

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/friends-beliefs-and-practices/decision-making/>

Decision-Making

The presuppositions of the corporate meeting for worship have, from the very beginning, profoundly affected the method of decision-making in the meeting for business. In both, there is faith in the Guide. There is faith in a continuous revelation that is always open to produce fresh disclosures. And there is respect and affection for each other that cuts through all diversity and that helps to kindle a faith that, with patience and openness, the group can expect to come to clearness and to resolve the problems that come before it.

– Source unknown

From Faith Into Business

Friends’ decision-making is rooted in the spiritual oneness of a religious community. We reject majority rule for the higher goal of reaching decisions in unity, through distinctive attitudes developed by Friends over the centuries. Our process is democratic in the sense that everyone is encouraged to participate. However, it also goes beyond democracy in that it does not rely solely on human will or ability. Participants are expected to put aside personal desires and allow themselves to be led by a Guide beyond the self.

When this decision-making process is used carelessly, its lack of formal rules of order can lead to abuse by neglect or by design. When used with care, it is deeply satisfying and produces practical decisions that are in harmony with the Spirit.

The act of choosing is inescapably religious, in that it reveals our fundamental values and deepest loyalties. Friends must therefore be rigorous in discerning the ultimate source of their leadings, always looking beyond the self, and never letting their own wills become a substitute for God.

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Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

The Religious Basis of Our Decision-Making

Despite the difference in format, meetings for business are meetings for worship in which our business is held and are conducted in the same openness to the leading of the Spirit. For our religious community to thrive, it is essential that we nurture our love for one another, maintain our spiritual unity, and live in harmony with the Spirit. These beliefs underlie every attitude and practice in our meetings for business.

As we wrestle with outward issues, the Inward Light gives us new perspectives and creative responses. On all matters, even the mundane, its presence promises a fresh revelation of truth and a clearer understanding of God’s will.

It is also our experience that new openings to truth may come at any time and from any source. Each Friend should therefore listen to all efforts to express that truth, testing them against accumulated experience, the life and teachings of Jesus, and moral and spiritual guides in Scripture and elsewhere. Yet we are careful to rely not on the letter of the text, but to read as George Fox enjoined us to read the Scriptures: “in the Spirit in which they were given forth.”

The Goal of Friends’ Decision-making

The goal of Friends’ decision-making is a Spirit-led sense of the meeting—a crystallization of the search for clarity on the topic under consideration. Even in the face of strong difference of opinion, that goal is achievable when there is spiritual unity.

Our search is for unity, not unanimity. We consider ourselves to be in unity when our search for Truth is shared; when our listening for God is faithful; when our wills are caught up in the presence of Christ; and when our love for one another is constant. A united meeting is not necessarily all of one mind, but it is all of one heart.

We believe that this unity, transcending apparent differences, springs from God’s empowering love, and that a Meeting, trusting in the leadership of that love and gathered in its spirit, will enjoy unity in its search for truth.

A Meeting is a living spiritual entity which may encompass strong differences of opinion. It is like an individual who may have many conflicting inclinations but who still has a final sense of how to act. The sense of the meeting is not designed and fitted together, but is conceived, born, and nurtured; the Meeting’s care for the quality of

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

its decision-making process is essential to the rightness of its decisions in the same way that an expectant mother’s care for her own health is essential to the strength of her child.

Sense of the meeting is not synonymous with consensus. Consensus is a widely used and valuable secular process characterized by a search for general agreement largely through rational discussion and compromise. Sense of the meeting is a religious process characterized by listening for and trusting in God. Both result in a course of action agreed to by all of the participants, but the sense of the meeting relies consciously on the Spirit. Although reasoned argument and lively debate may often play a role in Friends’ decision-making, they are useful only to the extent that they are the expressions of spiritual leadings.

When the sense of the meeting has been rightly discerned, those present will know that they have faithfully followed their Guide, and will feel a continued affection for each other.

Expectations of Participants

Among Friends, the decisions made by a group are enriched when all members commit themselves to regular attendance at meetings for worship as well as at decision-making sessions.

By maintaining a spirit of worship throughout the meeting, participants nurture their openness to the leadings of the Spirit and its gifts of trust, humility, compassion, and courage.

Although an individual Friend has the designated role of clerk, all share the responsibility for the maintenance of a Spirit-led gathering, for the wise use of time, and for a steadfast search for truth. All are expected to be attentive and to offer concisely such insight as each may have. None should remain silent in the belief that the conclusion is foregone, or that an insight apparently counter to that of the body of the Meeting will be divisive.

Friends who feel they cannot agree with what they perceive to be the weight of the Meeting must not yield to the temptation to absent themselves from the meeting for business in order to spare both themselves and the Meeting. Such an absence implies a lack of faith in the Meeting’s access to divine guidance and its ability to find unity.

Both speaking and listening should be marked by respect for others, with speakers saying only what they know to be worth others’ hearing, and with listeners seeking the Light as it is revealed

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

through others. An openness of spirit is crucial, especially when differing views are being expressed.

Friends have learned the value of contributions from serious and consistent attenders who are not members. Many Meetings welcome all who care to attend at decision-making sessions. Non-members should show sensitive restraint when addressing Meeting affairs. Each Meeting is at liberty to limit the participation of attenders; such limits should be clearly defined and communicated in advance to avoid embarrassment and hurt feelings. Prior definition is particularly important with respect to any sessions which involve confidential information or evaluations of individuals.

No one should take action on the Meeting’s behalf in anticipation of a minute’s approval, but should wait for actual approval.

The Role of the Clerk

Ideally, the clerk is both servant and leader who thoughtfully prepares for the meeting; maintains a worshipful spirit in the meeting; sets a helpful pace; discerns the sense of the meeting when it is present; and expresses it clearly or identifies those who can do so. Such a clerk sensitively searches for the right course of action and helps maintain the meeting’s spiritual unity. All these tasks are accomplished in an active, informed, helping spirit, facilitating but never dominating, carefully free from partisanship.

When nominated and appointed by members of the Meeting, the clerk accepts the obligation to focus time, energies, and gifts in the fulfillment of that trust.

The clerk helps the Meeting move through the agenda with efficient but unhurried dispatch, keeping the members’ attention on the matters to be considered. The clerk listens, learns, and sifts, searching for the sense of the meeting, possibly suggesting tentative minutes or periods of silent worship to help clarify or focus Friends’ leadings. The clerk encourages those who are reluctant to speak, and in like manner restrains those who tend to speak at undue length or to speak too often.

When the sense of the meeting seems to be clear, the clerk lays it before the Meeting. If there are objections or reservations, the clerk opens the way for further seeking and refinement. When there are no further objections or refinements, the clerk directs that the sense of the meeting be so recorded.

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

It is especially important that the clerk make clear what previous decisions or customs have been established on a given issue since lack of unity on a proposed change normally means that the status quo will be preserved.

When the sense of the meeting seems elusive, the clerk should be sensitive to the potential benefit of deferring the matter to a later time, to a different body, or to a different forum.

The clerk should be careful to refrain from opinionated participation in the discussion. Further, the clerk should be alert to those occasions when his or her ability to read the sense of the meeting may be blurred by deep personal convictions. In that event, the clerk stands aside and asks the Meeting to recognize someone else as clerk for the moment.

After the meeting is concluded it is the clerk’s duty to ensure that those charged by the Meeting with new tasks or specific actions are informed of their responsibilities. The clerk also takes care that matters held over appear in later agenda. Finally, letters or documents whose drafting has been entrusted to the clerk are promptly dispatched.

The Role of the Recording Clerk

The proceedings of a meeting should be carefully and appropriately minuted by someone designated to serve as recording clerk.

Since meetings are held for different purposes, the recording clerk’s minutes reflect the essential purpose of each meeting, be it for decision, for discussion, or for inspiration. The recording clerk should state precisely the nature, extent, and timing of actions directed to be taken and the persons responsible. Ambiguity and inaccuracy must be avoided.

Minutes should be written in the knowledge that at a later date the Meeting may well need a full and circumstantial account of its decision and how it was reached.

In the writing of minutes, the recording clerk is more effective when there has been detailed prior consultation with the presiding clerk so that names, dates, and proposals are already familiar. It is then also possible for the recording clerk to prepare tentative introductory sentences for each item of business, especially those that are routine.

A recording clerk does not hesitate to ask for help in

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

formulating minutes. Where the action to be taken is clear but the wording of the proposed minute is not, it is sometimes useful to ask a few Friends to withdraw to prepare a final draft for the Meeting’s later consideration. In some cases, the presiding clerk rather than the recording clerk will be in a better position to write the minute.

The recording clerk may at times be asked to prepare a minute on a matter of substance while the Meeting waits. All others present should settle into silent and supportive prayer until this task is complete.

In some instances a meeting may approve a minute in principle, being satisfied that its later refinement need not come before the Meeting again.

Once adopted, minutes retain their authority until amended by a subsequent minute.

To prevent confusion and misunderstanding, some Meetings find it useful for the recording clerk to read the minutes and have them approved from time to time during the course of the meeting or at the end; others read only those minutes referring to weighty and difficult matters and approve the complete minutes at the following session. Meetings follow a variety of practices in this regard, each of which has merit. If minutes are considered at a later session, those not present when business was discussed and actions taken should refrain from sharing in the approval of the minutes.

Recording clerks and clerks are granted the freedom to make only editorial changes or correct inaccuracies in the minutes, taking care that their meaning is in no way changed thereby. If other correction is needed, it should be brought before the Meeting at a later session.

All minutes are preserved in ways that will ensure their availability and permanence.

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/friends-beliefs-and-practices/the-good-order-used-among-us/>

The Good Order Used Among Us

Thoughtful preparation frees the Meeting to follow the leadings of the Spirit, preventing frustration arising from poor arrangements, incomplete information, or unclear procedure.

The clerks or other designated persons prepare the agenda and, if appropriate, distribute the agenda and other essential information

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

in advance. They may need to remind persons who are to bring matters before the meeting to come prepared. They must be careful to call members’ attention to issues of special moment.

Arrangements are made for the time and place of gathering, child care, meals, hospitality, and other organizational matters as needed, to permit as many as possible to attend and to provide ample opportunity for the unhurried disposition of business.

Members who are prompt in arrival and disciplined in settling into worship contribute much to the depth and power of the meeting. It is also important that this time of settling and focusing not become a brief formality.

Where a presiding or recording clerk has not already been appointed or is unable to serve, the Meeting may ask any member to serve until a regular appointment is made.

Decision-making by sense of the meeting applies to easy issues as well as to difficult ones. Matters felt to be routine but necessary are dealt with quickly in a spirit of trust. The Meeting may accept without extended discussion a suggestion volunteered by the clerk or other member, or may empower an individual or a committee to act on the matter.

Matters of importance are best presented by someone who is familiar with the issues. However, the Meeting must also be open to hear the concerns of others who may not be as widely experienced or well informed, but who nevertheless feel strongly led.

The promptings of the Inward Teacher may come with power to any present, without respect to age or experience. Friends know that sensitive and powerful insights come to newer and younger members. They also know the importance of those whose experience and advice in similar matters have been helpful in the past.

The Meeting in Conflict

Friends often find themselves most challenged when matters before them call forth strongly held but incompatible responses. A Meeting which goes forward for whatever reason without real unity in the Spirit does so at its peril. When any member present feels so strongly led as to wish to prevent the Meeting from acting, it is important that the Meeting take the time to test this leading in a loving spirit, and examine responsibly the consequences if the action is not taken.

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

The search for the course of action that will keep the meeting in unity—or the resolution of the problems caused by disunity itself—rests as much with the individual or group in opposition as it does with the other members.

Questions for a Meeting in Conflict

When disagreement on an issue threatens to divide a Meeting, it may be helpful for the Meeting and each Friend to consider the following questions:

- Have all Friends taken care to fully examine, in a loving and prayerful spirit, the perspective of those with whom they disagree?
- Have all Friends truly tried to leave behind their personal desires, the better to be led by the Spirit?
- Do all Friends seek to discern God’s will in all viewpoints?
- Have Friends considered whether God’s will for them as individuals may differ from God’s will for the Meeting?
- Do those in conflict regularly reaffirm, in voice and attitude, the love they feel for one another?

Moving Forward in Unity

In situations of conflicting insights, Friends have found helpful several ways of moving forward in unity:

- The Meeting may move to a deeper spiritual searching and sharing, often entering periods of silent worship. Every conviction is examined in the Light as Friends wait together to discern whether their convictions stem from a genuine motion of the Spirit. Friends may thus be empowered to lay aside those convictions which are not so based. While seeking new light, Friends should also remain faithful to the leadings they sense as authentic, even when these seem contrary to the weight of the Meeting.
- The Meeting may wait or proceed with other business while a small representative ad hoc committee withdraws, in the hope that they can bring forward a minute or course of action that will lead to unity.
- The Meeting may reschedule the matter for another time, encouraging members in the interim to continue their search for the right action, whether in solitary prayer and meditation, or in small informal groups.

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

- After patient searching over a considerable period, the Meeting may conclude that the sense of the meeting is clear and unity in the Spirit can be maintained if that sense is translated into action, but acknowledge that a few Friends continue to have reservations about the substance of the proposed action. In that event, those Friends may feel led to withdraw their objections, being unwilling to stand in the way of the Meeting. Or those Friends may say that they feel released from the burden of their concern, having laid it on the conscience of the Meeting. Or they may stand aside while maintaining their objections, asking that their names and the grounds of their objections be minuted.

Friends who stand aside are affirming their continuing spiritual unity with the Meeting. That unity will require of those Friends acceptance with good grace of the decision’s consequences for the Meeting and for themselves. It will require the rest of the Meeting to keep the objections firmly in mind as they proceed.

Each of these avenues expresses trust in divine guidance and a commitment to remaining in unity in the Spirit.

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/extracts-from-the-writings-of-friends/belief/>

Belief

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1).

Introduction

Quakers have traditionally been wary of creedal statements as limiting our understanding of God. Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting have further avoided prescribed declarations of faith and statements of essential truths as hindrances to communication with the Divine.

The rejection of creeds does not imply the absence of doctrine or statements of belief. From the earliest times of our society, individual Friends, as well as small groups of Friends and Friends’ Meetings, have issued written statements of their beliefs to the world. Among the doctrines finding wide acceptance by Friends are a universal saving light and continuing revelation. The selections that follow explore these and other beliefs widely shared among

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

Friends.

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1

Friends find their essential unity in their profound and exhilarating belief in the pervasive presence of God and in the continuing responsibility of each person and worshiping group to seek the leading of the Spirit in all things. Obedience to the leading of that Spirit rather than to any written statement of belief or conduct is the obligation of their faith.

—New England Yearly Meeting, 1985

5

As Friends we believe that love is the unifying force in human relations. Let us understand what brotherly love is and what it is not. Love is not self-seeking; it is self-giving. Love does not try to make up a deficiency in that of God in another from an overabundance of divinity in ourselves; it opens us to the divine Light in him and rejoices in it. Love does not mean agreeing on all questions of belief, values, or rules of conduct; it means accepting with humility and forbearance such differences as cannot be resolved by open and patient give-and-take. Love does not recreate our brother in our image; it recreates us both in relation to each other, united like limbs of one body yet each distinctly himself.

—Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1969

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/extracts-from-the-writings-of-friends/worship/>

Discernment and Guidance

126

[You are] not to spend time with needless, unnecessary, and fruitless discourses, but to proceed in the wisdom of God: not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion... not deciding affairs by the greater vote... but in the wisdom, love, and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of truth and righteousness, all things [are] to be carried on by hearing and

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness, and dear unity—I say, as one only party, all for the Truth of Christ and for the carrying on the work of the Lord, and assisting one another in whatsoever ability God hath given; and to determine of things by a general mutual concord, in assenting together as one man in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof.
—Edward Burrough, 1662

127

The Quaker way of trying to invite and be open to divine guidance is to begin with a time of silence. This is not the “moment of silence” which is a mere nod in passing to the Divine. Nor is it a time for organizing one’s thoughts. This is a time for what has been called recollection: for an intentional return to the Center to give over one’s own firm views, to place the outcome in the hands of God, to ask for a mind and heart as truly sensitive to and accepting of nuanced intimations of God’s will as of overwhelming evidences of it. It is possible that someone designated or undesignated may offer vocal prayer for the joint undertaking. Spoken or not, it is understood that each person present will be holding the undertaking in the Light in his own way.
—Patricia Loring, 1992

128

Even if Friends are careful to attend Meetings for Business and to assemble promptly, they may nevertheless fritter away God’s opportunity, perhaps because the business has been poorly prepared and presented, or because Friends do not apply themselves promptly and earnestly, or because Friends are self-indulgent, or simply because Friends do not wait upon the Lord.

The Query whether Friends are careful to come to Meetings for Worship “with hearts and minds prepared” should be extended to include our Meetings for Business as well. It is essential that the period of worship prior to the undertaking of business be long enough to permit Friends to put aside the heat and tumult of the day’s anxieties and to enter into the quietness that comes from trust in God and in God’s concern for the affairs of men and women.
—Thomas Shipley Brown, 1963

129

Each of these Quarterly Meetings were large and sat near eight

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

hours. Here I had occasion to consider that it is a weighty thing to speak much in large meetings for business. First, except our minds are rightly prepared and we clearly understand the case we speak to, instead of forwarding, we hinder business and make more labour for those on whom the burden of the work is laid.

If selfish views or a partial spirit have any room in our minds, we are unfit for the Lord’s work. If we have a clear prospect of the business and proper weight on our minds to speak, it behooves us to avoid useless apologies and repetitions. Where people are gathered from far, and adjourning a meeting of business is attended with great difficulty, it behooves all to be cautious how they detain a meeting, especially when they have sat six or seven hours and [have] a great distance to ride home.

In three hundred minutes are five hours, and he that improperly detains three hundred people one minute, besides other evils that attend it, does an injury like that of imprisoning one man five hours without cause.

—John Woolman, 1758

130

In meeting for business, Friends are seeking to discover and to implement the will of God. Aware that they meet in the presence of God, Friends try to conduct their business reverently, in the wisdom and peaceable spirit of Jesus. Insofar as a divine-human meeting takes place, there is order, unity, and power. The Quaker way of conducting business is of central importance. It is the way Friends have found of living and working together. It can create and preserve the sense of fellowship in the meeting, and from there it can spread to other groups and decisions in which individual Friends or meetings have a part. Thus it contributes to the way of peace in the world.

—*Faith and Practice*, New England Yearly Meeting, 1985

131

We recognize a variety of ministries. In our worship these include those who speak under the guidance of the Spirit and those who receive and uphold the work of the Spirit in silence and prayer. We also recognise as ministry service on our many committees, hospitality and childcare, the care of finance and premises, and many other tasks. We value those whose ministry is not in an appointed task but is in teaching, counselling, listening, prayer, enabling the

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

service of others, or other service in the meeting or the world. The purpose of all our ministry is to lead us and other people into closer communion with God and to enable us to carry out those tasks which the Spirit lays upon us.

—London Yearly Meeting, 1986

132

Few of us, by our efforts alone, can activate our spiritual natures in a vital and creative way. We need God’s help. We need the help of one another. But God’s help may not come at once. Our help to each other, even though we are gathered in a meeting for worship or actively serving our fellow men outside the meeting, may be and often is delayed as regards our kindling one another spiritually. What are we to do in this case? There is only one thing we can do—wait. Having done our part to overcome the separated self, we can but wait for the spiritual self to arise and take command of our lives. Having brought ourselves as close as we can to God, we can but hold ourselves in an attitude of waiting for Him to work His will in us, to draw us fully into His presence.

—N. Jean Toomer, 1947

133

A common misconception about Quaker business process is that a decision can never go forward if one person decides to “stand in the way.” Inactive members, new attenders and non-Friends trying to imitate Quaker process often interpret our principle of unity to mean that each individual has veto power over any decision of the community. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“Standing in the way” is not a right which inheres in paper membership or attendance at meeting for business. It is rather a privilege granted by the community because it believes that the dissent is grounded in spiritual integrity and not in ego or a power trip. We acknowledge that the Friend may have light which the rest of us don’t yet see; we wait in love for the Friend to see our light. We are willing to remain teachable in the trust that the dissenting Friend is also teachable....

Difficulty arises when some show themselves not to be teachable, as for instance when they attach themselves to an external “party line” which precludes submission to the Spirit. The Meeting may rightly decline to trust such persons. Trust is something which must be earned. Perhaps that is a central meaning of the term

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

“weighty Friend”: one whom the community trusts to “attend to pure wisdom and be teachable.”

—Esther Murer, 1989

134

In our meetings for church affairs an effective continuing life can be secured only if there is at least a strong nucleus of Friends attending with regularity, willing to accept responsibility and to give judgments based on informed minds as well as spiritual wisdom. There are few things which tend to destroy interest and loyalty in any business so easily as prolonged and unnecessary discussions on trivia: such discussions are very often provoked and kept up by those who do not trouble to inform themselves adequately of the facts, or who use their occasional attendance to re-open matters already decided. The meeting should expect and encourage its clerk to take firm action in such circumstances.

—*Quaker Faith and Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995

135

At monthly meeting there was a strong sense of unity on the matter—except for one person. (How easy to have ignored this one dissenting voice.) But in view of it, it was agreed to hold a second monthly meeting to reconsider the matter. Because the venue was different (our meetings are not normally “monthly”) a different group of Friends was present, although three of the first meeting were there. The sense of unity was equally strong in the other direction—except for two Friends. It was therefore decided to hold a third “monthly” meeting. By this time feelings were running high and we were each convinced of the rightness of our own viewpoints. Then suddenly Christ’s presence moved in, and in my own case I remembered his words to his disciples, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, that ye have love one for another.” And quite suddenly it seemed more important to love than to be right.

—Rosemary M. Elliott, 1967

136

Many Friends of all ages need the training provided by a good meeting for business: one that starts with real worship, that respects the insights of all its members; one that remembers it does God’s work, that God is in no hurry, and that, in the vast pattern of God’s universe, even man may not be very important—no matter how

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

wonderful a creation he is.

—Martin Cobin, 1964

137

As a structure to facilitate discernment of the will of God, the clearness committee partakes of many of the features of a meeting for worship for the conduct of business. Where meetings for business have been assimilated to more secular models, with emphasis on getting through agendas within time constraints, on decision-making rather than discernment, consensus rather than unity, it is helpful to incorporate in the model some aspects of worship sharing.

The crucial element is the establishment of a context of prayerful attentiveness, not just for the beginning and end of the time together but for the entire meeting. Liberal amounts of silence between utterances permits them to be heard with all their resonances and taken below the surface mind. The space between can remove the temptation to revert to discussion or conversation. It can help reinforce disciplined speaking and listening. It can allow what does come forth to arise spontaneously from the Center.

—Patricia Loring, 1992

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/queries/2-meeting-for-business/>

2. Meeting for Business

- Is our meeting for business held in the spirit of a meeting for worship in which we seek divine guidance?
- Are we careful to keep in the spirit of worship each of the concerns that emerge, whether of nurture, of Spirit, of social concerns, of property, or of finance?
- Are Meeting decisions directed by prayerful consideration of all aspects of an issue and are difficult problems considered carefully with patient search for truth, unhurried by the pressures of time?
- How do we respond if we notice the meeting has lost an understanding of the presence of God?
- Do we recognize that we speak through our inaction as well as our action?
- *Do I regularly attend meeting for business and in a spirit of*

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

love and unity? If unable to attend, how do I attend to my responsibility?

- *Do I consider prayerfully the many concerns that are lifted up on any issue, acknowledging that the search for truth in unity involves what God requires, being open to personal transformation as the community arrives at the sense of the meeting?*

<http://neym.org/faith-practice/part-2/chapter-2/meeting-business>

The Meeting for Business

In meeting for business, Friends are seeking to discover and to implement the will of God. Aware that they meet in the presence of God, Friends try to conduct their business reverently, in the wisdom and peaceable spirit of Jesus. Insofar as a divine-human meeting takes place, there is order, unity, and power.

The Quaker way of conducting business is of central importance. It is the way Friends have found of living and working together. It can create and preserve the sense of fellowship in the meeting, and from there it can spread to other groups and decisions in which individual Friends or meetings have a part. Thus it contributes to the way of peace in the world.

Proceed in the Wisdom of God

Being orderly come together [you are] not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses, but to proceed in the wisdom of God not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to out speak and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion not deciding affairs by the greater vote but in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of Truth and righteousness, all things [are] to be carried on; by hearing, and determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity.

—Edward Burrough: *Testimony*, 1662, in *Letters of early Friends*, 1841, p. 305.

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

Sense of Community

Friends found that even the proper functioning of the Quaker business meeting depended upon a strong sense of community, or caring in the group. Decisions were reached without a vote, by “gathering the sense of the meeting.” But this would happen only when those taking part respected and cared for one another. It was one of the happier discoveries of the early Friends not only that individuals endeavoring to follow the Light of Christ Within would be led to a unity, but that the caring group could be led as well, and might even be given a higher insight than any individual.

—George Selleck: *Quakers in Boston 1656–1964*, 1976, p. 270.

The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions

According to the Quaker method, decisions are reached not by voting nor gathering the majority opinion, but by gathering the “sense of the meeting.” It was the experience of the early Friends that faithful following of the Light of Christ Within led them into unity with one another, and their experience has been repeated generation after generation to the present time. Their great affirmation that the Light is given in some measure to every one implied that each may also be led, if not in the same path, at least in the same direction. Thus the nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another.

The possibility and likelihood of such unity in a Friends meeting for business is the basis of the Quaker attempt to gather the sense of the meeting. Friends have faith that there is a unity there to be gathered the Divine will in this instance, as grasped by those present in this group. Not only do Friends feel that by pooling their individual insights they may come close to finding the Divine will, but Friends are also convinced that there is such a thing as corporate guidance, where a group, meeting in the right spirit, may be given a greater insight than any single person. It is this unity of insight that Friends seek and that the clerk hopes to capture in his or her minute. If an individual differs from what appears to be the general sense of the meeting, it may be taken as a sign that the Divine will has not quite been grasped and that the inclusion of the new insight may give a more accurate determination of the Divine will.

After due consideration has been given to all points of view expressed in the meeting, it is the duty of the clerk to weigh carefully the various expressions and to state what he or she believes to be

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

the sense of the meeting, not alone according to numbers but also according to the recognized experience and spiritual insight of the members.

This matter of weighing the individual utterances in arriving at the sense of the meeting is quite fundamental to the Quaker method. Several Friends may quite sincerely speak in one direction, and then one Friend may express an insight which carries weight and conviction in the meeting in a different sense. This one acceptable communication may outweigh in significance several more superficial ones.

—George A. Selleck: “Principles of the Quaker business meeting,” pp. 7-9.

The Mind of the Meeting

It would be too high a claim to make to say that Friends have perfected the method here indicated, but it may rightly be said that they have put it into practice as few others have done and have found it the most satisfying and creative way of approximating to what is for us the will of God in a given situation: the will of God, that is, in so far as we are then able to apprehend it. The “mind of the meeting” may not always reach that clarity which we could have wished, yet we may be satisfied that, having regard to the frailties of human nature, our partial apprehensions of truth, the varying gifts with which we have been endowed, the fallibilities of our judgement, the decision we have reached is for us, in this situation, right and proper, and should do no final violence to the judgement of any member.

—Edgar G. Dunstan: *Quakers and the religious quest* (Swarthmore lecture), 1956, pp. 58-9.

The Search for Unity

The continuing search for unity is what makes the conduct of Friends business so uniquely coherent and effective. Friends are not trying in the business meetings to find the broadest area of common acceptance in order to form a consensus, but are searching for the Truth and for an understanding of our own relationships to it. That understanding may include quite a range of views, each of which must be valued, if not finally accepted. It is our ability to pass through our particular views to the common center of our Spiritual lives that makes the Friends business method both difficult and

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

rewarding, and ultimately sustaining.

—William B. Watson, “Before business begins,” 1976, p. 18.

Work in a Humble and Loving Spirit

Friends should endeavor to work with one another in a humble and loving spirit, each giving to others credit for purity of motive, notwithstanding differences of opinion. They are cautioned, however, to exercise mutual forbearance and, having expressed their views, to refrain from pressing them unduly when the judgment of the meeting obviously inclines to some other view.

—George A. Selleck, “Principles of the Quaker business method,” p. 10.

Speaking to Business

Since our method of transacting business presumes that in a given matter there is a way that is in harmony with God's plan, our search is for that right way, and not simply for a way which is either victory for some faction, or an expedient compromise. In a Meeting that is rightly ordered no one wins or loses, but Truth prevails.

Everyone has the privilege and the duty to lay before the Meeting whatever relevant insight one may possess. Out of this sharing of light may come a greater light which would not have been possible had some refrained from speaking.

Our conviction of God's care for this world and our respect for the dignity of man must carry over into the conduct of our Meetings for Business. We are called to love those present enough to listen to what they have to say and to speak what is worth their hearing.

—Thomas S. Brown, “When Friends attend to business.”

Quaker Unity

The crucial difference between the secular methods of human consensus or unanimous consent and the Quaker business method is that, while the former seeks to find a unity according to human wisdom, the latter endeavors to do so according to the leadings of the Spirit of God. In the religious context of worship in a Friends meeting for business, Friends have learned to tell the difference. A strong feeling on the part of even one Friend that the meeting is moving in opposition to the Truth, to the guidance of the Spirit, may properly be sufficient to block action of a meeting, whereas the

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

objection of several on the basis of prudence or of human wisdom may not be.

—George A. Selleck, “Principles of the Quaker business meeting,” p. 14.

Sense of the Meeting, Not Consensus

I am convinced that there is a profound difference between consensus and the sense of the meeting, for the latter involves faithfulness to the promptings of the Spirit. Most Friends understand that the sense of the meeting does not necessarily mean 100 percent approval. However, it does mean the Friends are in unity. Unity is a far stronger definition than “general agreement” or “solidarity in sentiment and belief.” The sense of the meeting means that, while some Friends may not be in full agreement regarding a proposed course of action, they are willing for the meeting to move forward.

This concept was seldom more dramatically exemplified than at an early meeting of the American Friends Service Committee. Portions of several days were spent in discussing a proposed new program. Each time the matter was discussed, a Friend spoke against the involvement of the AFSC. Finally, Rufus Jones, who was presiding, said, “Friend, we have listened to your views and feelings about this matter. Yet it is clearly the sense of the meeting that we approve the program. Are you willing to stand aside in view of the desire of the meeting to move forward?” The response was “yes,” and when the meeting concluded, the man came forward and said, “Rufus, it’s going to take money to start this program. Here’s my check.” There was clearly more than ‘general agreement’ at work in this meeting! The profound difference is that unity was sought in a meeting for worship in which business affairs were considered. In the search for unity, the group was sensitive to the leadings of the Spirit as it sought to discern its movement in the life of the gathered meeting.

—Elwood Cronk, “Not consensus,” in *Friends Journal*, April 1, 1982, p. 11.

Truth Which Satisfies Everyone

Quakers have used this method with a large degree of success for three centuries because it has met the religious test, being based on the Light Within producing unity. As the Light is God in His

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

capacity as Creator, Unity in Him creates Unity in the group. When the method has not succeeded, as in the divisions during the nineteenth century, spiritual life was low and Friends too impatient to wait for unity to develop.

At its best, the Quaker method does not result in a compromise. A compromise is not likely to satisfy anyone completely. The objective of the Quaker method is to discover Truth which will satisfy everyone more fully than did any position previously held. Each and all can then say, “That is what I really wanted, but I did not realize it.” To discover what we really want as compared to what at first we think we want, we must go below the surface of self-centered desires to the deeper level where the real Self resides. The deepest Self of all is that Self which we share with all others. This is the one Vine of which we all are branches, the Life of God on which our own individual lives are based. To will what God wills is, therefore, to will what we ourselves really want.

—Howard H. Brinton: *Friends for 300 years*, 1952, p. 109.

<http://neym.org/faith-practice/part-3/advices>

The Advices

The Advices have served Friends for many generations in their search for a life centered in the Spirit. Arising from the experience and aspirations of successive generations of Friends, the Advices are illustrations of how they seek to carry their faith into all aspects of life.

Advices first appeared in the form of epistles sent among Friends to encourage and strengthen each other in their faith. The earliest surviving collection of Advices was issued from Balby in England in 1656. Its concluding statement begins, “Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by.”

Friends find their essential unity in their profound and exhilarating belief in the pervasive presence of God and in the continuing responsibility of each person and worshipping group to seek the leading of the Spirit in all things. Obedience to the leading of that Spirit rather than to any written statement of belief or conduct is the obligation of their faith.

Yet the Advices should have a quickening influence in shaping our daily lives. Their reading is intended to remind us that all

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 4

aspects of our lives are under divine guidance and to heighten our awareness that in all our relationships we act in the sight of God.



Meeting Business

In meetings for business, and in all duties connected with them, seek again the leadings of the Light; let our utterances be brief and without repetition. Let us keep from obstinacy and from harshness of tone or manner and admit the possibility of being in error. In all the affairs of the meeting community, let us proceed in a peaceable spirit, with forbearance and warm affection for each other.

<http://neym.org/faith-practice/part-3/queries>

The Queries

Friends have developed the Queries to assist us to consider prayerfully the true source of spiritual strength and the extent to which the conduct of our lives gives witness to our Christian faith. To these ends, the Queries should be read frequently in private devotions and regularly in monthly and quarterly meetings.

In using these Queries, meetings should be aware that our standards of conduct do not derive from an outward set of rules but rather from the life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, from the examples offered by the spiritual experiences and lives of those who have preceded us, and from our own encounters with that inward revelation through which “the way, the truth, and the life”¹ seek expression today.



Meeting Business

- Are meetings for business held in a spirit of worship and prayerful search for the way of Truth?
- Are all members encouraged to use their talents in the service of the meeting?
- Do you undertake your proper share of the work and financial support of the meeting?

¹ John 14:5-6 (NRSV) Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”