

Quaker Business Method: The Practice of Group Discernment (from Australia YM)

This pamphlet is intended for Friends and Attenders who have some experience of Meeting for Worship for Business. It provides more detailed coverage of spiritual discipline and the roles and responsibilities of Clerks and participants.

Section 1: AUTHORITY & RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP FOR BUSINESS

Role of participants

In a rightly-ordered Meeting for Business, all participants share responsibility for the spiritual discernment that occurs, and hence for the actions that flow from it. Creation and maintenance of a spiritual climate in which corporate discernment can flourish will naturally fall to the Clerk/s and other 'weighty Friends' more than to those who are inexperienced, but the discernment itself is made collectively by the gathered meeting.

Role of the Clerk as servant of the Meeting

Each meeting is facilitated by the Clerk, usually with the support of a Recording Clerk. The role of the Clerk is similar to that of a Chairperson in a secular meeting in that the Clerk is responsible for the order of the meeting and the matters that are considered. The significant difference is that the Clerk is appointed as the servant of the meeting, not as its leader or chief executive. Authority for all decisions rest with the meeting as a whole, and ultimately with God.

Authority of decisions made

All decisions made in a rightly-ordered Meeting for Business represent the promptings of the Spirit, as discerned by the Meeting. Thus, once the sense of the meeting has been expressed in words and this formulation is agreed by the meeting as an acceptable minute, it stands as a permanent record of the decision which cannot be subject to challenge or change at a later date (other than minor factual or grammatical correction). Only those present at the time can know whether or not the minute is an accurate record of the sense of the meeting, and this is the reason why the minute is given such careful consideration during the meeting.

The spiritual discernment process is conducted by ordinary people and may turn out to have been flawed or inadequate, but Friends trust that this will eventually become apparent and the matter can then be brought back to the meeting for further discernment.

Responsibilities under the law

If the meeting is an incorporated body under State or Federal law, there are requirements concerning record-keeping (including the minutes of meetings) and the roles of appointed officers which may need to be taken into account in the conduct of meetings for business.

Section 2 SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE : THE ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Before the meeting

Preparatory work for the Meeting for Worship for Business includes both information gathering (which could be in the form of reports or recommendations from committees or other meetings) and preparing the mind and heart.

Provision of items and information to the Clerk/s

Friends have a responsibility to assist the Clerk/s by providing adequate notice of matters to come before the meeting, and by providing adequate background information.

“Submit information about matters to come before the meeting in good time, and preferably in writing. Avoid, if you possibly can, any last-minute messages to the table.”

[Quaker Faith & Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, section 3.10]

Consideration of the Agenda and background information

Friends are also expected to inform themselves properly and reflect upon matters to come before the meeting, so that all relevant insights, emotions, information and other considerations can be weighed in the meeting’s discernment process. Any information considered should not lead to setting the mind with a prepared point of view:

“... some preliminary thinking can help clarify [but not pre-empt] the decisions to be made by the business meeting”

(Charles Stevenson, ‘Quaker Business Method’ in As the Seed Grows, 1997).

Attempts to influence a particular outcome, such as lobbying, can interfere with the processes of attentive listening and of discernment.

‘With heart and mind prepared’

In practice this involves being “aware of any preconceptions or strong feelings that you may have and be ready to set them aside or see them set aside by the Meeting” (Judy Warren, *The Friend* 11 April 2003). There is also important spiritual preparation for both the Clerk/s and for all those who attend to ensure that the Meeting is conducted in a worshipful manner. It is important that each participant begins the meeting with the expectation that it will be a spiritual experience.

“On taking your seat, try to achieve quietness of mind and spirit. Try to avoid having subcommittees or conversations just as the meeting is about to begin. Turn inwardly to God, praying that the meeting may be guided in the matters before it and that the clerk may be enabled faithfully to discern and record the mind of the meeting”

(Quaker Faith & Practice, 1995, 3.09).

Reports to the Meeting

If any of us are asked to attend a meeting where we are asked to report the views of another group or committee, we need to remember that:

“When you are appointed to attend a meeting, you attend with local knowledge which may be of assistance: you are not there as a delegate with an inflexible brief to put over on behalf of another body of Friends which is not itself going through the exercise of the meeting”

(Quaker Faith & Practice, 1995, 3.09).

Members responsibility to attend

Members of the society are expected to attend Meetings for Worship for Business on a regular basis.

“There is a special responsibility to attend meetings for church affairs, for it is here that the meeting enacts its faith.”

[Quaker Faith & Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, section 11.01]

When it is not possible to attend, there is a further responsibility for Members to inform themselves about the meeting's decisions.

Permission for non-members

Attendees are encouraged to participate so that they can experience for themselves the process of spiritual discernment. Non-Members are usually asked to seek permission from the meeting, via the Clerk, as a precautionary measure to ensure that the spiritual climate of the meeting is upheld. (It is difficult to hold to Friends' traditions when a large number of inexperienced people are present).

During the meeting

Spiritual attentiveness

Every person present shares responsibility for setting and maintaining the spiritual climate needed for genuine discernment. This means avoiding disruptive behaviour, such as arriving late, fidgeting or talking to a nearby Friend. It means giving full attention to the work of the meeting, leaving other work and distractions behind so that all present can listen for the promptings of the spirit. Everyone present can assist inexperienced Friends to observe spiritual discipline by their own appropriate behaviour.

“Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business ... but to wait upon the Lord”

[George Fox (from Worcester prison), January 30th 1675]

Being open to the Light

A Friend may have strong feelings or opinions about an issue, but corporate discernment means being prepared to be led by the Spirit to a new understanding. Each person must be willing to be open to a way forward for the group that does not coincide with personal views.

“...no one can come with sincerity to a Friends' gathering for business with a mind unalterably set. To do so would leave no room for the Spirit to move, for Way to open, for discernment to take place.”

[Patricia Loring, Spiritual responsibility in the meeting for business, FGC pamphlet, 1993]

Speaking in the Meeting (giving ministry)

Spoken contributions to the meeting's discernment should be offered in a worshipful manner, as in a Meeting for Worship. It is important to avoid falling into a debate or discussion, which leaves little room for the spirit. This means carefully considering whether your point is relevant and needed by the meeting. There is no need to rephrase a point that has already been made or to confuse the discernment with new considerations that might be better addressed elsewhere or at another time.

"Meeting is the time for listening, for being prompted by the Spirit, for seeking guidance but very seldom for making sure that you personally have been heard. ...It should not matter too much which Friends are called because, if everyone is listening faithfully, the Meeting should still hear the correct message."

[Alan Quilley, 'The Sense of the Meeting' in The Friend (UK), 10 December 1999]

Respecting 'that of God' in all present

Insight may be given to anyone present, but an atmosphere of trust is vital for all contributions to be voiced, however shyly or inelegantly. This means listening with the inner as well as the outer ear, for the meaning that lies behind what is said.

"Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Remember that we all share responsibility ... whether our ministry is in silence or through the spoken word."

[Quaker Faith & Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, Advice #12]

Reaching unity

When the Clerk recognises and articulates the Sense of the Meeting about a matter being considered, it is the responsibility of any participant to notify the meeting if their discernment is not in unity with the decision described. The decision may not be the participant's preferred outcome, but he or she can unite with the decision if it seems clear that it offers the best way forward for the meeting as a whole in the current circumstances. [An example is John Woolman's acceptance of Friends' gradual and piecemeal decisions about the ownership of slaves, even though his goal was total abolition of slavery] Where an individual's conscience will not allow them to unite with the decision, true unity has not been achieved and so the decision cannot go forward.

Standing Aside

Sometimes, one person may have a view that differs strongly from the sense of the meeting. In some meetings, Friends who have significant reservations may be recorded as 'standing aside' from a decision, but this is only possible where the Friend recognises that the decision is the clear sense of the meeting, arrived at through appropriate spiritual discernment, even though they cannot unite with it. The person who stands aside needs to understand that the decision is the best achievable by the meeting as a whole so that he or she is prepared to support the decision's implementation. Wherever possible, Friends should labour to avoid a situation where a Friend feels compelled to stand aside from a decision, because the Friend who opts to stand aside will inevitably find themselves divided between their personal conviction and support for the spirit-led decision of the Meeting.

Formulating a minute

Composing a minute to express the unity that was achieved in the Sense of the Meeting is a weighty spiritual practice, not a clerical function. It is important, therefore, that Friends support the Clerk in prayerful silence while he or she struggles to find the right words. The meeting shares the responsibility for discernment, so it is not a time to fidget or chat while the Clerk writes.

“It has been said with truth that the clerk can best clerk the meeting only when everyone present is also clerking. That is, everyone present must be practising spiritual discernment to the best of his capacity.”

[Patricia Loring, Spiritual responsibility in the meeting for business, FGC pamphlet, 1993]

It is not essential for an item of business to be finalised at a particular time and so, normally, it does not matter if the Meeting is labouring without resolution - the matter can be raised again on another occasion. If unity is not reached, those present may begin to feel irritated, distressed, frustrated or uncomprehending. Periods of silent worship are very useful at such times. It is very important that there is respect for all present. The Clerk has the role of introducing periods of silent worship when these are required, whilst making sure that people who wish to speak are heard. The Clerk is also responsible for recognising when unity is not going to be reached, deferring the matter to a future meeting.

Whether unity is reached or not, a minute is drafted to record what has transpired and to indicate the way forward. Dealing with membership and other sensitive matters When sensitive matters, such as Membership, are before the meeting, non-Members are usually asked to leave the room temporarily in order to protect the privacy of individuals and ensure that the deep discernment required is undertaken by experienced Friends. It is recognised that membership decisions are the responsibility of members.

After the meeting

Status of the minutes

Corrections to the minutes can only be to matters of fact, spelling, grammar or punctuation. Substantive changes are not made, i.e. those which would alter the sense of the meeting or misrepresent the spirit in which the minute was agreed:

“It is at the moment of accepting each minute that the united meeting allows [the clerk] to record it as a minute of the meeting... Very minor amendments such as punctuation and points of style may be made, but any alteration of the sense should be avoided most carefully ”

(Quaker Faith & Practice, 1995, 3.15).

Supporting the decisions made

All Friends should support the decisions made by the Meeting, even if they were not present, trusting that those who were present were guided by the Spirit: \

“The Meeting may be wrong, but once made, the decision must be supported by those absent as well as those present. This involves trust that corporate guidance of the spirit has a large measure of significance”

(Walmsley, R. 2002, Meeting for Worship for Business, unpublished discussion paper, Perth).

“Once a minute is recorded it is accepted by all; even those not present accept the recorded Minute as a decision of the gathered Meeting”

(Polzin, B. 2002, Governance, Leadership and Organization in the Religious Society of Friends, unpublished paper presented to NCCA, Melbourne).

Revisiting decisions

Circumstances could well change at some time in the future, requiring a review of a decision made earlier.

“Decisions are not revisited by staff, clerks or committees. Those who were not present accept the decision of the Meeting. This is not to say that the Meeting’s decisions have ultimate authority, since our discernment is never free of human imperfection. The Meeting itself can always revisit decisions, and new light be found”

(Grace, E. 2001, An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice, World Council of Churches, Geneva).

Section 3 RIGHT ORDERING: THE ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES OF CLERKS

Before the meeting

Use of threshing sessions

A threshing session prior to the Meeting for Business may be appropriate where a difficult or controversial matter is concerned. This gives Friends the opportunity to express opinions, to hear those of others, and to discuss the issue’s complexities. In this way, the Meeting can become better informed before submitting the matter to corporate discernment.

Preparing the agenda

‘Sifting’ items for the agenda

It is the responsibility of the Clerk or Clerks to determine the business that will come before the meeting and this means setting an agenda, as for any secular meeting. The Clerk has a further responsibility, however, to ensure that items on the agenda really require the corporate discernment of the meeting as a whole. Most day-to-day matters can be dealt with by the meeting’s appointed officers and committees, though some actions may be referred to the meeting for guidance or approval. This assessment of possible agenda items is a weighty spiritual discernment process in itself, and many meetings appoint co-Clerks or Assistant Clerks to assist in this task.

Circulating the agenda in good time

An agenda should be completed and distributed in good time for Friends to prepare themselves appropriately. Some matters may require circulation of additional background material, such as committee reports or information from other meetings.

Last-minute agenda additions

When a last-minute addition to the circulated agenda is unavoidable, the Clerk needs to ensure that all present are made aware of the agenda change and have access to any relevant background material.

Use of prepared minutes

In a few circumstances, the meeting may be asked to accept a draft minute which was prepared prior to the start of the meeting for business. This is only appropriate where the meeting is being asked to ratify a decision or record an action that has already happened elsewhere. The meeting is not in any way bound to accept the prepared minute, and may amend it according to the sense of the meeting..

The following prepared minutes might be brought to the meeting:

a) Minutes of Record

This sort of minute merely records for archival purposes a significant event which has taken place in the life of the meeting (such as a marriage or funeral or public action). Those Friends who were directly involved are best placed to provide an adequate brief description.

b) Travelling minutes.

This sort of minute is usually prepared by the Clerk to accompany a Friend who will be visiting a distant meeting or meetings, in order to recommend the Friend to the care of that meeting. A prepared minute may not be appropriate if the Friend is travelling under a concern that has not been brought before the meeting, because further discernment is necessary.

c) A decision of a committee

This sort of minute may be prepared by an appointed committee or officer of the meeting for a decision within their brief. It is understood that the committee or officer has already considered the matter with due discernment.

During the meeting

Arrangement of the room

In a Meeting for Worship for Business the Clerk and Recording Clerk have key roles in facilitating the discernment process and recording decisions. Some adaptation of the normal arrangements for a Meeting for Worship is therefore necessary to ensure that all present can see and be seen by the Clerk, and to provide a suitable writing surface for the preparation of minutes. The Clerks usually sit at a large table facing the rest of the meeting. Copies of the agenda, past minutes and other relevant information may be displayed prominently or laid out on the table for reference by Friends as required. In a small meeting, it may be possible for Friends' chairs to be arranged in a semicircle facing the Clerks, but in most meetings chairs are likely to be arranged in rows. When setting out the furniture, remember the needs of vision / hearing impaired, elderly or infirm Friends and allow provision for latecomers so that the atmosphere of worship is not disturbed. A microphone will be needed in large meetings.

Opening and closing worship

Quaker business is conducted within the context of a Meeting for Worship, so the meeting for business begins and ends with a period of silent worship. During the opening worship, it is usual for a passage to be read from Quaker writings, in order to set the tone of the meeting and remind all present of the weighty responsibility of corporate spiritual discernment.

Recognition of speakers

It is the responsibility of each Friend to be recognised by the Clerk before offering a contribution, and to address the meeting rather than any individual. Contributions should be brief and clear, and avoid repeating points that have already been put before the meeting. It is not expected that any Friend will speak more than once on an issue, unless specifically requested by the Clerk (e.g. to provide a committee report or information from a Friend's area of expertise). It is impossible to listen for the promptings of the spirit if people speak at the same time or respond to each other directly so that there is no time to weigh what has been said.

“Wherefore let whatsoever is offered be mildly proposed, and so left with some pause that the meeting may have opportunity to weigh the matter, and have a right sense of it ... Also that but one speak at once, and the rest hear. And that private debates and discourses be avoided, and all attend the present business of the meeting.”

[Quaker Faith & Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, section 19.57]

Maintaining the spiritual climate

It is the Clerk's responsibility to bring Friends to order and restore a worshipful atmosphere after any disruption, especially when emotions become heated. Order is often restored with a simple reminder about the purpose of the gathered meeting and the spiritual discipline required of all involved. Sometimes the Clerk may need to interrupt a speaker and ask the meeting to return to silent worship to re-focus on the matter before the meeting so that discernment may proceed.

Remaining open to the Light

Sometimes a matter before the meeting can polarise Friends into factions. It is the duty of the Clerk to remind all present that detachment from personal preferences, opinions and positions is a prerequisite for genuine discernment. A period of silent worship will usually allow Friends to relinquish defensive positions and listen for the promptings of the spirit.

“Above all, those who take opposing views come to find that the discipline of waiting has mysteriously united them.”

[Quaker Faith & Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, section 2.90]

If such a shift does not occur, it may be necessary for the Clerk to defer the matter for consideration at a later date.

Expressing the sense of the Meeting

When the Clerk discerns that the Meeting may have come to unity about the matter under consideration, he or she will articulate the sense of the meeting to test whether unity has been reached. When Friends accept that this is the sense of the meeting the Clerk will ask Friends to wait prayerfully while the Clerk and/or Recording Clerk draft a formal minute to record the decision. Finding appropriate words to clarify the decision for those who are not present is a key part of the spiritual discernment process, so it is important to resist the temptation to offer a loose approximation, on the basis that the wording can be 'tidied up' later when the minutes are collated.

The language of a minute

A minute is usually expressed in the first person plural, to reflect the corporate nature of the decision and underline the shared responsibility for its implementation. In some instances, a specific individual or committee is asked to carry out all or part of the designated actions and the minute then needs to record this delegated authority. (e.g. "We ask or We appoint [name] to undertake this task on behalf of the meeting") Wherever possible, the Clerks will try to express the spiritual dimension of the discernment process in the minute as well as the practical elements of the action required. Note that the minute records the decision arrived at rather than the steps involved in reaching the decision, and that individuals contributing to the discussion are not identified.

Acceptance of a minute

The Clerk or Recording Clerk will read the minute clearly and ask the meeting whether it is acceptable as an accurate record of the sense of the meeting. When the offered minute does not capture the sense of the meeting adequately, any Friend may suggest new wording to convey what has been missed or to clarify possible confusion. Further discernment may be necessary to consider the revised minute and further changes made until the minute satisfactorily expresses the sense of the meeting.

Closing the meeting

It is the Clerk's responsibility to determine when Friends have become too tired to consider the matters before them with full attention. This should never mean that the discernment process is rushed in order to deal with all agenda items.

"We are here to worship, not to get through an agenda. The meeting for business is over when the worship is over."

[Friends' Consultation of Worship, Richmond, Indiana, December 1989]

Any remaining agenda items will normally be deferred to the next scheduled meeting for business. It may occasionally be necessary to ask the meeting to schedule a special meeting for consideration of unfinished or especially complex items. Before concluding the meeting, the Clerk will ask Friends to reflect prayerfully on the guidance that has been experienced in a final period of silent worship.

After the meeting

Circulation of minutes.

The Clerk ensures that minutes are circulated to Members and regular Attenders, and a copy is usually displayed somewhere accessible so that all Friends may read it. In addition, the minutes may be either summarised or reprinted in full in the Meeting's newsletter in order to communicate the outcome of the Meeting to as many Friends as possible. The Clerk/s may also send copies of relevant sections of the minutes to committees, individuals or working groups who have been asked to take some follow-up action. For information purposes, the Regional Meeting minutes are also sent to the Australia Yearly Meeting Secretary and Clerks of other Regional Meetings. A copy of the minutes is signed by the Clerk and filed in the Minute Book for archival reference.

Follow-up action

When it is apparent that further information is required before a decision can be reached, particular committees or individuals or working groups appointed by the Meeting may be asked to follow up matters and to report back on their findings. When a decision has been reached, the Meeting may appoint committees, groups or individuals to implement it. It is the Clerk's responsibility to ensure that any follow-up action is carried out and reported back to the Meeting appropriately