

Quaker Decision-making at Guilford College
Prepared by Jim Hood, Clerk of the Faculty
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Quaker decision-making practice, sometimes known as “consensus decision-making,” began in England at the founding of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Grounded in the radically-egalitarian idea that all persons have within themselves an equal measure of the divine, this strategy for coming to agreement in business meetings was first used by Friends in the London Business Meeting in 1655. As Edward Burrough put it in a 1662 letter describing the practice, the Quakers met “in love, coolness, . . . as one only party, . . . to determine of things by a general mutual concord, in assenting together as one man [sic] in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof” (qtd. in Sheeran 4).

Essentially, the consensus model places a high value on making decisions as a community, regarding compromise and willing suspension of personal preference or gain as mechanisms for achieving a higher unity of purpose. In the religious context of a Friends meeting, those involved in communal decision-making share a core belief in some transcendent power that guides their business meetings, what some Quakers call “Meeting for Worship with attention to Business.” In a secular context like Guilford College, we cannot assume such a shared faith in something divine. Faculty meeting decision-making, as well as other instances of decision-making at the College, is nevertheless grounded in the consensus model that Quakers developed and have used for over three hundred years.

Gathering together for the purpose of decision-making, faculty begin in silence in order to, as the Faculty Handbook states, “reach beneath individual preferences.” A willingness to lay aside one’s personal agenda or desires in order to achieve a common good most pointedly characterizes the position from which participants engage such decision-making. The consensus model also depends heavily on participants’ willingness to share thoughts and concerns openly, listen very carefully to others, and, crucially, raise objections to proposals “in a timely, respectful, and direct manner during the meeting” (Faculty Handbook).

The Clerk of the meeting is responsible for discerning what is called “the sense of the meeting,” essentially the general consensus. Quakers distinguish “unity” from “unanimity.” Consensus or “sense of the meeting” does not require that all persons present be in complete agreement. It does require that no objections remain that are grounded in “deep personal conscience” (Faculty Handbook), that there is a general willingness to move forward with the decision or proposal as determined in the meeting. That means everyone is in “unity” with the decision, even if the particular decision does not represent some members’ personal choice or preference.

At Guilford, we acknowledge three different levels of disagreement with a decision, only one of which prevents a decision or proposal from being approved. First, those who disagree may “stand aside,” essentially like abstaining from a vote or decision. Second, those who disagree may ask that their names be recorded in the minutes of the meeting as being opposed to the decision. In both these cases, the decision is approved. In a third case, where at least one person opposes a decision as a matter of “deep personal conscience,” the decision cannot move forward. In such a case, the Clerk holds over the decision, and the Clerk or members of the committee sponsoring a proposal will talk with those who have profound objections in order to seek a way forward.

As Snyder et al. (2001) make very clear, the consensus model depends upon a shared sense of trust, respect for all persons in the group, an openness to new ideas, and a commitment to ideas being owned

by the group, not by individual members of it. The consensus model also asks participants to value disagreement as a means of moving toward deeper unity of purpose or direction. Those participating in such consensus need to remain conscious of their own preferences (in order to distinguish them clearly from the good of the group) as well as their own privilege and position, which can have unintended (or intended) effects upon others, including their willingness to share ideas. Individuals always direct comments toward the group through the Clerk, avoiding addressing other participants one-on-one.

Many people think that the deliberate quality of Guilford's Quaker-based consensus decision-making model makes it difficult to make decisions in a timely manner. Others find that the consensus model requires more work up front but leaves participants more unified once a decision is reached, unlike what often happens when decision makers vote. The consensus model is definitely founded upon high aspirations for communal practice, but our experience at Guilford College shows that, in use, this method can have great practical value.

Works Cited

Faculty Handbook. Guilford College, 2018.

Sheeran, Michael J. *Beyond Majority Rule : Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1983.

Snyder, Monteze, et al. *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity*. Earlham Press, 2001.