

**Third Haven Friends Meeting**  
**Worship and Ministry Committee: Quakerism 101**  
**Decision-Making in the Manner of Friends**

3.14.24

**Introduction**

In 1662, Edward Burroughs described the Quaker meeting for business, at London Yearly Meeting –

In the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, ... and in the Holy Spirit of Truth, ... in love, coolness, as one only party, ... to determine things by a general mutual concord, in assenting together as one man in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof. (Sheeran, p 4)

Other faiths have peace testimonies and use silence in important ways. Some are committed to simplicity. The silent meeting for worship and decision-making in the manner of Friends profoundly distinguish the Religious Society of Friends and Quakers.

*Decision-making in the manner of Friends* seeks awareness and guidance of the Spirit (Light, Truth, God, Divine). Discernment and decision-making in the Quaker meeting for business should be spiritual practices. As Friends, we seek to understand and carry out the will of God. Spiritual guidance informs and help us discern the way forward and make decisions, individually in everyday life, and corporately in the meeting for business, and in other settings.

Personally, I do not much like the term “Quaker process,” though it is commonly use in Quaker settings, especially Quaker schools. I am not sure what that “Quaker process” means. I prefer *decision-making in the manner of Friends*, and *clearness* and *unity*, to name and describe our discernment and decision-making, especially in Quaker meetings and meetings for business. In my experience, I find that the assertion that we are not using or following “Quaker process” can challenge and even subverting decision-making in the manner of Friends. Nothing is easier to subvert that decision-making in the manner of Friends.

Michael J Sheeran, a Jesuit, studied Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and decision-making in the manner of Friends, and summarized 9 distinct principles of Friends’ “voteless” decision-making:

- 1) no voting, unity in decisions,
- 2) silent periods,
- 3) moratorium when decisions cannot be reached,
- 4) participation by all with ideas on the subject,
- 5) learning to listen, not going in with mind made up,
- 6) absence of leaders, the clerk steers but does not dominate,
- 7) nobody outranks anybody,
- 8) factual focus, emotions kept to a minimum, and
- 9) typically, small meetings.

Our Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 2018, provides:

In accordance with our understanding of that of God in each of us and that Truth is continually revealed, all those attending the meeting for business seek to release whatever preferences or opinions they may have about an issue, before it is considered, and become

open to the leading of the Spirit, as they would in a meeting for worship. The goal of this decision-making process is, then, is to discern God's will for the [M]meeting as a whole, regarding the issue under consideration. (commas added, p 17, see pp 16-24).

### **Clearness**

While there is a great deal written on unity, there is rather less on *clearness*. Clearness is essential in Quaker discernment and decision-making, and necessarily must precede sense of the meeting, unity and decision. Clearness means that all the participants understand quite well and clearly, what they are deciding. It does not make sense to achieve unity on something confusing or unclear. Such is the basis for subsequent confusion, disunity and conflict. Most decisions would benefit enormously from greater clearness.

Careful corporate discernment, and clear articulation and communication among participants can lead to clearness and full common understanding. Through corporate discernment in the meeting for business, Friends seek and come to know *God's will in the circumstances*. Friends speak of discerning the way forward, as the way opens. Issues and decisions can be more or less clear. There really cannot be meaningful unity without clearness.

### **Consensus**

Consensus is achieved through a process of reasoning in which reasonable people search for a satisfactory decision. But in seeking the sense of the meeting, we open ourselves to being guided to perfect resolution in the Light, to a place where we sit in unity in the inward Presence.” (Morley, p 5)

Arthur Larrabee reinforces the distinction between the *consensus* and *sense of the meeting*, stating that consensus is secular and rational, reaching general agreement under the authority of the group. Sense of the meeting is Spiritual, reaching a Spirit-led decision in the spirit of worship. Consensus asks “what can we agree to?” Sense of the meeting asks “how are we led?” (Larrabee, p 10)

### **Sense of the Meeting**

Sense of the Meeting is a gift. It came to Quakers through their commitment to continuing revelation. They discovered that the Light, which had come to teach people could lead them to revealed corporate decisions. (Morley, p 3)

Sense of the Meeting is a religious process characterized by listening for and trusting in God. Sense of the Meeting works because we turn our decision-making over to a higher power. (Morley, p 5)

When we seek the sense of the meeting, we allow ourselves to be directed to the solution that awaits us. It is a process of surrender to our highest natures, and a recognition that, even though each of us is possessed of light, there is only one Light. At the end of the Process, we reside in that Light. We have allowed ourselves to be led to a transcendent place of unmistakable harmony, peace, and tender love.’ (Morley, p 12)

Often, the clerk will try to articulate the sense of the meeting and test that sense. It is very important for the clerk to try to state, clearly and concisely, what is to be approved. The clerk, or recording clerk, or even another Friend may state the sense of the meeting to test the true

articulation of the sense of the meeting. This should be done before asking for approval. Saying, “Are we ready to approve *this*?” often is not helpful in moving forward. Sometimes, a Friend may suggest an addition or a refinement that may better reflect the true sense of the meeting. If a Friend or a committee is asking the meeting for business to approve (or accept) a report or a proposed minute, it is most helpful to present the text in writing in advance. Such good order, as used among us, helps Friends understand more clearly what approval is sought.

If the Meeting is laboring or struggling, Friends should seek the Spirit, God’s will, and the love in the Meeting community. The sense of the meeting may or may not contain a decision within it. There can be a sense of the meeting that does not contain or lead to a decision. “A sense of the meeting is a shared awareness of a place to which the Spirit has led us.” (Larrabee, p 11) Sense of the meeting gives all participants confidence in the rightness of the decision. “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 one another.” (*Faith and Practice*, 1997, p 23) In spite of the earnestness of Quakers, humor is allowed in the meeting for business, and sometimes a very good idea.

### **Unity**

*Unity* is not unanimity, being of one mind. Unity is not complete accord among all participants. Unity is all uniting with a way forward for the good of the meeting community. When sense of the meeting is achieved and approved – that is unity. Sense of the meeting is the Quaker way of decision-making. Unity is the result of the decision. Unity binds all of us, in the Meeting community, together in the decision and, in principle, commits all of us to implementing and supporting the decision.

Sometimes after a good deal of discernment and deliberation, Friends may not reach clearness and unity. Often Friends let such an issue “lay over” and season to another time and meeting. Friends can and do join in unity after feeling and even voicing disquiet, uneasiness or reservation. The principle of unity in decision-making in the manner of Friends does not give an individual Friend the authority to veto a decision, prevent action, “stand in the way” or stop the Meeting from moving forward, when there is a sense of the Meeting.

“A person cannot ‘stand in the way’ of the meeting. Rather, the meeting allows the truth, even the truth of a single person, to stand in its way.” (Larrabee, p 19). In the end, everyone must feel that he or she can support the sense of the meeting, even though she or he might have decided differently if he or she were to decide the matter on his or her own. Each participant should be in sufficient harmony with the unity of the meeting, that he or she does not feel led to resist it.

When Friends do not agree with the stated sense of the meeting, they may *stand aside* so as not to prevent the Meeting from moving forward. Such Friends may ask to be recorded as standing aside. If a Friend states that he or she will not stand aside that individual, can prevent the Meeting from moving forward. Such a situation is very awkward and difficult for the clerk, meeting for business participants and the Meeting community. Such an individual takes a very great responsibility for his or her version of the Truth, such that it can overrule the sense of the meeting.

Decision-making in the manner of Friends can be derailed or subverted, when participants are not led by the Spirit and practicing the good order used among us.

## **Responsibilities and Guidance in Decision-Making in the Manner of Friends**

### **Participants**

The first responsibility of all participants is to listen very attentively, carefully and respectfully. Before speaking, it is best to wait to be recognized by the clerk. Stand when speaking. Do not talk to others when someone is speaking. Allow time between speakers for the thought to be understood and appreciated. Listen and appreciate each offering thoughtfully and respectfully. “Participants are expected to put aside personal desires and allow themselves to be led by the Guide beyond the self.” (*Faith and Practice*, 1997 p 21) As in the meeting for worship, messages should be Spirit-led, not personal.

As in meeting for worship, Friends should attend to business with heart and mind prepared. Friends are reminded to consider:

- Intention, attitude and expectation – Are your, attitudes and expectations Spiritual and open?
- Listening – Do you listen for the leadings of the Spirit? Are you attentive and open to the Light in offerings of others?
- Attachments – Are you willing to examine your attachments, and let these go, so as not to let your attachments interfere with the Light in the meeting.
- Teachable – Are you open to the Light in the meeting and in other participants? Are you willing to be teachable? (adapted from Larrabee, p 15)

Each participant should come with heart and mind prepared. Meeting for business should start on time and try to end at an appropriate time. Meetings for business discussions that run too long, stray from the topic – “ranging around” – or do not reach resolution are usually more properly ascribed to the participants than the clerk. Friends should speak infrequently and not repeat their offerings. Give full attention to the work of the meeting. Do not be otherwise occupied or distracted.

Everyone has a responsibility to share his or her truth about moving forward. A Friend should usually speak only once and *release* his or her idea, view, or position to the Light, to the collective wisdom and will of the Meeting. A Friend can affirm his or her agreement by adding “I agree” or “This Friends speaks my mind.” Debate and back and forth between 2 participants is not good Quaker practice. The clerk may encourage those who have not spoken to add anything new. Arthur Larrabee reminds us that we do not need to hear everything that might be said on a question, but only that which needs to be said to move forward. If the Meeting approves, Friends should not keep talking on the matter, unless the sense of the Meeting has been incorrectly articulated or a Friend is not in unity in some meaningful way.

### **Clerk**

The clerk is the agent of the Meeting community and serves to guide decision-making in the manner of Friends. The clerk supports continuing Spiritual awareness and focuses the participants on the business at hand. The clerk develops the agenda, often in consultation with others. The clerk helps maintain an atmosphere of safety throughout the meeting for business.

The clerk helps the meeting for business manage the rhythm and temperament of the meeting for business. The clerk should use silence, even extended periods of silence, when emotions rise or the meeting for business comes to a contentious or difficult place.

The clerk role is active, not passive, in maintaining a worshipful spirit in the meeting for business and securing the good order used among us. “Absent leadership from the clerk, the domination of some, inefficiency, and exhaustion may take over.” (Larrabee, p 25) The clerk may ask if others agree with a different individual or “minority” view so that such Friends may feel such support as may exist and the meeting for business can avoid a misleading emergence of a sense of the meeting.

After a decision or approval of a minute, the clerk may want to speak to how the Meeting, a committee, or the clerk herself will proceed with the action needed. This can then be recorded in the minutes to ensure such follow-up action as may be needed. The clerk and the recording clerk ensure that the minutes accurately reflect the important points of the meeting for business. The minutes of the monthly meeting for business record decisions, and the approval (or acceptance) of minutes and reports.

### **Discernment and Technical Questions**

In an era of widespread and distressing deception, misinformation, and falsehoods, I have come to reflect on a distinction between:

- matters of *discernment*, as understood, and practiced by Quakers, on a wide variety of matters, and
- what might be called *technical questions*.

Quakers, in meetings for business, regard most issues and questions and matters for corporate discernment in the manner of Friends. In our own daily lives, we often defer to people with appropriate experience and expertise in matters related to medical diagnoses, health care, medicines, legal matters, construction, care of our automobiles and appliances; and matters informed by science, especially engineering, physics, chemistry, and mathematics. For example, with respect to the external stairway to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the brick meetinghouse (BMH), Third Have Friends might discern features of design and aesthetics but defer to a professional structural engineer on the support structures. In our current social and political environment, there are increasing challenges to technical and medical matters, even to the “death of expertise.” As we proceed in decision-making in the manner of Friends, we may want to identify and distinguish technical questions from matters of Quaker corporate discernment.

### **Queries**

We may want to consider and discuss the following queries on decision-making in the manner of Friends and the meeting for business:

- Are our meetings for business really meetings for business with attention to business, or are they much like other meetings in other non-Quaker settings?
- Do we, as individual Friends, faithfully understand and practice clearness, sense of the meeting and unity?
- Do we rely too often on conflict avoidance?
- Why and how do we distinguish between items that we approve and items that we accept?

### **Suggested Reading and References**

- *Faith and Practice*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997, especially pp 21-28 and 177-190.
- *Faith and Practice*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2018, especially pp 12-13; 16-24, p 207, Query 2, on meeting for business; and pp 247-248, “Managing Our Quaker Business Process”
- “Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting,” Barry Morley, *Pendle Hill Pamphlet* (PHP) 307, 1993.
- *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decision Making in the Religious Society of Friends*, Michael J Sheerhan, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1991.
- “How Quakers Do Business,” Arthur, Larrabee, Southern Quarterly Meeting, 1.19.03 (10.28.02).
- “Decisions, Decisions: A Quaker View on Quaker Process,” Committee on Truth and Integrity in Public Affairs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) [Britain Yearly Meeting], no date.
- “Before the Meeting: A Handbook for Clerks,” Keith Redfern, Quaker Home Service, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994.
- “A Handbook for the Presiding Clerk,” David O Stanfield, North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1989.
- “Before Business Begins,” William Braasch Watson, New England Yearly Meeting, 1996.

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