

The basis upon which we hold our meetings for business—be they committee, monthly, quarterly, or yearly meetings—is that this is God's world, that God has unfinished business for us to do, and that it is possible for us to ascertain God's will for us in this world. The meeting for business is, in essence, the meeting for worship focused upon specific matters, and there well may be significant correlation between the depth and power of the meeting for worship and that of the meeting for business.

Attendance

Friends who regularly attend meetings for worship but not those for business at the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting levels should weigh thoughtfully their assumption that these meetings do not concern them. And Friends who come regularly to meetings for business without the prior seasoning of the meeting for worship should examine carefully the basis for their practice. Those Friends whose concerns or affairs are to come before the meeting should feel a special responsibility to be present so that there may be no delay or mishandling of the business because of misunderstanding.

Preparation

Even if Friends are careful to attend meetings for business and to assemble promptly, they may nevertheless fritter away God's opportunity, perhaps because the business has been poorly prepared and presented, or because Friends do not apply themselves promptly and earnestly, or because Friends are self-indulgent, or simply because Friends do not wait upon the Lord.

The Query whether Friends are careful to come to meetings for worship "with hearts and minds prepared" should be extended to include our meetings for business as well. It is essential that the period of worship prior to the undertaking of business be long enough to permit Friends to put aside the heat and tumult of the day's anxieties and to enter into the quietness that comes from trust in God and in God's concern for the affairs of men and women.

For the right holding of meetings, it is important for clerks to have the known business meticulously prepared in advance of the session. Matters carried over from previous sessions should be noted and the persons who have been asked to take some action or to make a report should be reminded of the service expected. Members who wish to bring concerns before the meeting should inform the clerk in advance, have all possible relevant material in hand, and make their introductory remarks brief and recommendations clear. If any members feel moved to rise in the meeting to raise a major new concern, they should ask themselves whether this might not better wait to receive prior sifting by a few other Friends.

Speaking to Business

Those who rise to speak in the meeting for business should distinguish carefully between remarks which bear directly and helpfully upon the business and those which are tangential or distracting and should probably be left unspoken. Concerned members will cultivate the art of being relevant and concise, and will acknowledge the need for continual self-discipline and sensitivity to the proper use of the gifts, time, and energy of others, as well as their own.

Yet it is also of great importance that those Friends who feel they cannot speak acceptably and who are diffident about the significance of their share in the meeting be encouraged to say what they can, remembering that the concerns they feel they present so haltingly may in fact point to issues needing the meeting's consideration.

Since our method of transacting business presumes that in a given matter there is a way that is in harmony with God's plan, our search is for that right way, and not simply for a way which is either a victory for some faction or an expedient compromise. In a meeting that is rightly ordered no one wins or loses, but Truth prevails. It follows that Friends will listen carefully to the presentation of business in order to be clear as to the issues in hand, and they will weigh carefully the opinions expressed. Little is gained, however, by undue delay in handling routine and minor matters, which should move swiftly through the clerk's hands.

When the clerk asks for the sense of the meeting, Friends can help by speaking promptly and concisely and, where another has stated a position satisfactorily, they need offer only a word or two expressing unity. When familiar matters recur, Friends should guard against being swept away by reminiscence or response from habit. Repetition in itself is not the problem; some concerns have to be repeated because of our insensitivity. The central question must be, "Is this repetition from frailty or from God?"

Just as there is nothing intrinsically improper in repetition, so also humor may have a rightful place, restoring perspective, lifting spirits, and diminishing tensions.

A Friends meeting is not a town meeting in which everyone has the right to speak, for no one has the right to speak in meeting. Friends have, instead, the privilege and the duty to lay before the meeting whatever relevant insight they may possess. Out of this sharing of light may come a greater light which would not have been possible had some refrained from speaking and had others insisted upon being heard many times.

Reaching Decisions

In assessing the sense of the meeting, the clerk and the meeting may quite properly give greater weight to those Friends who over the years have shown wisdom and sensitivity in affairs similar to those at hand. But the meeting must always be on guard against habitual acceptance of the words of weighty Friends as final and must always beware of accepting the traditional pattern as the right pattern just because it is traditional. Fresh, powerful insights have often been granted to new and younger Friends. In the end, actions of the meeting should reveal an inner sense of rightness that all present will feel.

In those cases where Friends have labored faithfully over a period of time and most are in agreement, and when deferring the decision still further entails hardship and the diversion of energy and time that might be helpfully used elsewhere, those who do not feel in unity with the action proposed may find it right to adopt one of the following: they may withdraw their objections, trusting that in time their understanding of the leading of the Light will be vindicated; they may stand aside, asking that their objections be minuted, but expressing their unwillingness to block what the rest of those present see as the right way; they may maintain their opposition, asking that their names be so recorded. Although the meeting may then proceed with the action proposed, it must do so in humility.

Experience has also made it clear that matters of great moment and emotional involvement should not be settled in the session at which they are first proposed if postponement of final decision is possible. When such delay is not suitable, Friends should take time to ponder in silent waiting their own clearness of spirit and the rightness of the action to be taken. Once the matter has been settled to the satisfaction of those present and the minute approved, only with great reluctance and under strong inward compulsion should Friends suggest that the matter be reopened at that session or, indeed, in the near future.

Although documents to be laid before the meeting will, of course, be prepared with great care, the corporate light of the meeting may be greater than that of the Friends who prepared the material. When considering the wording of documents to be sent out by the meeting or included in the minutes, Friends need to exercise restraint in suggesting improvements, granting instead to responsible persons the power to make editorial changes needed. If the document is such that polished clarity is really necessary and the meeting's approval important, a few Friends may be asked to withdraw and make the needed revisions after they have heard the objections and suggestions relevant to the document. God's work may very well go on even if perfection of expression is not achieved, for the Kingdom of God does not come minute by polished minute.

Minutes

To facilitate swift and accurate minuting, the recording clerk should be provided in advance with as much pertinent information as possible: agenda, names, dates, places, and the precise recommendations of those proposing some action. It is also important to have minutes of decision read and approved while the meeting is still in session. Once approved, minutes are not open to revision except by action of the meeting.

In sum, our conviction of God's care for this world and our respect for human dignity must carry over into the conduct of our meetings for business. We are called to love those present enough to listen to what they have to say and to speak what is worth their hearing. Always minding the Light, we should come to meetings for business prepared to be conscientious in attending to business, disciplined in participation, and constantly aware that we are about God's business.