

Friends' Manner of Decision-Making

So Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, ...but to wait upon the Lord, and feeling his power and spirit to lead them...that whatsoever they may do, they may do it to the praise and glory of God, and in unity in the faith, and in the spirit, and in fellowship in the order of the gospel.

George Fox

When Friends gather to do business, the process is the same for committees and meetings of all levels. We gather together to listen for how God would have us move forward. The decisions made during the Quaker meeting for worship with a concern for business are the sense of the meeting of those in attendance. Minuted decisions remain until such time as the body is moved to change them.

A Quaker Meeting for Business

As many Friends as are able gather together to make the decisions that affect the meeting community. We begin by centering down in waiting worship, which continues into the items of business. If the business is difficult, or if the group feels keenly its need to be brought together in the Spirit, this silence may go on for a long time.

The clerk of the meeting introduces the items of business, one at a time. Some are small matters, while others are large; some appear mundane, while others deal directly with matters of faithful commitment. Each piece of business, regardless of its nature, is raised into the waiting, seeking silence.

Participants, when they feel led to speak to the issue under consideration, seek recognition from the clerk, and address the clerk or the meeting at large. All try to listen deeply to each speaker, trying to hear the guidance of God: the still, small voice which may find expression through any one of us, or (more often) find partial expression in several Friends' contributions. The clerk keeps a slow, reflective pace and an atmosphere hospitable to many different perspectives. Sometimes quite opposite views are expressed; elements from such diverse perspectives may reappear later, in unexpected combinations.

Slowly, or sometimes quickly, an agreement emerges: Friends find unity in a particular course of action which seems right for the meeting. Often, this course of action differs significantly from any idea present when the issue was introduced. The clerk or others try to put this agreement into words, as they recognize its emergence. Before the item of business is done, the clerk or recording clerk will voice this "sense of the meeting" very explicitly, to check her or his understanding with the meeting; the minute recording the decision is composed on the spot and read back "in the face of the meeting." The actual decision takes place when this clearly formulated understanding is accepted by the assembled group. No vote is ever taken.

When the decision has been formulated to the meeting's satisfaction, the group settles into more silence before the next item of business — which is introduced, and handled, in the same way.

Understanding the Process

When I try to think of decisions made in business meetings that were more important than the process by which they were made, I am unable to. The gifts generated by that process seem endless.

Barry Morley, 1993

Friends' approach to decision-making differs fundamentally from the decision-making processes in the world around us, whether in government, business, academia, volunteer organizations, or other religious groups. Our decisions are not based on the desires of the majority. Neither do they rest on compromises that seek to placate groups or individuals by granting some of their wishes. The sense of the meeting sought by Friends is that course of action recognized by the group as a leading for the group as a whole; often, this is understood in terms of finding the will of God for the meeting. While we prefer our decisions to be unanimous, unanimity is not the goal of this process, and it is no guarantee.

In the Society of Friends, decisions about matters of business are the responsibility of the entire meeting. Our decisions are not made by an administrator or a council of representatives. Any of us may have some divine guidance on any matter; without each Friend's care the meeting community risks missing the full picture of what it is being called by God to do.

Meeting for business is based on deep, open, prayerful listening. We listen for guidance directly, and we also listen carefully and prayerfully to each other, expecting to find guidance from the same deep source in one another's words. This is the same waiting and listening, the same openness to the leadings of the Spirit, that characterize our meetings for worship. In doing business, we wait together to be led as a body, just as we wait in meeting for worship for a leading to speak in ministry.

The spiritual growth of the meeting and of its people is the most important outcome of any piece of business. As a consequence, even routine business needs to be conducted in the Light. The processes that are used for small things will be the ones that come naturally when a more demanding issue arises. Our love and respect for each other, and our faith that deep springs of guidance and inspiration are always available, empower us to trust that a faithful path forward can be found. Meeting for business, like meeting for worship, can lead to the experience of a "gathered" meeting, which can be profoundly transformative both for the group and for the individuals involved.

Working Together Toward a Sense of the Meeting

Some Advices on Participation in Meeting for Business

- Hold the meeting prayerfully in the Light; hold each speaker and the clerks in the Light.
- Pay attention to the process, as well as to the issues. Quaker practice in meeting for business is best learned by first-hand observation and participation.
- Seek the good of the meeting as a whole, the will of God, the mind of Christ; be prepared to let go your personal preferences, individual comfort, and ego.
- Stay centered, or return if you find you have strayed.
- Give your full attention to the person speaking, and to the Spirit within. This kind of attention is incompatible with formulating your own responses while someone else is speaking.
- Allow others to complete what they are saying, and then allow some silence for reflection before you begin to speak.
- Consider before you speak if your message will bring the group closer to a sense of the meeting or if you are only repeating what another Friend has already said.
- Seek the clerk's recognition before speaking; address the clerk or the meeting as a whole, not individual Friends.
- Speak in the hope of serving the meeting's search for Truth. Your personal opinion, or your feelings on an issue, are relevant only insofar as they help in that search.
- Share the part of the Truth that is given you. The meeting needs the Light as given to each person, in order to find the path that is right for it.
- Speak to the item of business being discussed. Stay close to the essentials that can help the meeting reach a decision. Stop when you are done, so others can hold your statement, and the business at hand, in the Light.
- In some larger meetings, it is a helpful custom for each person to speak only once to an item of business; in smaller meetings, especially when part of the work is gathering information, this is not always either practical or helpful.
- Let your speech be plain, simple, and clear. Debate and appeal to emotion are both out of place in meeting for business. This is more than a matter of group style: such simplicity supports an attitude of seeking, of listening for divine guidance.
- When there is tension in the room take time to consider that we are members of a gathered community committed to loving fellowship and unity in the divine.
- Support the clerks in prayer as they formulate the minute.
- After a matter is concluded, return to silence and center again in preparation for the next item of business.

The Roles of the Clerks in Meeting for Business

A major responsibility of the clerk is to discern when the meeting has reached a sense of the will of God on each item of business. The clerk (and recording clerk if there is one) articulate this sense as an explicit minute for the meeting's consideration. The roles of clerk and recording clerk are at most superficially analogous to those of the chair and secretary of a secular organization, and clerks with such experience will find that it does not always serve them well. Those clerking a

Quaker meeting need to learn this job: by talking with other clerks and watching them at meetings for business, by attending to supportive feedback from their own meeting, and by reading or attending workshops.

Good clerking requires both significant spiritual preparation and practical organization. A meeting calendar, with dates when certain actions must be initiated in order to produce the outcomes the meeting expects, is invaluable. Preparing an agenda is important: identifying what items of business are to come before the meeting, choosing an order. It is prudent to make sure that committee clerks or others presenting business are prepared. The clerk should be aware of the history of past decisions related to present items of business. Preparing the agenda also involves considering beforehand which items of business could wait until a future meeting for business, if a decision proves unexpectedly complex or difficult, or if the Spirit moves in unforeseen ways. The agenda is never considered more than tentative; actual consideration of business should be left to the guidance of the Spirit. Reading a query at the beginning of meeting is often used to help settle Friends in readiness for business.

The clerk would do well to take time before the meeting to become centered and open to divine leadings.

The clerk's task is to help the meeting community hear and recognize the will of God for that community. This task should come before the clerk's personal preferences, or even deep convictions; the meeting's trust that the clerk is seeking to assist that corporate discernment should not be abused. Quaker clerks stay out of the discussion and avoid contributing their own perspectives to the business at hand. On rare occasions when the call to speak seems imperative, or when the clerk feels unable to remain impartial on an issue before the meeting, she or he may step down temporarily and make clear that she or he is speaking, for the moment, not as clerk but as an individual member of the meeting, then go back to impartial clerking. If the clerk steps down for more than a short time, someone else should be appointed to serve temporarily in her or his place. The clerks try to encourage an open, seeking atmosphere in which divergent perspectives can be voiced.

Discussions should be kept focused on the current item of business; a meandering discussion with little focus will not generally come to closure. The clerk may have to intervene to help Friends focus, interrupting digressions or personal sharing which is not relevant to the issue at hand. A secure trust that the clerk is not trying to influence the meeting's deliberations may make these interventions easier.

Moments may arise when worshipful spirit is lost. The clerk or others who recognize this may ask for silence and a return to waiting worship.

Composing and reading back the sense of the meeting immediately after it is reached is very helpful, especially with difficult decisions. "Minuting in the face of the meeting," as this practice is called, has been the standard since minutes were written longhand in record books; the practice is frequently used today and has been found to be helpful. Clerks need not feel embarrassed by the

time it takes to compose a minute, or to let the meeting reflect on it. They may ask for quiet while they write, reminding the meeting that this is an opportunity to return to the center. Clerks may also ask to be held in the Light while attempting to capture the sense of the meeting, especially on a difficult issue. Reading back the minute provides a helpful check on everyone's understanding of the decision. Friends are generally clearer about the decision and more ready to implement it, when the meeting has paused to see and feel and savor the unity that has been reached.

Minute-keeping is a skill requiring a good deal of thought and care. The following advices may be a useful guide:

- Record decisions, not discussion. It is not necessary, and not usually helpful, to record all opinions expressed in the meeting. Some explanation of the discussion which led to a decision is occasionally useful for understanding the decision itself, but should generally be kept to the minimum necessary to serve this purpose.
- Include all relevant information and word minutes carefully so that they will be comprehensible and clear to Friends who are not present at the meeting and to those referring to the minute in the future.
- Make explicit whether a decision was made. If the meeting seems inclined toward a decision, but not quite ready to undertake it, avoid writing a minute which could almost, but not quite, be interpreted as implying that the decision was made.
- Avoid mentioning specific individuals except as necessary to the business of the meeting, for example in making individual responsibilities clear, or in recording individuals, at their request, as standing aside from a decision.
- Minor editing of minutes after the meeting to correct grammatical errors or improve clarity and style is generally considered acceptable, but any changes affecting the substance of the minutes must be approved in the business meeting.
- Minutes must be archived, not just distributed to meeting participants. It is the responsibility of the recording clerk to see that a copy of the minutes is stored in a permanent file or minute book.

Process for Items of Business

Meeting affairs are sometimes delegated to committees or to individual Friends. At other times, a concern comes to the meeting for business from a committee or from an individual. Considerable preparation may be necessary to present the matter clearly; this preparation should be done beforehand. This may involve finding out the facts, doing the calculations, thinking things through, giving the matter careful and prayerful consideration.

Consider before coming to the meeting for business whether you are (or your committee is) providing information, or requesting seasoning, or recommending a decision. If your business

requires a decision from the meeting, make your presentation clearly and completely, then step back. The clerk of the meeting calls for consideration of the matter. The meeting may need some time to come to the clarity that you have already reached — and then may find itself led in a different direction. Trying to control the decision is an impediment to corporate discernment.

The meeting should take the time to be clear about the responsibilities of its committees, especially what it expects them to decide at the committee level. Trust the work of meeting committees; the meeting should not expect, during meeting for business, to go over every fact and every consideration behind a recommendation.

It is helpful to understand that the consideration of an item of business comes in two parts: The first part is to understand the recommendation of the committee or individual, when questions are asked and answered. The second part is to discern the way forward for the meeting.

In response to a committee's report the meeting minutes an action. Possibilities include acknowledging receipt of the report, minuting a decision whether to enact recommendations from the report, holding the matter over for further discernment either by the committee or by the meeting as a whole, or taking other action as the meeting is led.

Challenges

Question: What if I do not presently see that service in a thing, that the rest of my brethren agree in; in this case, what is my duty and theirs?

Answer: It is thy duty to wait upon God in silence and patience, out of all fleshly consultations; and as thou abidest in the *simplicity of the TRUTH*, thou wilt receive an understanding with the rest of thy brethren, about the thing doubted. And it is their duty, whilst thou behavest thyself in meekness and humility, to bear with thee, and carry themselves tenderly and lovingly towards thee...

William Penn, 1681

The primary goal of the meeting's decision process is to come into unity in God. The meeting and those participating in a meeting for business are urged not to allow the issues before it to eclipse this fundamental goal. Thus the meeting should cultivate an openness to receive a truth that may be missing from the perspectives most frequently expressed, to be open to alternatives to preconceived ideas. The clerk should see to it that this process is not rushed; returning to silent worship can often help a meeting's ability truly to listen to the variety of perspectives within it.

Sometimes, even in good Quaker process, a meeting may not find unity to move forward on an item of business. This does not automatically mean that the process is not working. It may take some time, but Friends can continue with patience, discernment, and faith that the way will open, perhaps not as we expect at first. If a united sense of the meeting cannot be found, the issue is left for further seasoning. The old policy remains unchanged, or the new business not acted upon; the subject is set aside until another meeting for business to allow for more prayer, reflection, and

discernment. The ultimate solution, and the group that takes the time to come to unity about it, are generally both the better for waiting.

Trying to hurry an item of business, either because the meeting has tired of it, or because the meeting for business is held in a strictly limited time period, often causes problems, and should be avoided. A meeting may search for a long time before it finds the course of action right for it. Other times, it is there early in the process, but it is long before the meeting is able to recognize its rightness. Friends' really creative or radical insights have often taken a very long time to reach full meeting support.

Occasionally, an agreement reached by the meeting reflects something quite other than the will of God. Friends may happen to agree for different, conflicting, reasons; when all are eager to act, everyone can have what they want by ignoring these differences. Major differences may become evident at a later step, however, making united action very difficult. Other times, unanimity is reached because people have dropped out of the process, feeling unheard or unheeded. A unanimous decision, in cases like this, is unlikely to reflect any deep leading for the meeting, and is often better laid aside for a time.

Sometimes a sense of the meeting is seen to emerge, though a Friend present remains unclear that the course of action in question represents a faithful response by the meeting to the divine guidance it has received. When a Friend is not united in the emerging sense of the meeting, it may be because of personal factors or circumstances that intrude on her or his prayerful consideration of the issue; it may be because he or she discerns that the course of action toward which the meeting appears to be heading is not sufficiently faithful to the leadings of the Spirit; or it may be because he or she is simply unable to discern God's will on this particular matter.

A Friend who is not drawn into the unity of the emerging sense of the meeting may ask to "stand aside" so as not to impede the meeting's work. However, a Friend who has a clear leading, or "stop," that a proposed action is not appropriate should clearly communicate this concern. It is a responsibility to do so even if it is uncomfortable for the individual or for the meeting. Typically a meeting will not proceed if even a single individual is not in unity. This is not to say that an individual Friend has the prerogative to block a decision. But the meeting should be extremely cautious in accepting a course of action where one or more Friends present have expressed contrary leadings. It should weigh heavily whether moving ahead with the matter at hand is not less important than the loving fellowship of the meeting. When a Friend objects and stands in the way, there is a mutual obligation for the meeting and the individual to do further discernment. Our practice should reflect faithfulness to the expectation that Divine guidance will lead the meeting into unity when all humbly submit themselves to Divine will.

The unity we seek depends on the willingness of us all to seek the truth in each other's utterances; on our being open to persuasion; and in the last resort on a willingness to recognise and accept the sense of the meeting as recorded in the minute, knowing that our dissenting views have been heard and considered. We do

not vote in our meetings, because we believe that this would emphasise the divisions between differing views and inhibit the process of seeking to know the will of God. We must recognise, however, that a minority view may well continue to exist. When we unite with a minute offered by our clerk, we express, not a sudden agreement of everyone present with the prevailing view, but rather a confidence in our tried and tested way of seeking to recognise God's will. We act as a community whose members love and trust each other. We should be reluctant to prevent the acceptance of a minute which the general body of Friends present feels to be right.

Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994

The faith of Friends is that there is a right order, a right way forward, that can be discerned by opening ourselves to God's leading for the Meeting. If we act on that faith, no matter how difficult the decision facing us might be, we will wait for the truth to become visible. Anything is possible when we wait in worship.

Marty Walton, 1997

Sources for Quotes

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p. 2, "When I try to think...": Barry Morley; *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*; Pendle Hill, 1993; p. 23.

p. 6, "*Question*: What if I do not presently see...": William Penn; 'A Brief Examination and State of Liberty Spiritual', *The Political Writings of William Penn*, pp. 272–288, ed. by Andrew R. Murphy; Liberty Fund, 2002; p. 282.

p. 7, "The unity we seek depends on the willingness of us all...": [no author]; *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 3rd ed.; The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2005, sec. 3.06.

p. 8, "The faith of Friends is that there is a right order...": Marty Walton; *The Meeting Experience: Practicing Quakerism in Community*; Argenta, 1997; p. 29.