

A DEFINITION OF “SUBSTANTIAL UNITY” IN THE PRACTICE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Quaker decisionmaking is, at its core, an effort to discern the Truth. In matters large and small, Friends traditionally labor to discern, through Spirit-led meditation, the right decision. Through loving discourse and discussion, they strive to achieve “unity.”

Those who are not fully familiar with the Quaker decisionmaking process sometimes describe it as the practice of “consensus.” Friends, however, make an important distinction between “consensus” and “unity.” In consensus, the support a decision receives often reflects participants’ belief that a fair compromise has been struck among competing interests.

Unity, as used by Friends, is intended to be deeper. It means the decision makers have done their utmost to release parochial concerns and narrow self-interest and are, after careful, prayerful discernment, united in support of a decision. As noted above, the fundamental notion is that this process is an effort, ultimately, not to make the best compromise, but to discover the Truth.

Sometimes unity cannot be achieved despite much time and energy in the discernment process. Such circumstances often involve a significant number of Friends who simply cannot join in support of a given decision. In cases where a decision can’t be made, the process may be laid down or referred to a committee for further deliberation and, perhaps, reconsideration by the group at a later time.

Sometimes, however, a Friend has continued concerns about a pending decision for which there is otherwise unity. In such cases, that Friend may choose to “stand aside,” indicating continued discomfort with the decision, but an unwillingness to block or delay the unity that otherwise exists in the group. A Friend who stands aside sometimes requests that his/her position be recorded in the minutes, but he/she does so with the understanding that the decision will be approved. In this situation, Friends consider that unity has been achieved because the person with concerns has voluntarily removed him/herself from the decision.

Once in a great while, one or more Friends may be in opposition to a pending decision for which there is otherwise very strong support (for example, a decision to remove a trustee). If, after many efforts at unity, the Friend(s) remain not only in opposition but are unwilling to stand aside, the clerk may, with great care, determine that “substantial unity” has been achieved and declare that the decision has been approved.

Using “substantial unity” to make decisions should be a very rare circumstance. A key element in Quaker decisionmaking is the notion of trust. Clerks in these cases have a great deal of power, and they must be mindful not to use this approach as an expeditious way to evade the goal of achieving unity through the sense of the meeting. It should be used only when a decision is of great consequence, only a small number, proportionally, of Friends are in opposition, and all reasonable efforts have proved unproductive. And most importantly, it should be done with loving consideration of people involved balanced by the importance of the decision at hand.

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