

# *Quaker Higher Education QHE*

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## QUAKER GOVERNANCE OF QUAKER COLLEGES

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Since I arrived in 1997, there have been perhaps six occasions when the Earlham Board of Trustees had significant difficulty coming to unity.

On each occasion, the matter at hand was important and the Board had been prepared for the agenda item in advance. On each occasion, the Board deliberated with care, each person speaking constructively, no one dominating, and all listening attentively to one another. On each occasion, the clerk proposed a minute after about two hours that, at first, seemed to draw approval from those gathered. On each occasion, one member and then another asked to be recorded as standing aside, noting that the rest of the group seemed in substantial unity. But on each occasion, when a third or a fourth also asked to be recorded as standing aside (we are a Board of 24, with several honorary life trustees also participating at most meetings), the clerk withdrew the proposed minute. Generally he asked the group to return to the matter the next day, and after further deliberation, the Board did come to unity, always a different decision than the proposed minute of the day before, and a decision that everyone present agreed was superior.

This is Quaker governance at its very best: not only better decisions, but also deepening trust and respect for one another. On another college board, the decision of the day before would have been approved by an overwhelming vote, perhaps leaving some with misgivings. At Earlham, the Faculty as a whole makes decisions by Quaker business practice, as do its committees, most student organizations and other groups. (You can see our Governance Manual at <http://www.earlham.edu/policies/governance/>. In addition to key governance documents, the manual also includes a series of short essays on Quaker governance, most of them drawn written by members of the Earlham community for various purposes over the past several decades.)

Consensus governance may well be the most unusual aspect of Earlham, and the one that seems, to many, most closely connected to our being a Quaker College. (Many Friends prefer to speak of unity rather than consensus, but in my experience, most Quaker organizations tend to talk of consensus governance.) I mostly want to celebrate our consensus governance, but also to note some confusions in the practice that arise among Quaker organizations like schools, retirement homes, social service agencies, and the like.

For Friends, Quaker business practice involves listening for the leadings of the Holy Spirit. Even at Earlham, we can hardly understand it this way, since many members of our community are not themselves Quakers and may not even believe in God. Nevertheless, we believe the process “can be effective in any group whose members share hopes and beliefs about their ability to engage in collective action for the common good.” (That quotation is from Monteze Snyder et al., *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity*, Earlham Press, 2001, a valuable handbook “for using consensus processes in workplaces, community organizations, schools, families and other social settings.”)

Consensus decision making is much more than finding ourselves all inclined to vote the same way; it is a set of commitments to work together to construct shared understanding and agreement. These four bracing commitments are especially important.

- *Transparency.* We need to take care that all relevant information is made available to all who will participate in decision-making. This requires active habits of regular disclosure and information sharing.
- *Listening carefully.* We need to listen unusually carefully to one another. We gather in or silence (or stillness) to prepare ourselves to listen carefully and to empty out distractions that may linger in our minds. And we leave moments of silence between spoken messages to allow each contribution to be fully comprehended.
- *Speaking constructively.* We need to speak constructively, not in opposition to one another, but constantly seeking to find and widen a firm ground of shared agreement. (This can be especially difficult in academic settings because of ingrained professional habits of criticism.)
- *Good clerking.* We need to put ourselves in the hands of a clerk who will help us find the best we collectively have to offer. Clerking is a mutual relationship: the clerk should trust that each participant will speak only when s/he can move the discussion forward, and the participants should trust the clerk’s judgment in acknowledging speakers and in formulating and reformulating where we are in the deliberation.

At its best, consensus process can be seen as a collective exercise of reason: many minds working together to think through a complex or vexing problem. Perhaps this is why it can work so well at an academic institution. Where *Robert’s Rules of Order* or other voting processes can become an exercise of power politics (majority wins! others lose!), consensus process encourages us to find solutions that win assent and legitimacy from everyone.

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So what mars this celebration of Quaker decision-making?

In practice we recognize some potential drawbacks. It can be very slow in reaching a conclusion. It can be sabotaged by bad faith (which could undermine each of the commitments noted above) though we rarely experience this. It can work poorly where self-interest is engaged among some participants. It probably asks too much of human frailty to

ask or expect some individuals to put aside their own self-interest in this process; better that such individuals recuse themselves. We recognize these practical difficulties, and yet we are still deeply attached to the idea of consensus decision-making. But none of these are the main difficulty, which is more conceptual than practical.

Grasping the conceptual difficulty requires focusing on these two questions: (1) Who is included in the group that reaches consensus, and how do we justify this pattern of inclusion and exclusion? And (2) should we ever allow an individual to make an important decision, and if so, how do we justify that?

Our ways of thinking about Quaker decision-making processes arise from the monthly meeting for business. In this setting, we have clear answers to these two questions. Who is included in the group that reaches consensus? All members. Should we ever allow an individual to make an important decision? No. But are these the right answers in Quaker *organizations*?

It is one of the glories of Quakerism that we have created so many vital, effective, purposeful organizations: schools, colleges, retirement homes, hospitals and hospice services, and social service and advocacy organizations. We want these Quaker organizations to follow Quaker business practices. But if our standard model for such decision making arises from the monthly meeting for business, we risk (and I believe we regularly experience) recurring issues around the legitimacy of authority in Quaker organizations. I believe we have some conceptual work that needs to be done so that Quaker business practices can be adapted to the different circumstances of a Quaker organization.

Monthly meetings for business generally involve a few dozen people, and rarely more than 100. Many Quaker organizations (even if small) can be a good deal larger in terms of total people involved. Their functioning requires specialized roles (teachers and students, professionals or managers and support staff, boards of directors and paid staff, etc.). Those specialized roles sometimes involve valued expertise. And Quaker organizations often have specific missions that put them in regular engagement with those who are not members of the organization. There may be legal requirements that prescribe how the organization does its work. Put another way, the different circumstances of a Quaker organization (as against a Quaker meeting) involve size, complexity, expertise and responsibility. These differences make it difficult to adapt the standard model of Quaker decision-making to Quaker organizations.

Consider again the two questions. I'll use Earlham as a running example.

(1) Who is included in the group that reaches consensus, and how do we justify this pattern of inclusion and exclusion?

Although we often provide an opportunity for anyone in the community to voice his/her opinion to whoever is making a decision, no decisions at Earlham involve every member of the community: all 1500 persons, including faculty, students and staff. No one seriously argues we should make decisions in this way, though it is not uncommon to hear that someone doubts the legitimacy of a decision because "s/he was not involved."

Many of the decisions we make involve careful thinking (not just tallying of preferences) so it makes sense to focus the decision-making in a relatively small group of people to whom we entrust the responsibility to listen carefully and weigh thoughtfully.

At Earlham, our Governance Manual has a good deal of black letter text that specifies who makes which decisions. The pattern turns out to be quite complex. Most of the time there isn't much controversy about who's included and who's not. The Faculty make decisions about the curriculum, for example; the Board of Trustees gives final approval to the budget. These delineations of "whose decision is it to make? following what process?" generally arise from sensible thinking given the location of relevant expertise (e.g. The Faculty with regard to the curriculum) or bearing of responsibility (e.g. The Board with regard to the budget, in light of its ultimate fiduciary responsibilities).

Some controversies about inclusion and exclusion arise because someone may object that they should participate in making a decision because "it will affect them." Note that this argument that anyone potentially *affected by* a decision should be involved in *making* the decision could be used to justify the involvement of a great many people (if not everyone) in the making of every decision. And it flies in the face of the admonition that Quaker process may not work well where self-interest is involved. The controversy arises because the standard account of Quaker decision making process has virtually nothing to say about who should be involved in making a decision, and certainly says nothing that helps draw the lines of inclusion and exclusion. The default understanding is that "everyone" should be involved.

(2) Should we ever allow an individual to make an important decision, and if so, how do we justify that?

Many decisions at Earlham follow a compound process: a committee that includes faculty and students makes a recommendation to the President or to another officer of the college. In these situations, the ultimate decision will be made by the administrative officer based on considerations of expertise or responsibility, but the officer is charged to "consult broadly" before making the decision. The committee is the group charged with the consultative responsibility and will normally make its recommendation by consensus.

Nevertheless, should the officer make a different decision after receiving the recommendation, we often hear that "the President has overturned a consensus decision." The problem, again, is not a lack of clarity in our governance documents. Rather, it is a lack in our standard understanding of Quaker decision-making that could ever justify any single individual making a decision or that could justify any further step ever following a consensus process.

In an important 1969 joint statement by the Faculty and the Board of Trustees there appear these two sentences: "Earlham is an open community within the context of a Quaker pattern of search for consensus. We realistically recognize the necessity for division of labor and for weighted allocations of responsibility." I quote these because the second sentence is remarkably wise, in my experience, among Quaker writings about decision making. And yet the document provides no elaboration. It provides no justification for the

“realistic recognition” of either a “division of labor” or for “weighted allocations of responsibility” in making decisions. These are precisely what we need.

Every Quaker organization I know (schools, colleges, retirement homes, social service and advocacy organizations) frequently finds itself in governance wrangles. Just as the good exercise of Quaker business process (like the instances of the Earlham Board working to find unity with which I began) can strengthen bonds of trust and group cohesion, these wrangles about the legitimacy of decision-making can weaken trust and tear apart cohesion.

These wrangles arise, I believe, not because Quaker organizations do not seek to follow the broad understanding of consensus-seeking decision-making. They arise, rather, because the way Quakers articulate decision processes makes no provision for size, complexity, expertise or responsibility – all features of any serious organization. When a decision-making process is sensibly shaped around these, it is vulnerable to being attacked as illegitimate – to being attacked as unQuakerly.

Within Quaker organizations, consensus should be the process we use within groups when they are charged to participate in the decision making process, but the decision-making process is certain to be more complex than one in which every individual gathers together in a single group to make all decisions. Within Quaker organizations, the guiding principles for consensus decision-making should light our way: transparency, careful listening, constructive speaking. We should seek broad participation, engage in active consultation, and encourage care to be taken that every voice is heard.

In the celebration of and faithful adherence to Quaker business practice, we also need to find a way to enrich Quaker thinking about decision-making to adapt it to the circumstances of Quaker organizations: that is, to make a place for (and not by silence undercut) considerations of size, complexity, expertise and responsibility.