

Worship Groups and Preparative Meetings

A local meeting need not be organized as a monthly meeting. Especially if a meeting is very small, or includes few experienced Friends, it may not feel prepared to fulfill all the functions and responsibilities normally expected of a monthly meeting. A small meeting may also find that it does not have enough business to require a regular business meeting. Depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate to organize such a meeting as a *worship group* or *preparative meeting*.

Worship groups and preparative meetings affiliated with Illinois Yearly Meeting are normally held under the care of a monthly meeting; but are acknowledged to have a high degree of local autonomy, making their own decisions about internal matters. However, membership in the Religious Society of Friends resides in a monthly meeting; decisions to admit a Friend to membership, transfer a Friend's membership from one meeting to another, or remove a Friend from membership are made in the monthly meeting, not the preparative meeting or worship group. Likewise, monthly meetings have responsibility for the clearness process leading to marriage; requests for marriage under the care of a meeting should be directed to the monthly meeting.

Even if autonomous in its decision-making, a preparative meeting or worship group held under the care of a monthly meeting forms a part of that monthly meeting, which in these circumstances serves as a kind of regional body rather than a strictly local meeting. It is this regional body under whose care the meeting is held, and all the meetings involved — even a large, old and established meeting — are under this same care. The care which these meetings exercise is mutual; they hold each other in love, supporting each other spiritually and practically, offering assistance as circumstances require and abilities permit.

Distance may prevent Friends belonging to the worship group or preparative meeting from frequent participation in the monthly meeting; but they form part of the monthly meeting community, and should feel welcome as full participants whenever they have the opportunity to attend its business sessions, meetings for worship, and other functions. The worship group or preparative meeting should not hesitate to request the assistance of the monthly meeting with large projects, or any other matters where the participation of the monthly meeting as a whole would be useful. Smaller meetings under the care of a monthly meeting may also expect periodic visitors from the monthly meeting, who should provide support as needed and keep the monthly meeting informed about the state of the smaller meeting. For more information on the relation between monthly meetings and the meetings under their care, see “Responsibilities of the monthly meeting to meetings under its care,” pp. xx–xx.

Preparative meetings and worship groups do not share the same level of responsibility to the yearly and quarterly meetings as a monthly meeting: there is no general expectation that they will send representatives to the yearly meeting Continuing Committee or host its sessions, that they will send State of Society reports, or that they will provide direct financial support to the yearly and quarterly meetings. However, they may do any of these things at their option. Smaller meetings are tenderly urged to assist their monthly meetings as needed in fulfilling these responsibilities.

The following chart summarizes the differences among different types of local meetings. More detailed explanation follows the chart:

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	Informal, Independent Worship Group	Recognized Worship Group under the minuted care of a meeting	Preparative Meeting	Monthly Meeting
<i>Holds regular meeting for worship</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Has official affiliation with Illinois Yearly Meeting & the Religious Society of Friends</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Holds an official meeting for business</i>	No	No	Yes	Yes
<i>May receive, release or transfer members</i>	No	No	No	Yes
<i>May approve requests for marriage</i>	No	No	No	Yes
<i>May have more than one local meeting under its care</i>	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Reports to Illinois Yearly Meeting, and supports it financially</i>	Optional	Optional	Optional	Expected
<i>Is set up and laid down by minute of</i>	N/A	Monthly meeting	Quarterly meeting (or yearly meeting if no available quarterly) on recommendation of the monthly meeting	Yearly meeting on recommendation of the quarterly meeting, if any

Worship groups

A worship group is simply a group of individuals, meeting together on a regular basis for worship in the manner of Friends. Such groups are often organized on a completely informal and unofficial basis. Over time, a worship group may gradually come to function more and more as an established Friends meeting; many of the meetings in Illinois Yearly Meeting began in just this way.

The formation of new worship groups is encouraged in all areas where an existing meeting is not available. Individuals organizing a new worship group often find it beneficial to seek the advice and support of an existing meeting (typically the nearest monthly meeting), even if it is some distance away. A monthly meeting may lend informal assistance to a worship group without formally taking the worship group under its care.

An informally organized worship group which has not affiliated with a yearly meeting or analogous Quaker organization should avoid representing itself as an official body of the Religious Society of Friends. Any worship group which anticipates long term existence is encouraged to seek affiliation.

To affiliate with Illinois Yearly Meeting, a worship group normally makes a request to a monthly meeting which already forms part of the yearly meeting. The monthly meeting appoints a clearness committee to visit the worship group and explore with it the practical and spiritual issues involved in affiliation under the monthly meeting's care. Appropriate topics for discussion include the nature and basis of meeting for worship in the manner of Friends, the familiarity and consonance of the worship group with Friends testimonies and practices, expectations regarding the relation between the worship group and the monthly meeting after affiliation, and any other pertinent matters. The following sample queries may be used in exploring these areas:

- What experience do you have with the Religious Society of Friends?
- How do you understand worship in the manner of Friends? Do you approach worship as communal seeking? Do you experience it as uniting?
- How do you understand Friends' testimonies and their role in your daily lives?
- Describe the expected relationship between the worship group and the monthly meeting after affiliation.
- What are you doing as a group to know each other better? What is the quality of your potlucks or other community events?
- Are you aware and respectful of the individual differences within your worship group?
- Are you prepared to support each other spiritually and in times of need?
- If there are families with children, have you considered how to provide for their religious education?
- How will you participate in the yearly and quarterly (if any) meeting?

The clearness committee reports back to the monthly meeting, which records in its minutes a decision whether to take the worship group under its care. A decision to take the worship group under the monthly meeting's care establishes the worship group as a part of the monthly meeting, the quarterly meeting (if any) to which the monthly meeting belongs, and Illinois Yearly Meeting. The monthly meeting should report such decisions to the quarterly and yearly meetings. A worship group held under the minuted care of another meeting may also be known as a *recognized meeting* (or, in older terminology, an *allowed* or *indulged* meeting).

Affiliating a worship group with a monthly meeting does not confer membership on the worship group's participants. Participants in a worship group may become members of a monthly meeting in the usual ways, before or after affiliation; see *Membership*, pp. xx–xx.

In exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate for a worship group to affiliate under the direct care of a quarterly meeting or Illinois Yearly Meeting, rather than a monthly meeting. A quarterly meeting may take worship groups under its care using the same procedure as a monthly meeting. Requests for affiliation under the direct care of Illinois Yearly Meeting should be addressed to the yearly meeting's Continuing Committee, which may appoint a clearness committee directly, or ask the Ministry and Advancement Committee to do so. The clearness committee reports to the body that appointed it, which in turn makes a recommendation to the yearly meeting. Affiliation is established by minute of the yearly meeting in its annual business sessions.

As the name implies, worship groups are primarily for worship, with minimal business. Historically, all business pertaining to a worship group held under the care of a monthly meeting was handled by the monthly meeting; and such an arrangement may occasionally still be appropriate, particularly if the worship group is located close enough for its participants regularly to attend the monthly meeting for business. But in many circumstances, it is appropriate for a worship group to hold its own decision-making sessions, to decide such practical matters as the time and location of meetings. Such decisions should be promptly reported to the monthly meeting. If the worship group finds that it has sufficient business to hold such sessions on a regular basis, it should consider whether the time has come to request the establishment of a preparative or monthly meeting.

If a worship group under the care of another meeting has become unable to sustain itself, with no expectation of revival, it should be “laid down,” or formally discontinued. The decision to lay down a worship group is normally made by the worship group itself in consultation with the monthly meeting under whose care it is held, and minuted by the monthly meeting in its business sessions. In special circumstances — for example, if a worship group has become completely inactive and its participants scattered — the monthly meeting may also lay down the worship group without such consultation; but monthly meetings are strongly advised to consult with the participants of the worship group if this is realistically possible. When a worship group under the care of a monthly meeting is laid down, the monthly meeting should report it to the quarterly (if any) and yearly meeting.

Preparative meetings

A preparative meeting is the business meeting of a single local meeting, forming part of a larger monthly meeting. By extension, the body of Friends whose business is conducted in such a meeting is also known as a preparative meeting.

Preparative meetings were originally so called because they prepared business for presentation at the monthly meeting, much as a committee might do. Decisions were finalized in the monthly meeting, not in the preparative meeting itself. In Illinois Yearly Meeting today, there is no official expectation that a preparative meeting will send business (other than matters pertaining to membership or marriage) to its monthly meeting for final decision.

In some yearly meetings a local meeting seeking establishment as a monthly meeting is often expected to pass some time first as a preparative meeting, so the name has sometimes been understood as implying preparation to become a monthly meeting. In Illinois Yearly Meeting

there is no such expectation, nor any expectation that every preparative meeting will eventually seek establishment as a separate monthly meeting. A preparative meeting which does wish to become a monthly meeting is advised to refer to the section on monthly meetings, pp. xx–xx.

A preparative meeting appoints a clerk. If it maintains a treasury, it should appoint a different person as treasurer. The meeting may also appoint a recording clerk, religious education committee, or such other positions and committees as seem useful. However, a preparative meeting which finds that a large number of positions and committees are called for would do well to consider whether the time has come to request the establishment of a monthly meeting. Likewise, a preparative meeting may own a building or other property; but a meeting which is in a position to function as a property-owning institution will also often find that it is prepared to function as a monthly meeting.

A preparative meeting should keep minutes of its business proceedings, and make sure that these and any other records are properly archived. (See “Archivist,” p. xx.)

To set up a preparative meeting, a group (typically an existing worship group) makes a request to the monthly meeting under whose care the preparative meeting is to be held. The monthly meeting appoints a clearness committee to visit the group and explore with it its readiness for this step. If the group has not previously had formal affiliation with a yearly meeting or analogous Friends organization, this exploration may include a consideration of many of the same topics as in the case of a worship group seeking affiliation; see the queries on p. xx. Whether the group has had previous affiliation or not, the discussion should include a consideration of the nature and basis of Friends business practices, the group’s reasons for seeking the establishment of a business meeting, and the practical details of the preparative meeting’s relation with the monthly meeting. The following sample queries may be useful in this process:

- Do you understand Friends’ business practice as a communal seeking of divine guidance?
- What is your experience of Friends’ business practice?
- Have you read the section of this Faith and Practice on ‘Friends Manner of Decision Making’ (pp. xx–xx)?
- Do you have enough business to require a regular business meeting?
- Are you prepared to keep records of your business meetings? Where will the records be kept?
- Are you familiar with Illinois Yearly Meeting’s Faith and Practice?
- What other Quaker sources do you consult?
- Do you anticipate having a treasury? How will it be administered?
- Do you have individuals willing and able to serve as clerk and treasurer?

The clearness committee reports back to the monthly meeting, which records in its minutes a recommendation whether to establish the preparative meeting. If the recommendation is positive and the monthly meeting is part of a quarterly meeting, this recommendation is forwarded to the quarterly meeting. The preparative meeting is established when the quarterly meeting approves a minute concurring with the recommendation. The quarterly meeting should report the decision to the yearly meeting. If the monthly meeting is not part of a quarterly meeting, a positive recommendation is forwarded directly to the yearly meeting, and the preparative meeting is established when the yearly meeting approves a minute concurring with the recommendation. After the establishment of the preparative meeting has been approved, the

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monthly meeting appoints a committee of welcome to visit it and provide advice or assistance as needed at its opening business session.

“Laying down” a preparative meeting means officially discontinuing its business meeting. Typically, this might happen because the meeting has become too weak in numbers or has too little business to sustain a regular business meeting. When a preparative meeting is laid down, its meeting for worship may be laid down at the same time; or it may continue as a worship group.

Normally, a preparative meeting is laid down by minute of the quarterly meeting or yearly meeting on recommendation of the monthly meeting of which the preparative meeting is a part. A preparative meeting may also lay itself down. In any case, the monthly meeting, the quarterly meeting (if any), and the yearly meeting should be promptly informed. When the meeting is laid down, care should be taken to see that its records are properly archived, and appropriate arrangements made for its treasury and other property. Please see ‘Laying down a monthly meeting’, pp. xx–xx, for considerations regarding these issues.