

Encouraged by books like *The Irresistible Revolution*, experiences of deep community in college, and the desire to radically follow Jesus, people are forming hundreds of intentional Christian communities across the United States and world. These communities of Christians living in proximity to one another seek to boldly bring the Kingdom of God through such key practices as redistribution, reconciliation, hospitality, simple living, peacemaking, and most importantly love. Unfortunately, I have personally seen community after community emerge with great vision and hope only to drown in the details of day-to-day life together. The purpose of this series of white papers is to help people form and “live into” healthy and vibrant Christian communities by developing a strong foundation and practice of community while avoiding the common pitfalls of community formation and life together.

Community Decision-making (Draft, revised 10-5-2010)

I have never been a part of community who made decisions using majority rule and for very good reason--it creates schisms and does not promote listening and growth. Instead communities tend to make decisions using consensus. While this is great in principle, most people have little experience or training in consensus decision-making and it shows: bad behavior reigns supreme and meetings drone on forever as small decisions are discussed ad nauseam.

It's key in our life together that we learn how to make decisions together well. In my experience, within such an environment the following parts make for good decision-making.

I recommend an Elder-lead unity approach to decision-making.

Why not voting

Voting has the inevitable problem of leaving behind a group of people with every decision. This never sows unity in a community.

One vote, one person is unwise. In a community there are often people closer to the decision than you. In voting, you would each get one vote. In the beautiful dance unity, we are able to place more power with those with the gifts and responsibilities which yield the best insight for the specific decision at hand. Why? Because those closest to a decision usually have the perspective and information to best make the call on it. Unity provides a framework to acknowledge that. Also in communities that are more permeable, unity gives the ability for even a new person to influence a decision (though most communities don't allow newbies to block unity).

In short, voting protects us from the need to trust and love the others we are in community with.

Most governance in organizations is focused on protecting the organization from the people that are of it. Unfortunately, this means that unhealthy organizations are able to hobble along for almost indefinitely. Voting enables us to operate without trust.

Trust and Love

The essential piece of making decisions in community is an environment of love and trust. We must trust others to make decisions that affect us and our community, and while they may be different than the decisions we think we would make, we must trust they are good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and

loving. Likewise, we must ourselves commit to making decisions that are good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and loving (but the most of these is loving). The tools and framework of the “Conflict and Community” white paper are an essential foundation to the work of decision-making.

Areas of Responsibility

Shane Claiborne often tells the story of a community he visited: they’d printed t-shirts that said, “Everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to do this dishes.”

The reality is there is a ton of stuff that has to get done in community: bills have to be paid, food has to be purchased and prepared, gatherings have to be planned, a calendar has to be kept, the house has to be cleaned.

It may be tempting to rotate responsibilities, but I’ve found it best to have people take responsibility for an area for an extended period of time

These coordinators must learn the bounds of their responsibility. Also, they must learn to gage the size of decisions: Does it make sense for me to just make the call on this? Should I confirm unity with a handful of others? Is this really a big enough decision that we all need to make it together? Refuse to make decisions with the entire community that do not affect the entire community or that are better entrusted with smaller groups or individuals. Do not make decisions that are better left to others.

Your responsibility in your area of community life is to make the decision that is most good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and loving for the individuals in the community. Often the most faithful decision is one that is not actually the best for the community at large... it would be better for the community to spend that money to buy a refrigerator, but it is essential that John’s bicycle be repaired so that he can get to work.

You must look outside yourself, your personal agenda, and your personal needs to seek God and discern the best decision. Your goal must be, while seeking dissent, to find unity in the Holy Spirit.

Elders

Elders as described in scripture and as used in other monastic traditions serve a key role in community decision-making.

Elders share responsibility for all of community life and, additionally have a role in discipline and conflict resolution. It is helpful to ordain Elders for the entire community and, if you have multiple households, to ordain Elders in each household. Unless your community is very small, it is generally advisable to have at least two elders and no more than three.

The Elders’ roll in discipline is to deal with and adjudicate breaches of the agreed-to life together: i.e. you have a housemate who yells at house meetings or someone consistently drinks too much and then is belligerent. While we share responsibility for holding one another accountable, this is a role Elders often

take a lead in. If there is inaction or insufficient response in changing such behavior, Elders serve the important function asking a person to leave the community.

Elders have a unique grace in finding unity and looking outside themselves for the blessing of a community. As with other areas of responsibility, their foremost role is helping a community find unity while seeking dissent. They help guide the appropriate place for decision-making—i.e. most decisions about hospitality should be left to the discretion of the person responsible for hospitality, a decision about the life of a specific household should be left to the household rather than the whole community; a decision about parenting should be left to the parents rather than the whole community. If someone comes to an Elder asking about something in another person's sphere of responsibility, s/he must direct them to the other person.

Elders are NOT the final decision makers in a community, however if and only if unity cannot be found and a decision MUST be made (usually do to some sort of time constraint, and this is the Elders' call), they are charged with looking outside themselves to discern the most good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and loving decision for the community: i.e. you have to decide whether to renew the lease on your house or move to a new apartment. The Elders must find Unity among themselves.

This is a situation that should seldom if ever occur and is an option of last resort. Before Elders make such a decision for a community, they should consult the outside oversight of your community. Situations where Elders have to make the decision should be mourned. It is in fact a failure of the Elders to succeed in their role of finding unity.

Outside oversight

One of the most important things I have ever done in community has been to find older and wiser people to speak into my life and into the life of our community. This is much easier said than done. For many years I was unable to find older folks who had a paradigm for the life we were living. It is essential that whoever forms your outside oversight have a strong understanding of the life and protocols you have agreed to as a community. They will be an important voice and resource to you as you proceed with your life together.

Sometimes it's not readily apparent in a community who is functioning as the Elders. In this case, those with outside oversight can be helpful in this discernment, both through their own observations and through discussions with community members.

Sometimes Elders may abuse their power, lording over a community. These outside leaders should have the ability to remove Elders they discover to be abusive or unfaithful to their call. While Elder lead unity has the potential to be abused more than voting or other forms of government, it also enables a vibrancy that is unattainable in "safer" governmental forms.

Ordination

When it is clear who will serve as your Elders and outside oversight, it is important that your community actively express ordination of them for their role. In my experience, ordaining leadership releases an

extra grace in accomplishing their responsibilities. Laying hands on Elders and praying for them is an excellent way of doing this, it is also a way for everyone in your community to physically express their support and submission for their important roles.

Problems of power

If a community is large enough, we will inevitably be closer to some people than others. If we are married, we should certainly be closer to our spouse than the others in our community. This is actually really good, however problems arise when those we are in relationship with form a power center with one another.

I lived in a community where the wife of one of the guys insisted that he never dissent from her in house meetings. This power dynamic deprived our community of the wisdom of one of our members. As might be expected as well, his wife was often out of stride with the rest of the community. This enabled her to disproportionately influence our decision-making.

We must take care to allow our closest relationships in community to bring their gifts and perspectives fully to the table, taking care not to form a power center in order to force our way instead of discerning God's way.

Unity not consensus

Quakers make a key distinction between consensus and unity:

"Consensus" is a word sometimes used to describe a Quaker-like process. Yet Quakers would insist that this is not the most suitable term. Consensus (or unanimous consent, or general agreement) are based on the work of human wisdom and reason, whereas "the Sense of the Meeting" is based on the prompting of the Spirit. Consensus is commonly understood to require mutual compromise -- shaving away at positions until we find a core which is objectionable to none. The Quaker approach tries instead to reach toward a higher and greater Truth that speaks to all concerns in ways that could not have been foreseen. We discover what God wants for us, as opposed to what we thought we wanted. "Consensus is the product of an intellectual process. Sense of the Meeting is a commitment of faith."⁶ This difference is more than semantic. In resisting the word "consensus" we refuse to allow our Sacrament to become secularized. Preferred terms would be "Unity" or "Sense of the Meeting". The latter emphasizes the goal for the Gathered Meeting, and the former evokes the core theological affirmation of God's will for humanity. ("An introduction to Quaker business practice" <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/damascuspost-03-e.html>)

It is absolutely essential that communities embody this key distinction. It is this ethos that undergirds whatever process you choose. Take time to read "An Introduction to Quaker business practice" (<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/damascuspost-03-e.html>). It provides a rich description of the ethos that must undergird whatever process you choose.

A context of worship

Another key wisdom in decision-making we gain from Quakers is understanding our decision-making in a context of worship:

Quakers profess a theocratic understanding of authority. "The primary authority is that of God, as the God whose will is sought, as Christ who presides, and as the Holy Spirit who inspires and empowers. Thus the task of the meeting is to listen in worship, putting itself under that authority, to discern the right way forward on any piece of business."³ All human leadership is subordinated to the authority of Christ, the true shepherd of any gathering of Christians. All participants in the Meeting are equally capable of being used by the Holy Spirit, and those who moderate the Meeting are seen as servants of the gathering discernment process.

A Quaker Meeting for Business is conducted in the context of worship, and with the same expectant waiting upon the Spirit as in the Meeting for Worship. The Business Meeting begins and ends with periods of open worship, and an atmosphere of reverence and devotion is maintained throughout the Meeting. Each contribution to the discussion is heard in a spirit of prayer. As the spiritual momentum grows and the movement of Christ is felt among us, we experience the Gathered Meeting, in which we are gathered into Unity with Christ and become of one heart and mind. ("An introduction to Quaker business practice" <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/damascuspost-03-e.html>)

Often it is helpful to bookend your meetings with more recognizable forms of worship (liturgy, prayer, music, etc.) This helps to focus you on the fact that your meeting is an act of worship.

Choosing what to decide

You will need to figure out as a community how you want to set meeting agendas and to regulate whether or not a decision needs to be made at the community level or at all.

Generally, it is ill advised to resolve non-existent problems—that is to create regulations out of the fear that a problem might arise in the future. Instead, deal with issues as they arise. When you are discussing a problem, seek to avoid what ifs, especially if they fail to assume those you live with are seeking to be good, wise, faithful, intelligent, and loving. Instead of creating rules, provide guidelines/protocols and, trusting one another to make decisions that are good, wise, faithful, intelligent, and loving, allow people to adjust to the specific situations they encounter.

Interrelational issues should be resolved as laid out in "Conflict and Community" instead of through community unity. For example, if someone is keeping their bicycle in a location you'd prefer they not, go to them and seek a resolution that is good for both of you rather than going to the community to make a policy about bicycles. If there is an issue with people on the first floor, talk with them directly.

Don't make decisions that can be left to smaller groups. For instance, most decisions about food should be left to the discretion of the person responsible for food, a decision about the life of a specific household should be left to the household rather than the whole community. A decision about parenting should be left to the parents rather than the whole community.

Remember that there are some unsolvable problems that we just have to live with, be mindful of this possibility as you seek unity with the Holy Spirit together.

The pursuit of safety, success, comfort, and control

An important endeavor of following Jesus is learning to make decisions based upon loving obedience rather than our desire to acquire safety, success, comfort and/or control. It is important that we examine ourselves and ask why we care about something or the outcome? Are we seeking the outcome that is obedient and loving in accordance with the Spirit or the outcome that simply provides the promise of more safety, success, comfort and/or control. Obedience often yields these four things, so it is not a simple matter of avoiding them, rather you must eagerly pursue loving obedience without regard to these things.

Seek to look outside yourself when you are part of the decision-making process. Seek to give up your desires, hopes, and agendas and seek that which is in accordance with the Spirit of God.

A clear understanding of the decision-making process

Elders may or may not facilitate a community discussion, but it is helpful to have someone serve this role, either on a meeting-by-meeting basis or as an ongoing responsibility in your community.

There are a variety of decision-making procedures available to you. Investigate the options and make a decision as to which you will adhere. Get training if needed. I'm a particular fan of the Cohousing "Using Colored Cards to Achieve Consensus" model as described at <http://www.cohousing.ca/consensus.htm> It provides a helpful framework for everyone to be heard in an orderly manner.

In addition to a facilitator, it's helpful to have a thermometer, whose responsibility is monitor and acknowledge the temperature of the room. If things get too heated it will be impossible to hear one another or find unity. It's also helpful to have a time-keeper depending on your procedures.

A safe space

It is important that you make meetings a safe space for people to share what's really going on. Take care to watch your body language and comments to ensure they are in the spirit of love. Encourage and seek to understand. Take care not to belittle or minimize the thoughts, ideas, convictions, experiences, and feelings of others as you discuss.

Being an ally

Some people in community speak up seldom and ask for little. Look out for this and when you notice someone who seldom brings up their needs and desires, go to them one-on-one and ask them about this. Also, seek to notice those things that are life giving for them. Seek to be their ally in discussions and also to bring needs forward that which they are uncomfortable sharing.

Other Helpful Tools

Listening Wheel

The listening wheel is a tactile tool that enables you to concentrate on listening and observing rather than analyzing and defending. It is helpful in more fully understanding one another. Learn more and get resources for this tool at <http://www.i-skillszone.com>

Friendship is the best foundation

There are some core skills that will enrich your life together. Community is a lot like marriage. A book that I recommend to communities is in fact a marriage book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman. While Gottman writes from a context of marriage, the tools he provides are more about having effective friendships in general (page 19). While all the tools are extremely helpful in conflict resolution, in conflict pay particular attention to the sections on solvable and unsolvable problems (pages 129-241).