

## Tool 8



### How to Participate in a Debate on a Motion

All courts of our church deal with the business before it through debate. More than a simple dispute or argument, a debate in our context is best defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a formal discussion of some question of public interest in a legislative or other assembly.” That formal discussion is introduced by a presbyter who “makes a motion.” Without a formal motion to discuss, we are merely having a conversation.

### The Role of the Moderator

In order to determine the best course of action, that which fulfils and displays the love and mercy of God, we need to hear from a variety of views and a balance of perspectives. The moderator ensures that everyone who wishes to speak on an issue can. One of the best definitions of moderator, articulated by a former moderator of the General Assembly, is that a moderator regulates the flow of hot air. Too much and too little is not good. As we know from our own lives, discerning God's will is hard, thoughtful work. Together, where two or three are gathered, we can discern God's will if each of us is committed to sharing our opinions on the function and affairs of God's Church honestly and clearly.

### Some Basic Rules of Debate

There can be many arguments that support or stand in opposition to a motion, and some arguments will be stronger and more persuasive than others. To help a presbyter discern what he or she should support or stand in opposition to, it is helpful to review the basic rules of debate that lead to good decision-making. Which ones are most common in your session or presbytery?

- All debate is directed or voiced to the moderator. Matters of debate should never be directed to another member of the court.
- Members of the court have a responsibility to participate in the debate.
- A dissenting vote may only be recorded by a member who has voted against a motion.
- Members are allowed to speak only once to a motion. However, the mover has the privilege of the last word before the vote is taken. An exception to this rule may be when a member who has already spoken to a motion possesses information germane to the discussion.
- Silence indicates your willingness to go along with the majority decision.
- Silence does not allow you to record your dissent if you have second thoughts after a decision is reached.
- It is never appropriate to say something against another member of the court. Comments are made in support of or in opposition to motions, not people.
- The only situation in which it is appropriate to speak of specific people is when the court sits in camera.

Any questions or comments? Please contact the Elders' Institute for information.

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