

HOMEWOOD FRIENDS MEETING

Advice on Friends' Decision Making Process and Clerking

Adapted from notes by Jacqueline Stillwell, Art Larabee, and Tom Waring

Friends' decision-making process is a group process that is based in openness and surrender to spiritual awareness and guidance. Decisions are identified by the unity of the group; that is called *sense of the meeting*. The attitudes, methods, and practices of a Friends' meeting for business are for the purpose of supporting that process.

Sense of the meeting is an awareness of being together in the spiritual unity of truth. It may or may not contain within it a decision. If it does contain a decision, the decision alone may sometimes be referred to as "the sense of the meeting."

The following table contrasts the Quaker discernment process with the "consensus" method of decision-making.

<u>Sense of the meeting / discernment</u>	<u>Consensus</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A spiritual method• Involving a spiritual process• Expecting a Spirit-led decision• The authority is the Spirit.• "How are we led?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A secular method• Involving a rational process• Producing a general agreement• The authority is the group.• "What can we agree to?"

Basic Assumptions of the Friends' Meeting for Business:

- There is a spiritual energy of love within and among us.
- We can open ourselves to that spiritual energy for guidance in the conduct of human affairs.
- It is possible to give up our individual desires and opinions in order to discover truth together in the Spirit..
- When we open ourselves fully to the Spirit, it will lead us into unity in truth.
- *Sense of the meeting* is an awareness of being together in that spiritual unity of truth. It may or may not contain within it a decision.

Understanding that Impasse is Not Failure

Friends' decision-making process has the potential for impasse, with corresponding frustration, not unlike any other group decision-making process. The presence of frustration or impasse does not necessarily mean that the meeting has failed. Rather, it may mean that more work needs to be done. There may be important issues to be addressed and worked through. In the face of change or a difficult decision, time for the emotional processing may be needed. Naming the issues can help the group move through them more readily. Be careful not to confuse human "stuck-ness" with inability to hear where the Spirit is leading.

The Role and Responsibilities of Participants

- Come prepared both intellectually and spiritually—in your "head" and in your "heart."
- Be open to a spiritual process of seeking a truth larger than, and perhaps different from, your own.
- Arrive on time.
- Wait to be recognized by the clerk before speaking.
- Listen empathetically to others, and to yourself, with the inner ear as well as with the outer ear, listening for what "is really being said."
- Refrain from speaking if what you have to say has already been said.
- Make an effort to trust the light which is given to others; to be open to new truth, revelation, and insight; to be teachable.

- Help the meeting move forward by opening your consciousness to the group as a whole. This may include asking for a moment of silence, or attempting to voice a sense of the meeting.
- Offer to work between meetings, **and do it!**
- Trust each other; on difficult issues trusting is more difficult and so is discernment.
- Ask yourself, “What is Spirit trying to tell us through this person who is speaking now?”
- Healthy committee work is necessary preparation for business meeting.

When You Feel Out of Unity: “Standing Aside”

- There may come a time in a meeting when someone feels that they are not in unity with a proposed sense of the meeting, but they nonetheless can feel, and trust, the way in which the Spirit has moved in the meeting and the Light that has been given to others. In such a case, the person may state that they are in that situation and offer to “stand aside” so that the decision can progress in the Spirit.
- If someone “stands aside,” the meeting may wish to record the person’s stated cause for standing aside. (It may not be necessary to identify the individual in the minutes.)
- “Standing aside” may be an indicator that the matter needs further seasoning, or that human resistance is clouding the sense of truth. Ultimately, the clerk must discern whether the decision should be recorded or the item should be held over for a future meeting. *“Standing aside” should be a rare occurrence.*

Dangers for the Meeting

- Members of the meeting who come with their minds made up.
- Members of the meeting who are not willing to see issues through the eyes of others.
- A clerk’s failure to transcend her or his personal opinions.
- A clerk’s failure to hear what is being said, verbally or non-verbally.
- An atmosphere that is not conducive to a spiritual process of openness and mutual respect.
- An attitude that getting things done is more important than unity in surrender to the divine Spirit.

FOR CLERKS:

The Role of the Clerk

- The clerk’s role is not a passive one. The job is much more than recognizing speakers until the discussion is over. The clerk is helpful to the meeting by being active, not so much as a participant in the substance of the meeting, but as a facilitator and recognizer of the spiritual unity and discernment of the community.
- The clerk helps to focus the discussion; keeps it on track; articulates interim conclusions during the course of a discussion; senses the underlying currents of the meeting and helps to articulate them; gives the meeting form and direction; disinterestedly discerns the spirits of the participants and gently helps them surrender to the Spirit.
- The clerk plays a large role in maintaining the worshipful character of the meeting.
- Leadership from the clerk encourages the corporate discipline that makes it easier for the meeting to sense and respond to the Spirit.
- Without active leadership from the clerk, fear and ego may create barriers to the Spirit.
- Clerks should use inclusive language.
- Clerks should also be aware of their body language and how it affects the group dynamic.

Prior to the Meeting:

- Draft an agenda. For each item define who will present the item; estimate time; determine whether it is a report, discussion, or decision item. Check that the homework is prepared.
- Research any anticipated procedures or needed information. (Consult *Faith and Practice* as needed.)
- Check-in with committee clerks. Ask for written reports—know who will be reporting about what, and if any action/decision items will be presented.
- Meet with the recording clerk to review the agenda and prepare for the meeting.
- Consider what minutes you anticipate being written.
- A week before the meeting, remind members about the time/date for the meeting and about major agenda items or homework that needs attention.

Clerking the Meeting:

- Ensure the room is set up so that all can hear and see one another. Set up a table for the clerks. Do whatever is necessary and helpful to create a non-distracting space.
- Begin promptly. Ask for help as needed so that the responsibility for the meeting rests with all.
- Begin with a period of worship. A query may be read during the worship.
- Review the agenda and ask for its approval. As you introduce each agenda item, state whether it is a report, discussion, or decision item.
- Ask for an agreed upon end time for the meeting. (This is particularly appropriate for committee meetings.)
- Support the recording clerk during the meeting by asking for silence while s/he writes each minute. Pause to review the minutes as you progress through the meeting, taking care to approve wording on decision items.
- Summarize periodically, helping to build a sense of the meeting. Check with the group each time you do this to make sure your summary is accurate.
- Attend carefully to what is said, both with words and otherwise, so that you will be able to gather a sense of the meeting.
- When you discern that the group has come to a sense of the meeting, state your perception of that sense and ask the group if your statement is accurate. Don't hesitate to suggest a sense of the meeting early on if you feel one is present.
- Before the end of the meeting, summarize what may be the unfinished business and make a plan for how it will be handled. Assign homework.
- End the meeting on time (or ask for approval to extend it) with a brief period of worship.
- Throughout, preserve a loving environment.
- Insist that people wait to be recognized before speaking.
- Ask people to address you or the meeting as a whole, not another individual.
- When necessary, slow things down by deliberately being slow to recognize the next speaker.
- When necessary, ask the meeting to "settle," inviting time for reflection, or call for a period of worship.
- Help to bring out the full range of concerns on a particular matter, but keep in mind that it is not a purpose of the meeting to hear everything that could be said on a matter.
- Help people to say what may be difficult for them to say.
- Invite "minority" concerns before they are overwhelmed by the many.
- Help people who speak to stay focused on the matter at hand. Identify matters that belong elsewhere on the agenda or in a different meeting.

- When necessary, articulate difficult truths for the group. In any group, some things may not be said to avoid conflict or because they are too painful. If they belong in the group's deliberations, the clerk has a responsibility to bring them forth.
- If you must speak on a topic, be clear with the group that you are speaking as an individual and not as the clerk.

Create Safety by Interrupting

- As difficult as it is to do, it is necessary for the safety and well-being of the meeting for the clerk to interrupt people who are burdening the meeting. The clerk is the only one who can do it effectively. The meeting expects the clerk to do it.
- Interrupt if two or more people get into a dialogue or argument.
- Interrupt people who are repeating what has already been said, speaking at too great a length, or using tone or language that is hurtful to others.
- It is useful to think through in advance how to interrupt people, if this should be needed. Language that asks permission can be useful.
- It is generally better to give difficult feedback/advice to individuals privately.

After the meeting:

- Review the minutes for accuracy, grammar, and spelling with the recording clerk.
- Do any required follow-up with individuals or tasks.

Dangers for the Clerk

The most significant danger for clerks is that they will have strong feelings or opinions about the matter under consideration or the direction in which the meeting is going. In this case, clerk must ask themselves whether or not their personal feelings or opinions are getting in the way of their ability to discern the sense of the meeting.

Advice from a Former Clerk

- If you feel you know the sense of the meeting, members will correct you if you are wrong.
- If you are not sure you know the sense of the meeting, you can ask and some member(s) will help you.
- If you are sure you don't know the sense of the meeting, Friends will talk some more until it becomes clear.
- Don't worry about pushing things along or allowing them to drag – there will be about equal expressions of concern on each side after each meeting for business, no matter what you do.

FOR RECORDING CLERKS:

- If possible, review the agenda with the clerk prior to the meeting. Note details for upcoming agenda items and possible decisions.
- Take minutes during the meeting, and read them back for approval during the meeting (especially minutes that are related to a decision).
- Ask for time, if necessary, while you are discerning proper wording or catching up.
- Review and correct the minutes with the clerk after the meeting.
- After the review, send the minutes to the clerk for distribution, or, if appropriate, send them directly to everyone promptly.