and I and the rest of the clergy on this list all find a home in the UU ministry because we agree there's something we can thank for it (whatever "it" is), and you call it what you wish and I'll call it what I wish and that's okay. That's consensus, too. Please, don't ask me to do without it. It's far too important. And if you merely disagree with me... well, I've been wrong before. I'll listen.