

Eden Community

Employing Non-Violent Communications and Sociocracy in a Christian Context

By Randall Johnson



Summary

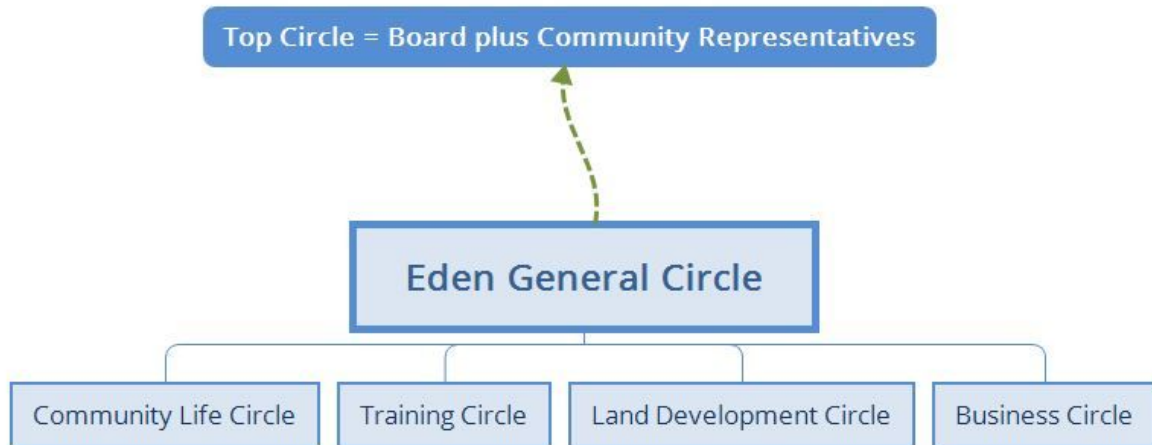
The Eden Community is a Christian intentional community located near Abilene, Texas, USA, that is in the process of building a cohousing ecovillage, permaculture farm, and retreat/training facility called the Eden Center in the mesas of the Callahan Divide about 20 miles Southeast of Abilene. Currently their community consists of five families, totaling 10 adults and quite a few children, and is actively pursuing connection with others who fit with their values, mission, and way of life.



The founders of Eden, Kent and Karen Smith, Rosten and Laura Callarman, and John and Shannon Kaczmarek, researched governance models with the intent of finding a format that avoided the use of consensus, democracy and single-leader driven models. They had experienced the failure of consensus decision making when individuals with perspectives not well grounded in reason would block the forward motion of a group and frustrated capable leaders would leave. Democracy always seemed to result in conquering majorities and frustrated minorities at each other's throats, and single leader driven communities worked until they didn't. But sociocracy governed communities were where things got done in harmony. Kent trained under John Buck and connected with Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and Diana Leafe Christian and helped form the community using sociocracy principles.

Structure

Eden is a subsidiary of the Jesus Family Network whose board in part constitutes the top circle in the organization. The board made up of a majority of those not in the community, but people who know them well and are committed to their purposes, and a minority who are in the community life. The general circle consists of the five families who make up the community, ten adults in all. The general circle meets every other week with a meal, an emotional check-in (a chance to see how everyone is doing emotionally), prayer and worship, and then an hour or so on matters of import to the community. There are four sub-circles: the community life circle (focused on internal governance and the health of the community), the training circle (responsible for the work of training others in this way of life), the land development circle, and the business/administration circle. Because some of the circles are very small there is not as much emphasis on double-linking. At this point everyone sits on the general circle and several people sit on more than one circle. That will change as size increases.



Training

Training in sociocracy happens mostly by experience. This is the only governance model they have used and everyone has experienced it under the leadership of the founders. They do quarterly gatherings, some of which focus on training, and have had one training specific to aspects of sociocratic practices. Non-Violent Communication principles are at the core of their experience and practice but are not explicitly attended to.

Harmony with Christian Philosophy and Practice

One of the co-founders explains their thinking on governance:

“People can get out of balance on governance by thinking it doesn't matter what system you use (God will help you make it work) or by thinking that if you get the right system it will never fail to work. In any system you are always dealing with the messiness of people, a basic Christian tenet. But having a system that already works in all the created order, including social systems, should lead more generally to success. By that is meant that all governance is orientation toward an aim and disorientation when enacting a plan to achieve that aim, but then re-orientation when you measure and find success in achieving your aim. You can't steer without an aim, and you need a plan to achieve that aim, then you need to measure to see if you achieved your aim. You are often off course so you make corrections and get closer to achieving your aim. Plan, Act, Measure! That is the normal way of things.”



At Eden, an additional factor is added to the sociocratic process, and that is an acknowledged need and desire for God to provide guidance in decision and policy making. Eden members actively seek to listen to God through prayer. At times when the group feels stuck it is common for all to stop and listen to God. This has led to waiting on some decisions and to moving in new directions at other times. The purchase of the land happened this way. It seemed the preferred property of two in consideration was not available so it would have been natural to proceed with purchasing the other property. But as the community listened to God it seemed God was nudging them to go back to the owners of the first property and ask again. They had just experienced a change of heart and were ready to sell.

The Christian ideals of valuing the lives and views of every believer regardless of socioeconomic or educational level is achieved in sociocratic governance where the opinions of all are invited.

Effectiveness

As people see things getting done more efficiently they become sold on sociocracy as a governance model. It may seem counter-intuitive at first because of the initial time spent in picture forming and proposal framing discussions but when everyone has buy-in on the decisions and policies that have been made the effectiveness of that is brought home.

Anything can be done better, but the Eden Community has found that things go well as long as they keep working it, not allowing themselves to fall into old patterns without reminding themselves how they want to do things. As new people step into roles there is a need to remind how those function and that is a learning curve for new people. Those more experienced in the process mentor and guide those new to the system. But the system itself has functioned basically flawlessly.

See their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/edencommunityabilene/>