

Meeting for Worship With A Concern for Business

Mind The Oneness

—George Fox

“In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose. But all these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit, distributing them separately to each individual at will. For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body.”

I Corinthians 12:7, 11-12

New English Bible

“Our belief that people can continually discover more about the will of God makes us eschew dogma. We search for ways to meet human need in shared worship and open ourselves to disagreement as a path to God’s higher truths. The spirit leads our community to creative action occasionally in ways that transcend reason, as we listen to God’s voice in our prayers and in the messages we have for each other.”

—New York Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*

Approved the 28th July 1995, p 20

“Friends are not to meet [in meetings for business] like a company of people about town or parish business; but to wait upon the lord”

—from George Fox, letters, *New York Yearly Meeting*

Faith and Practice, Approved the 28th July 1995, p. 19

“Throughout, the grace of humor can often help to relax the tensions of a Meeting [for Business] so that new Light comes to it.”

—North Pacific Yearly Meeting
Faith and Practice, Second Edition, 1993, p. 75

“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.”

—Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Faith and Practice, 1997, p. 21.

Decision Making

From Faith Into Business...

Friends’ decision-making is rooted in the spiritual oneness of a faith community. We reject majority rule and consensus for the higher goal of reaching decisions in unity, through distinctive attitudes and practices 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.

In the course of Meeting for business, the quality of interaction among the Friends present is of as great importance as are the

matters on the agenda. The goal of Meeting for Business lies in its contribution to the growth of **the** Beloved Community.

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

The act of choosing is **spiritual** when it involves 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 our own wills become a substitute for God’s will.

The Religious Basis of our Decision Making...

Meetings for business are meetings for worship. Both 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. Ideally, these beliefs underlie every attitude and practice in our meetings, as well as in our meetings for business.

As we wrestle with outward issues, the Inner 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.

One of the practices basic to the Religious Society of Friends is that we test our leadings before acting. We bring our concern into the light of Truth when we speak it to our meeting. When we believe we are called to act out of a concern, we share our vision with the meeting. The meeting worships together asking for divine assistance in discerning whether the leading is of the Spirit.

It is 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. As we listen, we test these expressions against accumulated experience, the life and teachings of Jesus, and moral and spiritual guides in Scripture and elsewhere. Therefore, we are careful not to rely on the letter of the text, but to read the Scriptures “in the Spirit in which they were given forth” as George Fox enjoined us.

The Goal of Friend’s Decision Making

Unity...

The purpose of meeting for business is to discern God’s will for the corporate body of the meeting. The goal of Friends’ decision-making is a Spirit-led unity – 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 and manifest. 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, a corporate body, which sometimes encompasses 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 its decision-making process is essential to the rightness of its decisions.

Sense of the meeting...

The term “*sense of the meeting*” has two meanings. One of the meanings is the same as unity, the point at which the meeting is agreed on a decision. This point is not the same as unanimity. The second meaning of the term “*sense of the meeting*” is a description of where the meeting now stands in its discernment of a question. For example, the meeting may be in agreement on one part of an issue and in disagreement on another part of the issue, or the meeting may be polarized, or in confusion. A statement in the minutes of the state of the meeting at this point will serve Friends as a reminder of the foregoing experience when they take up the issue again.

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 the result of our religious process, which is characterized by listening for and trusting in God. Both sense of the meeting and consensus result in a course of action agreed to by the participants, but the sense of the meeting relies consciously on the Spirit. Lively discussions may often play a role in Friends’ decision-making, these are useful only to the extent that they are the expressions of spiritual leadings. Friends’ practice avoids secular devices such as debate, persuasion, coercion and procedures equivalent to voting.

When the meeting has come to unity, those present will know that

they have faithfully followed their Guide, and will feel a continued affection for each other.

The meeting may find that a matter under consideration evokes considerable emotion in members of the meeting. In such a situation, the clerk sets aside time either in the present meeting for business or later, for Friends to share their emotions in a worship sharing format. After the emotions have been shared and understood, the meeting can go on to make a decision on the concern.

Threshing sessions...

In dealing with issues which are difficult, complex, or entailing information with which some Friends may be unfamiliar, it is often helpful to hold one or more preliminary “threshing meetings” in which no decision is made, but through which the chaff can be separated from the grain of Truth. Such meetings can clear the way for later action on the issue. Full notice of a threshing session should be given and special efforts made to see that Friends of all shades of opinion can and will be present. To the extent that Friends of a given view are absent, the usefulness of such a meeting will be impaired. If factual material needs to be presented, persons knowledgeable in the area should be asked to present such material and be available to answer questions.

The clerk or moderator of a threshing session should make it clear, at the start, that the meeting not only expects, but welcomes expressions of the widest differences. Friends are urged not to hold back whatever troubles them about the issues at hand. Hesitancy to share a strong conviction, because it may offend someone, reflects a lack of trust. The clerk’s job, then is to draw out the reticent, limit the time taken by too-ready talkers, and see that all have an opportunity to speak. It is useful to ask someone

to take notes of the meeting for later reference. At times the threshing meeting may forward a recommendation to the meeting for business. No decisions are taken at a threshing session.

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. Anyone can call for silence when the spirit of worship has been disrupted. In the silence, connection to God and each other can be renewed.

Participants are expected to put aside personal desires and allow themselves to be led by the Spirit beyond the self. Although an individual Friend has the designated role of clerk, all share the responsibility for the maintenance of the Spirit-led gathering, for steadfast search for Truth, and for the wise use of time. Sometimes, what the Truth requires is uncomfortable or painful. All are expected to be attentive and to offer, concisely, such insight as each may have. The meeting is listening to God and listening to each other to hear God speaking. As we seek God’s will, we get closer to each other. In this way, we will all reach a point of unity. 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 or dismissed. Friends are encouraged to actively consider bringing issues, which may be difficult or controversial, into meeting for business for spiritual discernment. It is better for the meeting to allow full opportunity for differences to be aired and faced.

Friends demonstrate their faith in the meeting's access to Divine Guidance and its ability to find unity, by their attendance and participation in meeting for business even when they feel they cannot agree with what they perceive to be the weight of the meeting. Their absence diminishes the meeting's ability to discern the Truth.

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 through others. An openness of spirit is crucial, especially when differing views are being expressed. Usually an individual speaks only once on any one issue because, in a gathered meeting for business, we trust that our expression of light has been heard and is being considered and tested as part of the Truth. Repeated speaking is **often** a way of forcing one's will on others. One should speak with clarity and brevity. If one's viewpoint has been expressed by another, one can say, "That Friend speaks my mind" or "I approve." In some meetings there is opportunity for each individual to speak more often. All meetings need to use care to see that the meeting for business is Spirit-led and that each person is heard and respected.

A meeting may organize the meeting for business in any way it wants. What follows is a brief description of the traditional form of the meeting for business: worship, within which there is a reading of the queries and advices of the month, a reading of the agenda, reading of the minutes of the last meeting for business (approved at the previous meeting for business), the treasurer's report, reports from committees (which if written may be attached to the minutes), other items of business, reading of the minutes of the present meeting for business (for approval), a final period of worship.

Seasoning...

It is an integral part of Quaker process to consider a given concern repeatedly, giving time for Friends to consider the matter alone (perhaps in prayer), to sleep on it, and to talk about it with different people. This process is called seasoning. In the traditional meeting for business process, an issue is first discerned in a committee. Then it is discerned in meeting for business at least in one meeting, perhaps successive meetings. If a meeting does not have committees and acts as a committee of the whole, it can consciously decide not to make a decision on an item at the first meeting for business at which the concern is **raised**. Instead the item can be fully considered at two meetings for business before asking for a sense of the meeting.

Whether or not the meeting has committees there is a need for focus on the various aspects of meeting activity. There is a need for someone or some few to give continuity to this focus, to remember across the years what has been done, what has worked and what has not worked.

The meeting is a corporate body. One aspect of the corporate body is that the meeting is a loving, affirming community. Another aspect of the corporate body is that the responsibility for the meeting's being and actions rests with everyone. Responsibility is not delegated to a few Friends. Hence the good order of the meeting for business and all other aspects of the meeting rest with each of us.

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. Because 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 communication 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 prayerfully and 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, and helping spirit, facilitating but never dominating, and avoiding partisanship.

The clerk is nominated and approved by members of the meeting. **A nominated person should be given time to prayerfully test for a leading to clerk.** In accepting the nomination, the clerk accepts the obligation to focus time, energies, and gifts in the fulfillment of the trust expressed by the meeting. The meeting and the clerk might benefit from an assistant to the clerk who would also be learning how to clerk.

A concern is brought to the clerk's attention usually after it has gone through a process of discernment and seasoning within the appropriate committee. If a concern is brought to the clerk by an individual before committee consideration, the matter may be sent to a committee. In the case of a need for an immediate decision, the meeting as a whole can consider the concern. The clerk

prepares the agenda after consultation with others, including committee clerks. It is important that concerns and agenda items are given to the clerk before meeting for business. Impulsive agenda items can create an atmosphere of disorder, frustration, and distrust. When a clerk has a number of items to be considered at the next regular monthly meeting, prayerful reflection on them and on the order of presentation is needed. A proposed minute may be drafted before the meeting by the clerk or a committee. This can be helpful when a committee is recommending an action.

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' deliberations. The clerk encourages those who are reluctant to speak and, in like manner, restrains those who tend to speak at undue length, too often, or with vehemence.

When the sense of the meeting becomes clear to the clerk, the clerk states the decision. Then the decision is written as a **numbered** minute. The minute may be formulated by the clerk, the recording clerk, or another member of the meeting. The minute may be written by any of these. It is then read back to the meeting for approval. Writing and approving the minute clarifies for everyone what the decision is. While minutes are not to be altered by a subsequent meeting for business, the decisions they reflect may be revisited, particularly in light of new information or circumstances. When the matter is revisited, probably the group of people will be slightly different and the group may not be in the same frame of mind and spirit as at the previous meeting for business. However, another minute can always be written which supersedes the previous minute. Minutes remain in force until they are superseded.

If there is no unity, it is especially important that the clerk make clear what previous decision or custom has been established on a given issue, because lack of unity on a proposed change normally means that the previous decision 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. The clerk may then speak to the issue.

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 a 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 **for business** should be carefully and appropriately minuted by someone designated to serve as recording clerk. Where the clerk 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. The recording clerk should state precisely the nature, extent, and timing of actions directed to be taken and the persons responsible. Ambiguity and inaccuracy are to 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 then becomes 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 formulating minutes. In some cases the presiding clerk, rather than the recording clerk, will be in a better position to write the minute. When the action to be taken is clear but the wording of the proposed minute is not, it is sometimes useful to ask *one or few* Friends to prepare a final draft **for consideration later during the meeting**.

The recording clerk, clerk, or another member of the meeting 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, holding the writers in the light until this task is complete.

Once approved, minutes retain their authority until replaced by a subsequent minute.

The record of the meeting's proceedings consists of minutes and a brief narrative description of important aspects of the flow of the meeting. This record in its entirety is sometimes referred to as the minutes. To promote clarity and understanding, it is useful for the recording clerk to read the minutes and the narrative **to** have them approved from time to time during the course of the meeting. The entire record is read for approval before the closing period of worship.

Since the meeting may want a record of other gatherings, the recording clerk's minutes should state the essential purpose of each meeting, whether for decision, for discussion, for inspiration, or a threshing session.

An indispensable part of the corporate body is its memory. The memory of the corporate body resides in the collective memory of the members of the meeting. If the collective memory of the body no longer remembers a minute, that minute no longer has force in the discernment of the meeting.

The corporate body, just as a person, has to have aids to its memory. For clarity and ease of access the usual practice is for action minutes and statement minutes to be numbered. Narrative minutes are not numbered. Currently our yearly meeting uses the system: 00EC12 or 00RM12 or 00YM12. The first two digits are the year; the next two letters are the body; the last digits are the consecutive number of the minute, starting with one at the beginning of each calendar year. The minutes of the Executive Committee (EC), the Representative Meeting (RM), and the Yearly Meeting in annual sessions (YM) are numbered independently.

It is easier for the meeting to refer to decisions already made if the recording clerk lists, in brief form, all the numbered minutes recorded during the year and puts this list as an index at the end of the minutes for the year. All minutes are to be preserved in ways that ensure their availability and permanence.

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 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 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 vital that this time of settling and focusing not become a brief formality.

Decision-making by coming to unity applies to easy issues as well as 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, important concerns may come from others who may not be as widely experienced or well informed, but who nevertheless feel strongly led. The meeting is tender to the known opinions of unavoidably absent Friends.

The prompting 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 younger and newer members and attenders. 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 seemingly incompatible responses.

They seek for guidance through prayerful discernment. 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

whether or not action is taken.

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. Often conflict is resolved through the use of listening skills. When friends know they have been heard, movement toward unity becomes possible. Because the group listens, perspectives are enlarged, objections can be included or withdrawn or a new resolution is found.

Moving Forward in Unity

If all efforts to include everyone in the unity of the meeting fail, and one person remains outside the unity of the meeting, the rest of the meeting can still move ahead in unity **after a period of discernment. Friends may use several ways of moving forward in unity.**

- 1) 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.

- 2) The meeting may wait or proceed with other business while a small, temporary, representative committee withdraws, in the hope that it can bring forward to the session a proposed minute or course of action that will lead the meeting into unity.
- 3) 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.
- 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. Omit [But these few friends may not block a decision when the rest of the meeting is in unity.]

After a discernment process the meeting may be led to move forward in unity despite continued objections by one or a few Friends.

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.

Queries 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:

- 1) Have we taken care to examine fully, in a loving and prayerful spirit, the perspective of those with whom we disagree?
- 2) Have we truly tried to leave behind our personal desires, the better to be led by the Spirit?
- 3) Do we seek to discern the light in all viewpoints?
- 4) Have we considered whether God's will for us as individuals may differ from God's will for the Meeting?
- 5) Do we in conflict regularly reaffirm, in voice and attitude, the love we feel for one another?

Queries on the Meeting for Business

Queries for Participants in the Meeting for Business...

- 1) How do I prepare myself for meeting for business? Do I approach the meeting for business as a meeting for worship, corporately seeking Divine Guidance? In the conduct of business, do I avoid secular practices such as debate, persuasion, coercive devices, and procedures equivalent to voting? Do I speak only once on the same issue?
- 2) Do I accept the meeting for business in the spirit of relinquishing control, recognizing the meeting's corporate spiritual discernment of God's will may lead in a quite different direction from my own perception of God's will, no matter how sincere?
- 3) Do I accept responsibility to assist the clerk by maintaining openness, sensitivity, and tenderness to others, recognizing that the true sense of the meeting can be ascertained only when all present are clerking the meeting together with the clerk, practicing spiritual discernment to the best of our abilities?

Queries for the Clerk of Meeting for Business...

- 1) Do I allow opportunity for all who wish to speak to an issue to do so? Am I mindful of those who speak seldom or with difficulty, giving them opportunity to express their discernment? In the process of seeking Divine Guidance, am I careful to seek the growth of all those present?
- 2) Do I make use of periods of silent worship, when necessary? Do I avoid secular business practices and help the meeting to avoid such practices? Do I do my best to ensure a true corporate seeking after Light and the achievement of a true unity?

- 3) When a sense of the meeting is reached, is a minute immediately written and read aloud so that all may understand and approve it or alter it until it reflects the true sense of the meeting?
- 4) Do I carefully prepare matters for presentation to the meeting for business? Do I ask for discernment by the appropriate committee before I bring a matter to meeting for business?

“Friends, keep your meetings in the power of God, and in his wisdom (by which all things were made) and in the love of God, that by that ye may order all to his glory. And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and continue awhile quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God Almighty may be felt among you.

—George Fox Epistles 162, 1658

from Friends for 300 Years by Howard Brinton p. 106.