

The Quaker meeting community in decision making, support, organization, and relation to the wider Quaker community (among unprogrammed Friends meetings)

Quaker decision making

The Friends decision making process arises out of our experience and understanding of the Spirit and our relationship to it. It is grounded in worship and our intention to discern together how the Spirit is leading us as a body. Friends gather in the meeting for business and enter into worship, waiting to open into awareness of the stream “where heart and mind and will are united in God and with one another;” it is an intentional attention to the Inward Teacher, the Inward Light. In this spiritual consciousness, we are guided by the Light to discern the way of God in the matter at hand.

The clerk of the meeting prepares an agenda, with input from the meeting committees, and facilitates the business meeting. Friends present will speak to the matter, from a contemplative alertness as led by the Spirit, careful to be brief, peaceable, and non-repetitive. They also listen carefully, patiently, and open to the Spirit’s movement. It is a process of discernment of guidance, rather than a sharing of opinions. We do not vote, but the clerk (and everyone) listens for an emerging spiritual unity on the Spirit’s leading for this group on this issue. The clerk tests for this sense of the meeting, and when the meeting is in unity, a minute is written on the decision, and the meeting moves to the next matter.

If there is not yet unity, the meeting continues to seek the Spirit’s guidance together, perhaps with a time of silence. Unity of the meeting may not mean unanimity; someone may not be in agreement, but may stand aside, recognizing the meeting’s discernment and unwilling to block the decision. If the meeting is not in unity, the decision will be put off, while Friends “season” the matter, seeking deeper guidance and openness to the Spirit.

Essentially the same process is adapted to the sessions of meeting committees.

The Meeting as caring community

The shared experience of the Presence and of unity in the Spirit that comes from worshipping deeply together binds Friends into a caring community. And as we are led to increasingly let the Holy Spirit guide our lives and to live in the awareness of divine love, we need and offer to each other our support. Our caring for each other includes both support for our spiritual growth and faithfulness, and for our practical and emotional needs. Careful and caring listening is fundamental to all support.

The meeting, in order to provide concrete support to its members, establishes various committees. There will be a committee to oversee and care for the spiritual life and learning of the meeting, another for oversight of pastoral care, and other committees for other concerns, depending on the size of the meeting. We recognize however, that all meeting participants are called to use their gifts and take responsibility as they are able, and under the guidance of the Spirit. Middlebury Friends Meeting committees include Worship & Study, Pastoral Care, Outreach & Social Concerns, Fellowship, Finance, and the Climate Change Committee.

The meeting can offer a Friend spiritual support in the form of a Clearness committee, a small group of Friends appointed to listen and support the individual in

discerning divine guidance in their life. Eldering is another Quaker tradition, where an experienced Friend is called to offer loving spiritual support to another Friend; it can be both affirming and challenging.

As Tom Gates says in PHP 371, the Quaker meeting is a place of acceptance and loving welcome, a place of shared values as we live out our testimonies, a place of spiritual growth and transformation offering both challenge and support, and of faithfulness to the leadings of the Spirit. The meeting's challenge is to meet each participant where they are and also lift up to them a vision of where they can go.

The wider Quaker community

Varieties of Quakers

There are two main branches of Quakers in North America, the unprogrammed meetings held on the basis of silence, and Quaker meetings or churches that have pastors and programmed worship services with sermons, spoken prayers, hymns, Scripture readings, and very little silence. These Quaker churches stem from Quaker meetings that were increasingly influenced in the 19th century by Christian evangelism and the American revival movement. Many such meetings became pastoral churches, while others stayed unprogrammed and non-pastoral; they usually split into separate Yearly Meetings. The most evangelical Friends Churches sent missionaries to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, with the result that there are now pastoral programmed Christian Quaker churches in some of these places, as well as in North America.

The Quakers in unprogrammed meetings in America include a variety of Quakers as well. Some meetings are Conservative Quakers, explicitly theologically Christian and also silent in the Quaker tradition. Others are meetings that include Friends of Christian, universalist, and numerous other traditions and approaches (panentheistic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and others); these meetings are sometimes called liberal Quakerism.

Quaker meeting affiliations

Friends meetings are affiliated into regional groups. This organizational system is named after how often each level holds its business meetings. Each individual meeting holds its meeting for worship for business once a month and thus is called a monthly meeting (MM). It belongs to a Quarterly Meeting (QM) composed of a group of monthly meetings, and a group of QMs form a Yearly Meeting (YM). Middlebury Monthly Meeting is a member of Northwest Quarterly Meeting, including meetings from Vermont and western New Hampshire and meeting quarterly; Northwest QM is a member of New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM), which meets annually for several days. NEYM has both unprogrammed and pastoral meeting members, though the majority, and all the meetings in the Northwest Quarter, are unprogrammed.

A MM may have one or more worship groups under its care. These are small groups meeting regularly for worship, in places convenient to those attending; they usually do not hold meetings for business, and report to and are served by the MM.

There are numerous YMs in the U.S., some with exclusively pastoral meetings. There are a few unaffiliated meetings that are not a member of any YM. Friends General Conference (FGC) is an affiliation of North American YMs that are majority unprogrammed YMs, like NEYM. It sponsors an annual summer conference and provides resources to meetings. Friends United Meeting (FUM) is another organization of YMs; it includes many YMs of pastoral programmed meetings or churches, including YMs of programmed meetings in other countries that were founded by missionaries from

North American programmed meetings. FUM also includes some American YMs that are majority unprogrammed meetings. New England YM belongs to both FGC and FUM. The most evangelical and fundamentalist Christian Friends meetings in America belong to their own group of YMs, Evangelical Friends International.

Most YMs, including NEYM, publish a *Faith and Practice*, explaining some Friends' history and the practices of that YM. It will also discuss Friends' spiritual experience and the implications of Quaker faith for living a Quaker life. Advices and Queries are included, to assist and encourage Friends in considering how to carry faith into all aspects of life.

Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) is the world-wide organization of Quaker Yearly Meetings, with meetings of all types included. These include meetings in Europe, Africa, North America, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America. African Friends are the most numerous of any of these regions.

There are many Friends' service organizations in the US and other countries, such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). These will be discussed in another handout on Living a Quaker Life.

Quakers on Meeting for Worship for Business -- Quotes

Faith and Practice, Pacific Yearly Meeting: Friends' unique practice for conducting business... is derived directly from Friends' faith. It is guided by three core beliefs: that there is that of God in everyone, that each can experience that of God within, and that divine guidance will lead to the realization of a single shared truth... Meeting for Business is a meeting for worship in which business is conducted by seeking God's will in the decisions that are to be made.

Anyone can call for silence in the course of a meeting...it is always a call to worship, to focus on the guidance of the Spirit, to listen with a loving and open heart... Friends strive to observe a discipline of plain speaking... Friends should offer their personal perspectives and avoid taking fixed or adversarial positions... A sense of the meeting evolves from the interplay of all contributions... When unity is realized, it produces a sense of the rightness of the decision and a loving connection between members... It is possible for all to unite in a decision, even when some have reservations. A united meeting is not necessarily of one mind but it is all of one heart.

Unity requires active participation... When Friends come to an issue with conflicting views, they are challenged to pool their knowledge and experience, and to experience the joy of discovering a new understanding... This process requires love, courage, trust, and an ability to truly listen and change... Time is also essential for "seasoning" important decisions.

Faith and Practice, New England Yearly Meeting

In meeting for business, Friends are seeking to discover and to implement the will of God... The Quaker way of conducting business... can create and preserve the sense of fellowship in the meeting... It contributes to the way of peace in the world.

From the Advices: 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 proceed in a peaceable spirit, with forbearance and warm affection for each other.

From the Queries: 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? Do you love one another...? Do you share each other's joys and burdens? When conflicts arise, do you seek in mutual forgiveness and tenderness to resolve them speedily?

Bill Taber, *PHP 406, The Mind of Christ: Bill Taber on Meeting for Business*

The business meeting is at least as important as the meeting for worship, for it is the actual demonstration of the New Testament vision of a fellowship guided by, and obeying, the Spirit... the whole fellowship comes face to face with the Spirit's demands for the sacrifice of time, treasure, convenience, and prejudice. When opinions differ widely and the need for spiritual discernment becomes crucial, the best of Quaker business techniques alone will not suffice; then we are driven...to seek that spiritual covering which alone can give the fruits of the Spirit, which can sustain harmony while waiting for the right leading. Thus, God's work among us becomes more real, and faith is both tested and strengthened in the business meeting.

At the heart of any successful business meeting there is a significant core of people whose lives are daily in touch with... the Holy Spirit, the Inward Christ, the Universal Light... perhaps most important is this skill of discipleship through the Holy Spirit... the daily opening, again and again, to communicate with the living center of all life. If we want the fruits of the Spirit to be present in our business meetings, we need to help our members – help each other – to find and experience this Spirit in our daily lives and in small groups.

As we wait in business meeting... we can be nourished by the physical nearness of our community and... feel that God is very real and close... we can sense a living flow which unites us... and in that wonderful flow we are bathed and rested and nourished... It does take time and intention to wait, to move over into that place where heart and mind and will are united in God and with one another... We wait until the secular mists roll away, and we find the world still there, but we see it now as God would have us see it... Our greatest service to the meeting may lie in our going to this inward place quickly and staying there throughout the entire business meeting... On the one hand, we feel an almost bodily sense of our invisible bonding, our underlying spiritual connection with these people through the Spirit of God. And yet on the other hand, our mind competently follows the discussion of an issue, absorbing the words as well as hearing them, while at the same time we surround the speakers and the clerk with a wordless wash of prayer and blessing.

Every time we enter the... business meeting, there is a mounting sense of excitement as we come face to face with the utter unpredictability of God at work thorough our lives. We never know what will happen!.. Yet in that excitement, there is trust, trust.

The meeting for business is one of the most important times for the personal use of prayer – that we may stay in touch with the great and living Stream, no matter how many millions are about to be squandered, and no matter what horrible color is about to be chosen for the meeting room rug!

George Fox

All meet together everywhere, and in your meetings wait upon the Lord. And take heed of forming words, but mind the Power, and know that which is Eternal, which will keep you all in unity, walking in the Spirit, and will let you see the Lord near you and among you. 1653

All Friends everywhere, meet together, and in the measure of God's spirit wait, that with it all your minds may be guided up to God, to receive wisdom from God, that ye may all come to know, how to Walk up to him in his wisdom.

Walk wisely in the wisdom of God and take heed of acting in your own will, contrary to that which is pure of God in you.

Edward Burrough, *Testimony*, 1662

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 determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness, and dear unity.

Maureen Flannery, *PHP* 363

Friends' waiting worship and Quaker ways of doing business depend upon the willingness of Friends to be empathetic and 'tender' with each other... The search for God's way draws them together... Each member... bears some responsibility for attending to the psychological and personal needs of others. The health of the meeting community is determined by the way in which Friends relate to one another.

Vital to Gospel Order for early Friends was the close relationship of trust and caring within a meeting community.

John Lampen, *Wait in the Light: The spirituality of George Fox*

Quaker discipline is that God's will can be found when we lay aside our own. If God's will is clear to only one person in a gathering, the others will recognize it when they listen to him in the spirit, and this will is single in a given situation, not diverse or self-contradictory.

The worshipping group provides the physical expression of two related realities. Firstly, the love among God's people, the community in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus says that by this the world shall know that you are my disciples, that you love one another. This means that neither ritual nor priesthood, nor creed, confirmation, nor membership identifies the Christian, but the quality of his personal relationships. Secondly, the group expresses God's order, God's pattern and command. This is why Fox sees the meeting as the fundamental Quaker witness to the nature and glory of God. "Keep in the gospel which is the Power of God, and in the fellowship of it; in which there is neither sect nor schism, but an everlasting fellowship and an everlasting order."

Fox's structure for the Society of Friends was an attempt not to dim the Light of this spirit,

Chuck Fager, *Without Apology: The heroes, the heritage, and the hope of liberal Quakerism*: The key Quaker disciplines are: silence-based unprogrammed worship and free ministry led by the Spirit; decision making by the worshipful sense of the meeting; church structures kept to a spartan decentralized minimum; cultivation of the inward life of both individual and group; a preference for unfolding experience of faith, or continuing revelation, over creeds and doctrinal systems; devotion to the historic but evolving Quaker testimonies, especially peace, simplicity, and equality.

Quakers on the Meeting community -- Quotes

Faith and Practice, Pacific Yearly Meeting

Community is essential to Friends' life and spiritual growth. A strong Meeting community offers companionship, resources to care lovingly for those in need, and a place to test and support leadings and concerns. Community is expressed in many ways: by cheerfully joining together to accomplish the work of the Meeting, refraining from gossip and disparaging others, taking part in clearness committees, providing pastoral care,.. social and playful activities of the Meeting... Each one should attend to the spiritual condition of others... Friends must be sensitive to one another's needs and willing to ask for assistance in times of trouble.

William Dewsbury

Dear people of God, be tender over the least breathings of God's spirit in one another.

Isaac Penington. 1667. Letter to Friends in Amsterdam

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness, and bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another, but praying for one another, and helping one another up with a tender hand, if there be any slip or fall.

Brian Drayton, PHP 391. *Getting Rooted: Living in the Cross, a path to joy and liberation.*

The experience of the Spirit in our lives is the basis of community. We tap the resources that allow us to love, to overcome hurt, to enact a true Gospel Order.

Sandra Cronk, PHP 297. Gospel Order: A Quaker understanding of faithful church community.

At the heart of Quaker faith is the understanding that we cannot live God's new order alone, but only in a community can we embody a new pattern of living... The integration of inward life and social witness is complete only when the structures of the meeting-community are part of it. Mutual support and care of members enabled Friends to stand against a society;.. mutual accountability was a way to give each other the strength to be a people who listened to and lived God's order... Inward, communal, and social witness aspects all intertwine and relate together in gospel order for Quakers.

Margery Mears Larrabee, PHP 392. *Spirit-Led Eldering: Integral to our faith and practice*

A Friends meeting is intended to be much more than a loose association of individuals on separate and private spiritual journeys. We are called to be a faith community, and seek to know each other in that which is eternal. We become part of a gathered community...

Friends have had a mutual and active desire to be accountable for the spiritual health, nurture, and behavior of members, attenders, and the meeting as a whole. This creates a culture of mutual spiritual nurturing and care.

Spirit-led eldering, support and affirmation are essential and integral to our Quaker way of faith and practice. Otherwise our life as a Quaker community falters because we are not tending to critical aspects of our lives. It is part of our lay ministry to each other.

Spirit-led eldering is offering spiritual leadership, which is to support and encourage the life of the Spirit in an individual or the meeting, or to raise questions and explore with another person or group ways in which they may be more faithful to the Spirit, or it is simply being prayerfully present. It is intentional, arising from a compassionate heart and mind, and led by the Spirit. If it is not so guided, it is something other than eldering. It helps us maintain or regain our spiritual groundedness and faithful connection to the Spirit and each other.

Eldering is being present to another, a group, or the meeting, and can include: Affirming others' ministry; Offering support; Listening another's soul into disclosure and discovery; Raising serious questions; Acknowledging others' gifts; Calling forth courage to make change; Challenging the course others are on; Delighting in their creativity and ways... The guidance by the spirit is crucial.

Some suggested readings on Quaker decision making and process

New England Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 1986. Includes quotes from Friends illustrating their experience, a history of Friends in New England, information on Quaker faith as exemplified in NEYM, NEYM's Advices and Queries, and an explanation of practices and procedures as used in NEYM, covering organization and business procedures, membership, marriage and death practices, and more. NEYM is in the process of revising its F&P.

PHP 406. *The Mind of Christ: Bill Taber on meeting for business*, edited by Michael Birkel

PHP 307. *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging sense of the meeting*, by Barry Morley.

PHP 20, 2006. *Guide to Quaker Practice*, Howard Brinton

PHP 297. *Gospel Order: A Quaker understanding of faithful church community*, by Sandra L. Cronk

PHP 371, 2004. *Members One of Another: The dynamics of membership in Quaker meeting*, by Thomas Gates. Deepening our understanding and developing our practice as we live in spiritual community.

PHP 305. *Spiritual Discernment: The context and goal of clearness committees*, by Patricia Loring. Definitions, explanations, guidelines.

PHP 365. *The Authority of Our Meetings is the Power of God*, by Paul Lacey. Clarity on the balance between affirming the autonomy of the individual following her conscience, and affirming the authority of the group to discern the true leading of the spirit, with Quaker history.

PHP 392. *Spirit-led Eldering: Integral to our faith and practice*, by Margery Mears Larrabee.

PHP 347, 1999. *Tall Poppies: Supporting gifts of ministry and eldering in the Monthly Meeting*, by Martha Paxson Grundy. A meeting needs to provide for support and accountability for the spiritual gifts that nurture the spiritual community.

PHP 264. *Leading and Being Led*, by Paul Lacey. Addresses many issues about leadings, with examples from Quaker history.

PHP 383, 2006. *Answering the Call to Heal the World*, by Patience Schenk. On leadings, discernment, and support.

PHP 399, 2008. *Matthew 18: Wisdom for living in community*, by Connie McPeak Green and Marty Paxson Grundy. About using Jesus' instructions for resolving conflicts in community.

October 2013