

TO: Earlham Community
FROM: Doug Bennett
RE: Responses: What does it mean that Earlham is a Quaker College?
DATE: February 5, 2008

I want to summarize here responses from the on-campus Earlham community to the questions I posed this fall about what it means that Earlham is a Quaker college.

About twenty five members of the faculty responded and a few members of the staff. This summary focuses on those responses; at the end, I'll include a few additional comments about the five responses I received from students. I'll include many quotations, but won't attribute these to individuals.

Not embraced in this summary are the hundreds of responses from alumni nor the fruits of the discussions among members of the Board of Trustees in October. I will summarize those separately. Broadly speaking, there was much more agreement than disagreement among the responses, both within and across constituencies.

I am grateful to every one who participated. The responses were thoughtful, moving and thought-provoking.

(1) What does it mean that Earlham is a Quaker college? And is it important that we are a Quaker college?

Nearly all the respondents said that yes, it is important that Earlham is a Quaker college. "At a primordial level," said one, Quaker practices and testimonies inform our governance, interpersonal relations, and teaching work." Several others echoed this. Said one, "it means everything, well at least quite a bit." And another "Quakerism has influenced every aspect of my life here."

If important, what does it mean that Earlham is a Quaker college? People expressed this in different but convergent ways. Said one, "It means we hold Quaker values up as not just historic values but *lived* values. Also, that these values lived values are dynamic and not static such that we are attentive to 'continuing revelation' as this community tries to understand what it means to be Quaker in new contexts."

A similar view, noting the contemporary plurality of Quaker beliefs said, "To be a Quaker college NOW is to stand in the midst of the vast variety of Quaker outlooks and practices and to take them all seriously by seeking to understand them. We need to stay in relationship with all of Quakerism, even when that is not easy. It is important to do this in order to be truthful."

One respondent quoted D. Elton Trueblood: “[ours] is the vision of a [college] which gathers in order to scatter, and which [learns] in order to serve. It is to the perpetuation, implementation and the embodiment of this vision that we are committed.” Another voiced a similar view in this way: “I think Earlham sets out to open doors for people, so that they are their freest, bravest selves, in any context: intellectual work, spiritual seeking, service to others, living a balanced life that makes room for avocation as well as vocation, for family life and recreation as well as work.”

Several respondents, noting that Earlham, in its Quakerness, runs against the grain of much contemporary culture, and has particular value because of this. “Is it important to the world that some one or some institution should care enough about the future to nurture life long learners who prefer an openness to truth rather than the blindness of dogmatism? Asked one, rhetorically. Another, noting Earlham’s unusual, forceful adherence to “values of respect, integrity, peace and justice, simplicity, and consensus,” said these “need to be embodied and taught,” and that Earlham does this. Another said, “One reason I wanted to come here was to become part of an intentional community, the values of which resonate with me and my aspirations for a just, peaceful, democratic polity that recognizes in theory and practice the worth of all persons.”

Several respondents were enthusiastic about Earlham’s core values, but less inclined to ascribe these simply or narrowly to Quakerism. “I never think of Earlham as a ‘Quaker college’ and don’t describe it that way.” These respondents noted that other religions and other perspectives also support the values we tend to see as Earlham’s core values.

One respondent was concerned about “a kind of moralism” that does not serve us well: “I think sometimes the Quaker traditions are invoked to restrict the scope of our debate at Earlham” and “I sometimes worry that we try to deduce policy or ‘right behavior’ from more general testimonies.”

I think we can tie together a number of seemingly divergent viewpoints by noting *a paradox of Quaker distinctiveness*. We identify a cluster of Earlham values as Quaker, even distinctively Quaker. But if we ask ourselves *why* we value these things, don’t we have to acknowledge we value them because they are *right* or *good*? We don’t intend to be distinctive or odd, so we shouldn’t be surprised to find that some others, non-Quakers, share our fundamental values? (Imagine Socrates asking us ‘are these things good because they are Quaker? Or are they Quaker because they are good?’)

(2) Does it mean that our goals are different from other colleges? If so in what ways?

This paradox of Quaker distinctiveness came up frequently in speaking of our goals: some saw them as distinctively Quaker and others did not – though all saw and valued the same goals. Said one non-Quaker, “I would imagine that the goals of all colleges would be to enable students to learn in the best way possible.” And said a Quaker, “Academically, I’m not sure that it means we have different goals.” And another, “I think that all of the high-quality, small liberal arts schools share a number of goals that may be different from many of the larger universities.”

Others did want to assert that there was something distinctive about our goals. “I would first mention the testimonies,” said one respondent. “It seems to me,” said another, “that the Quaker identity of Earlham allows us to openly stand for and promote certain values in the classroom such as justice and peace.” And another, “I think our goals need to be in keeping with Quaker testimonies of peace, equality, simplicity and integrity.”

Quaker testimonies figured often in assertions of how Earlham’s goals are distinctive, but at least as common were statements that focused on Earlham’s spiritual dimension. “I think/hope Earlham means that educating the entire person means that educating the entire person means that reason and spirit live together and not in separate worlds.” Said another, “We are able to unashamedly and foundationally address the whole person – mind, body and SPIRIT – in a way that truly enriches the students and our community.” And another said that we are different because “our academic program is not in tension with religious beliefs. Our religious beliefs liberate us – faculty and students – to pursue truth where it leads us.

(3) Does it mean that we teach different things, or teach in a different way?

Again with this question we encounter the paradox of Quaker distinctiveness. “We do teach differently here but I would not call that Quaker, I would call that progressive,” said one Quaker. Said another, “I don’t think there is a uniquely Quaker way to teach history, or IP, or an Earlham Seminar. I think I would teach those things much as I do, no matter where I was. To me, a ‘Quaker’ way of teaching would invite attempts to impose a Quaker way and could threaten academic freedom.”

Some respondents do see distinctive subjects in our curriculum: “More interdisciplinary work,” “subjects that improve cross-cultural understanding,” “peace and justice,” “Across the curriculum, my colleagues are committed to opening students to the wider world with and around us and orienting them toward enlightened service to the common good.”

Many more agreed that we teach in distinctive ways, and linked that to our Quakerness. “Teaching/learning is more intimate, more aimed at transformation of the teacher and learner, than simply acquiring objective knowledge, though of course that has its own importance.” Another said we emphasize “collaboration over competition” and “create classrooms that are characterized by respect empowerment and freedom of inquiry.”

Said another, “First, we teach from a perspective that demands an examination of the barriers to inequality and explore the roots of conflict and justice. We also teach in ways that invite students to take responsibility for their own learning.”

A couple of respondents pointed to the phrase in our mission statement about awakening the teacher within, as, for example, in the this statement: “I find that many

Earlham professors seem to seriously consider what is required to ‘awaken the teacher within.’”

- (4) Does it mean that we support regular opportunities for Quaker worship on campus? If so, what are the important characteristics of Quaker worship?

Nearly every respondent thought it was important that we provide opportunities for Quaker worship on campus. A few added (as one put it) that “attendance at Quaker worship events should never be coerced.”

Several respondents urged that we offer variety (programmed and unprogrammed) in the kinds of worship available on campus. Another urged that we provide “opportunities for both Quaker and non-Quaker students to learn about the history and religious characteristics and practices of the Society of Friends.” And another added that she found valuable the “Quaker disposition toward religious pluralism and the active support of the various communities of faith on campus.”

What are important characteristics of worship opportunities? One respondent said “speaking to that of God in every person and inculcating the habit of listening to the spirit.” Another urged that worship opportunities involve “a genuine opportunity for those gathered to participate in the worship time in ways that are Spirit-led.” Another said we need “maximum opportunity for obedience to the leadings of the Spirit.”

Several respondents focused on the importance of times of silent worship. “Open worship in stillness or silence should be part of any Quaker Service, even those that are programmed.” Another said that “moments to center oneself...really seems to community better than any of the other activities on campus.” And another: “Silence, centering and a corporate sharing are to me the important qualities of Quaker worship.”

- (5) Does it mean that the guiding ethos or central values of the college derive from Quakerism? If so, what is that ethos or values, and how do they derive from Quakerism?

Most respondents think Earlham has a distinctive and strong ethos, and connected that ethos to Quakerism. One added, “I think our ethos is Quaker-based, although I find it hard to articulate what would be unique about that.” Another said, however, “It may be possible to translate this ethos into more secular terms and have a similar set of dispositions and practices, but doing so risks dilution and eventual dissolution of its distinctive tradition.”

What is that ethos? For some, it is our focus on Quaker testimonies: “Simplicity, peace, integrity, community equality,” as one put it. Another said that these are “Guiding values currently in practice: the teacher within, peace, consensus, community, equality,” adding that “these are all derived at the most basic level from the ‘that of God in every person’ in Quakerism.”

For our ethos, others pointed to “the attitude toward truth in Quakerism.” As one put it, “There is a background commitment (sometimes more felt than articulated) to seeking the widest possible truth that involves all persons and disciplines.” Another noted that in pursuing truth, we believe “all have the opportunity to be teachers and learners” and that “all have a responsibility to seek truth.”

One respondent who started by pointing to Quaker testimonies to identify our ethos, also underscored that Quakers are “non-creedal as a people of faith.” That is, Quakers do not set up “‘minimum daily requirements’ for membership...and do not have precise tests of orthodoxy against which to measure one another.” In acknowledging that “God [variously named] is powerful and can and does move through and within anyone, the resulting new insights or ‘leadings’ can be verified best by use of collective discernment.” Listening carefully to one another is part of our ethos.

- (6) Does it mean that we do others things in a Quaker way? If so, what things? And what are Quaker ways?

“Consensus comes to mind,” said one person, speaking the mind of many others. Our unusual ways of making decisions came up frequently in responses to this question. One respondent added in this regard, “I see Earlham as torn between libertarian and communitarian dispositions, both of which can be construed as very Quaker, and sometimes bring us to very different conclusions about the logic and practice of our shared life.” This respondent articulated support for the communitarian understanding: “it impels us to keep in mind the good of the whole in all the small acts of our days.”
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Respondents also mentioned as Quaker ways “moments of silence,” “use of first names,” and “clearness committees” (and practices modeled on these). Another noted “Most of the time most of us do not engage in competitive speech that is self-promoting.” One respondent noted a package of character virtues that was part of our ways: diligence, kindness, straightforwardness, reticence, hopefulness; but also added (as too frequent fellow-travelers) over-commitment, condescension, self-righteousness, passivity, naivete, and busy-bodyness.

- (7) Does it mean that a significant number of us are Quaker? If numbers matter, for which groups does it matter: students? faculty? staff? members of the board of trustees? What is a significant number for the groups that matter? And how should we insure those numbers stay high enough?

By and large, respondents agreed that it is desirable that there be a significant number of Quakers among us. “Numbers matter!” said one. “I feel that having active members of the Society of Friends on campus helps keep practices such as observation of periods of silence, use of first names and the consensus process from becoming mere rituals increasingly separated from the living faith of Quakers.” Another said, “I believe that having a significant core of Quaker teaching faculty is critical. I am distressed that a number of teaching faculty appear to think that Earlham as a Quaker college is merely

affirming a historical connection and that, in fact, Earlham is secular – a where religion doesn't matter.” And another: “For me, Earlham should be a place of formation for up and coming Quakers, as well as those who feel a resonance with Quaker values, and I think it's important to have faculty and administrators who know the tradition from within and have historical memory to pass on.”

One respondent put the case for numbers mattering in this way: because Quakers are non-creedal, the defining principles and ethos can be elusive. “This is where it is crucial that a critical mass of Friends be present at Earlham, since in collective decision-making as in worship, ‘the water always tastes of the pipes’” (quoting Michael Birkel, *Silence and Witness*, p 47).

Respondents had a harder time saying what a significant number should be. A few talked about “critical mass.” Several noted that our current numbers appear to be pretty good, but some of these found that reassuring for the future, and others worried that our current numbers of Quakers would be hard to maintain. A few respondents noted that it can be hard to tell who is a Quaker: some are members only in formal terms, and some who forcefully espouse the Quaker ethos and practices of Earlham are members of other religious communities.

With regard to the Board of Trustees, several respondents urged that the Board retain a majority of Quakers in the future, but voiced the hope that those Quakers might come from a wider geographical and theological spread across the Quaker world. “The monopoly of those two [Indiana and Western] yearly Meetings seems to be a relic.”

What steps should we take to insure numbers stay high enough? Respondents suggested a variety of steps: Affirmative action for Quakers in hiring and in admissions was mentioned by several. “Personally I think it would be good if a few (but only a few) positions had a ‘Quaker preferred’ designation.” “Perhaps Earlham should help encourage active youth programs at Yearly Meetings.” “Perhaps [we should establish] a pool of non-department specific endowed chairs that can only be filled by Quakers.”

(8) Is it important that Earlham remain a Quaker college? If so, why? Or why not?

Respondents agreed – emphatically – that Earlham should remain a Quaker college. “I cannot fathom a non-Quaker Earlham,” said one respondent.

Why? In answering this question, many respondents referred back to statements they had made earlier about our goals, our teaching, our community life and our ethos.

“Because the world lacks cultural diversity,” was the way a few respondents put it . Echoed another: “Because the college provides an alternative view...an alternative view of how the world works and might someday work” .

“Could Earlham survive without being Quaker?” mused one respondent? ... Are we slipping down the slope to the point where, twenty years from now, we are just another Swarthmore or Haverford that has Quaker history but not a whole lot of “living Quakerism?”

Said one respondent, “We need to show the world that faith and academe can co-exist for the betterment of our students, our college community and the world.”

One respondent put it this way: “Because we have found a niche that I think has produced a remarkable school, and I don’t want to lose it.” “And another: “We don’t want to be just another private college.” And another: “We have something special to demonstrate and contribute to the world of higher education – and to the world of Quakerism.”

“Earlham models an exemplary form of evangelism,” said one respondent. “Students, faculty and staff who come here participate in Quaker practices and more often than not morph into fellow travelers [and] kindred spirits.”

Responses from students

Only five students responded and what they said was broadly in the same vein as the responses from faculty and staff.

(1) What does it mean that Earlham is a Quaker college? And is it important? Student respondents agreed it is, and spoke about the importance of “Quaker values,” meaning, I gather from specifics they offered, both Quaker testimonies (peace, equality, simplicity) and also the ethos of respect and care that follow from our belief that “there is that of God in every person.” One student noted “In using the term ‘Quaker college’ we must be sure that we are referring to a college influenced by certain principles and guiding practices of the Society of Friends and not in any way confuse it with a goal to be in every respect ‘Quaker’ in some way.”

(2) Does it mean that our goals are different from other colleges? One student respondent said Earlham’s goals were different because we don’t encourage students to conform or assimilate. Instead, he said “Earlham encourages people to be individuals, free thinkers and contributing members of society.” Another wasn’t so sure: “education of students is our goal as it is for other students.” But she went on to note that “how we go about this education is different,” especially, how we “deal with difficult situations” is different. A third student noted that “Earlham focuses on helping students understand other cultures,” and on motivating students “to use their education and abilities to work for peace in the world.”

(3) Does it mean that we teach different things, or teach in a different way? One student respondent noted our curriculum “is more focused on diversity,” and that there is “a strong focus on the moral and ethical implications” of what we do. Others pointed more to how we teach, one noting “we teach in a more welcoming setting,” and another said that “professors do teach in a manner that students are taken into consideration.”

(4) Does it mean that we support regular opportunities for Quaker worship on campus? All the student respondents who spoke to this question agreed that opportunities for Quaker worship were important, and urged that such opportunities be plural in format (eg.

Programmed and unprogrammed). One student was grateful for a small, house-based weekly worship opportunity, saying “this has really helped me feel more centered in my studies and daily life.”

(5) Does it mean that the guiding ethos or central values of the college derive from Quakerism? A few respondents pointed to “Principles and Practices” as an exemplar of our ethos.

(6) Does it mean that we do others things in a Quaker way? One student, agreeing that Earlham’s Quakerism is important, focused on what he considered the gap between our values and our fulfillment of them” “I find our college to be seriously disappointing in how it carries itself as a Quaker institution and an institution which promotes justice, peace and environmental responsibility.” He pointed especially to issues around our investments and our environmental practices. That response, which was printed in the Word, drew a vigorous disagreement from two students who had worked on revising our socially responsible investment policy last year. Another student noted he “came to Earlham not just because of its programs, but because the Quaker principles and practices appeared to be enacted.”

(7) Does it mean that a significant number of us are Quaker? By and large, the student respondents thought numbers mattered, at least to some point. One thought 10% should be a minimum goal for faculty and staff who work closely with students, but added that “even more important than having significant numbers of Quakers is that everyone is willing to abide by the Quaker testimonies of peace, justice, simplicity, etc.” Another thought that having enough Quakers “ensures that the college’s values are protected” and that it was especially important to have Quakers in leadership. A third said “the actual number of Quakers does not matter at all as long as the people who attend are willing to be part of an institution that follows Quaker values.”

(8) Is it important that Earlham remain a Quaker college? All the student respondents agreed that it is. “It’s what separates Earlham from other educational institutions,” said one. “It’s essential,” said another, “because its principles and practices make it one of the few colleges that is safe for ALL people, not just the ones who fit in regular society.”