At Earlham we use decision-making processes derived from, but not exactly the same as, those used by Quaker meetings. Some of the differences are important. In a “meeting for worship for the purpose of doing business,” it is assumed that God may make a right course of action manifest by inspiring the words of any person in attendance. Some members of the Earlham community, coming into a meeting for business, may hold exactly the same hope and expectation, but most of us are probably not engaging with one another on that premise. Instead, we come together believing that open consultation and attempting to reach decisions among people of good will means that we can discern the truth, or the wisest course of action, by listening to one another and weighing arguments. The equality we try to practice in our decision-making does not rest on any assumption that everyone in a discussion has the same degree of expertise, or the same amount of lived experience, and both expertise and experience have to be important in trying to reach good decisions.

Here we again borrow and modify a term derived from the Quaker procedures, and speak of someone as having “weight” in some particular discussion.

Someone is said to have “weight” when she or he has a lot of good experience in listening to differing views and finding points of agreement in them, or when she or he has a gift for patient waiting, to let the implications of a decision emerge.

We would also call someone “weighty” who has a depth of ethical perception recognized as solid and dependable by other people. We sometimes say that someone is “the conscience” of a group, not because no one else is conscientious but because we see that this person in especially centered, sees broad implications of an issue that others, and consistently examines the ethical dimensions of problems.

The person of “weighty” conscience may not have as much information as someone else, and ethical decision-making is difficult with insufficient information. We thus also speak of the weight of information or knowledge, and we would call someone “weighty” — entitled to be listened to with very great attention — who has studied a question and mastered its complexities. To be an expert, or hold a job where one has had to develop a great deal of knowledge, confers some degree of “weight.” Long experience conveys “weight.” So does having been put in charge of an office or task, “the weight of authority,” by which we would recognize that this person is empowered by a board (or a monthly meeting) to take certain actions.

“Weight” is by no means an absolute or permanent acquisition, nor is it distributed or assessed in some simple hierarchical fashion when we try to arrive at a
decision. It is always a matter of degree. “We “weigh” the contributions each person makes to a discussion in the same way we “weigh” evidence. Vehemence of opinion, deep personal involvement or long-term interest in a subject, do not automatically confer special weight on the speaker’s words.

Official responsibility for an action (for example the responsibility of a president, dean, business manager, librarian to bring in a budget and to administer it according to Board’s directives, or the authority of the Board delegated to a faculty to be responsible for a curriculum) confers “authority.” Such delegated authority is both legitimate and also a kind of “weight,” but what we hope for is the melding of delegated responsibility, “authority,” and experience, insight, wisdom, “weight.” “Weight and “authority” should not cancel each other out.

In arriving at a decision, we try to bring everyone with a stake in the outcome into the conversation, sometimes to work toward a consensus, sometimes to give the best-informed advice to someone whose job it is to take action. All who are involved in such a process are equal in the sense that we are each entitled to share our insight and to hear the views of others. We will rarely be equal in “weight.” We will differ from one another in degree of expertise, in experience, in authority, in sensitivity and insight — each of which may confer “weight” on an individual for this decision. None of us owns our weight; it is conferred by how others discern what we bring to the specific case, how well we participate in a common search. And to throw our weight around is to lose it as an ethical or intellectual or spiritual power, in the eyes of our colleagues.