THE EARLY CHURCH AND DECISION-MAKING
Acts 15

Acts 15 tells how the early Christians faced a major internal conflict and went through stages of a group process that resulted in a decision most participants were able to accept. The conflict in this case went through the following steps:

1. There was a big argument. (Acts 15:1-2)
2. The church sought out a forum in which all parties could be heard. (Acts 15:2)
3. The parties saw that they were entrusted to resolve the conflict while seeking the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.
4. People in conflict had opportunity to tell their stories. (Acts 15:4)
5. There was enough time to air convictions, feelings and perspectives. (Acts 15:7)
6. What the senior leaders had to say was given special weight. (Acts 15:7ff and Acts 15:13ff)
7. There was order and respect in the process. (Acts 15:12)
8. The decision that was made was an interest-based and principled one. It was not a compromise. (Acts 15:13-21)
9. The proposed solution was ratified by consensus. (Acts 15:22, 25)
10. The decision-making process was handled with sensitivity to all participants, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 15:28)
11. The outcome that was reached was conveyed through both written and human means, but particularly through human advocates. (Acts 15:22)
12. The consensus of the decision-making group was confirmed by the way that their decision was received. (Acts 15:31, 33)

The actual events of Acts 15 may not have been quite as pastorally sensitive as the above interpretation would suggest. Nevertheless, by the standards of modern conflict theory, the early Christians got it right when they brought conflict out into the open, gave all parties – those with positive and those with negative views – a good hearing, and worked at finding a way forward which all or most could support. People in conflict want to be heard, and this is especially true when people believe that they will be significantly affected by decisions made by leaders or the group. The way we make decisions can be as important as the outcomes that we reach – especially if we want those outcomes to last, and to receive ongoing support from those affected.