

An introduction to Quaker business practice by Eden Grace

This paper is intended as an introduction to how Quakers make decisions, and why we do it that way. The hope is that this perspective might be helpful to the Special Commission as it asks these questions of the WCC's own process. In offering this introduction, I speak, as is the custom among Friends, from my own experience of the Divine truth as I have received it and without any authority to speak officially for the Religious Society of Friends. My experience is as an American Friend, and I offer here a reflection on the practice used by American and European Friends. Friends all over the world have discovered the ways that Quaker practice speaks to their condition. I hope that my contribution can be supplemented in the future by contributions from non-western Quakers, and that a richer picture might thus emerge which could be of even greater use to the World Council of Churches.

The first comment to make about Quaker business practice is that it is of central importance to Friends. It is rooted in our deepest theological affirmations, and is one of our highest spiritual experiences. To ask a Quaker to describe the Meeting for Business is to ask for a testimony of the core of our faith. Therefore I will need to start here with some basic theological affirmations, and then proceed to draw their implications for decision-making.

The primary theological doctrine and spiritual experience of Friends is that the living Christ is present to teach us Himself. No priestly intermediary is necessary for Divine access, for "there is One, Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition."¹ Rooted in such texts as John's prologue, Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is given in some measure to all people. This experience of the immediate presence of Christ, both personally and corporately, implies that we may be led by the Inward Teacher. Since Christ is not divided, the nearer we come to Him, the nearer we will be to one another. Thus the sense of being led into Unity with one another becomes a fundamental mark of the Divine work in the world.

Based on this theology, Friends commit themselves to discovering and implementing the will of God. This is the purpose of the Quaker Meeting for Business. "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 victory for some faction, or an expedient compromise."² What we call "the Sense of the Meeting" is not the collected wisdom of those present, but the collective discernment of God's will. There is no place for activities such as motions, seconds, amendments and votes in our process of collective discernment. Our bold affirmation is that God does indeed have a will for us, that God is actively trying to communicate that will, and that we are capable, through corporate prayer, to discover that will. A sign that we have achieved our goal of discerning God's will is the experience of Unity which is recognized and affirmed by those gathered.

Quakers profess a theocratic understanding of authority. "The primary authority is that of God, as the God whose will is sought, as Christ who presides, and as the Holy Spirit who inspires and empowers. Thus the task of the meeting is to listen in worship, putting itself under that authority, to discern the right way forward on any piece of business."³ All human leadership is subordinated to the authority of Christ, the true shepherd of any gathering of Christians. All participants in the Meeting are equally capable of being used by the Holy Spirit, and those who moderate the Meeting are seen as servants of the gathering discernment process.

A Quaker Meeting for Business is conducted in the context of worship, and with the same expectant waiting upon the Spirit as in the Meeting for Worship. The Business Meeting begins and ends with periods of open worship, and an atmosphere of reverence and devotion is maintained throughout the Meeting. Each contribution to the discussion is heard in a spirit of prayer. As the spiritual momentum grows and the movement of Christ is felt among us, we experience the Gathered Meeting, in which we are gathered into Unity with Christ and become of one heart and mind.

Quakers do not practice the outward ritual of Eucharist in our worship, but seek rather to experience and celebrate the inward spiritual participation in Christ's death and resurrection which comes from being raised up together into Unity in God. "We believe that a corporate practice of the presence of God, a corporate knowledge of Christ in our midst, a common experience of the work of the Spirit, constitute the supremely real sacrament of a Holy Communion."⁴ In the experience of Quakers, the Meeting for Business is one of the deepest occasions for this "eucharistic" event. Thus the spiritual depth of the Meeting is cherished and upheld throughout. "The right conduct of Business Meetings, even in routine matters, is important to the spiritual life of all. Care must be taken that the enduring value of a spiritual community is not sacrificed to the immediate goal of action."⁵

"Consensus" is a word sometimes used to describe a Quaker-like process. Yet Quakers would insist that this is not the most suitable term. Consensus (or unanimous consent, or general agreement) are based on the work of human wisdom and reason, whereas "the Sense of the Meeting" is based on the prompting of the Spirit. Consensus is commonly understood to require mutual compromise -- shaving away at positions until we find a core which is objectionable to none. The Quaker approach tries instead to reach toward a higher and greater Truth that speaks to all concerns in ways that could not have been foreseen. We discover what God wants for us, as opposed to what we thought we wanted. "Consensus is the product of an intellectual process. Sense of the Meeting is a commitment of faith."⁶ This difference is more than semantic. In resisting the word "consensus" we refuse to allow our Sacrament to become secularized. Preferred terms would be "Unity" or "Sense of the Meeting". The latter emphasizes the goal for the Gathered Meeting, and the former evokes the core theological affirmation of God's will for humanity.

I will freely admit that a Quaker Meeting for Business is vulnerable to abuse. Those who do not enter the process in a right spirit can seriously jeopardize the Meeting. In order for the Meeting to function, the members must share a commitment to a spiritual discipline. This discipline is cultivated rather than regulated, and it takes time to acquire. There is no official list of rules, although each Yearly Meeting (autonomous Quaker church) has a book of discipline which gives guidance on the spirit and practice of the Meeting for Business. Some elements of the discipline are:

- *attitude toward God:* We enter into the Business Meeting with hearts and minds prepared to be led by the Holy Spirit. We renew our commitment to Divine authority and our belief that the living Christ is present this day to teach and lead us. We submit to Divine will and seek to lay our own strong feelings and desires before God.

- *attitude toward the other members:* Our process places a high value on the strength of the community. A Sense of the Meeting is only achieved when those participating respect and care for one another. It requires a humble and loving spirit, imputing purity of motive to all participants and offering our highest selves in return. We seek to create a safe space for sharing. We pray that we might listen carefully, respectfully, lovingly. We listen always for the presence of God through what someone is saying, knowing that each of us is endowed with some measure of Divine Light. The creation of the blessed community is both a necessary prerequisite and an inevitable by-product of corporate discernment. While this is most easily accomplished at the local level, where members are already known to each other, it has been our experience that, when we ask the Lord's help, deep Christian community can form even among strangers.
- *attitude toward the process:* We value process over product, action or outcome. We respect each other's thoughts, feelings and insights more than expedient action. The process of reaching a decision yields more "results" than the decisions themselves. Attention to the Divine movement in the community is, in fact, the source of decision and action, so that process and outcome are ideally two sides of the same Sacramental experience. Through that experience of the Unity of the Meeting, we are prepared for faithful discipleship in the church and world. A decision which is made without that experience is of little value.
- *attitude toward potential outcomes:* We know that none of us is likely to enter the Meeting with a fully-formed understanding of the will of God, and so we expect that a new way will emerge which is not necessarily identified with the position of any person or faction. "... a group, meeting in the right spirit, may be given greater insight than any single person."⁷ "A gathered meeting under the authority of God is often able to find unity in creative ways which were not considered before the meeting but which become apparent during its course. Though the process of Quaker business may take some time, at the end it can find a united meeting able to act swiftly because the action has been widely agreed."⁸
- *commitment to the authority of the meeting:* All authority rests in God. Once the Meeting has discerned God's will as best it can at that moment in time, the decision of the Meeting is vested with a measure of Divine authority. 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 may be found.

- *role of human leadership:* The Meeting is served by a Presiding Clerk, and often also a Recording Clerk. Friends are appointed for a limited time, and these roles are widely shared among the membership. The Clerks have no formal authority of their own and can not speak for the Meeting. Their task is to focus and enable the discernment of the Meeting by laying business before it in an orderly way, managing the pace and discipline of the discussion, listening for the Sense of the Meeting to emerge, restating that Sense in clear language and asking for approval, and recording the business in written minutes. The Clerks develop the agenda and discern whether an issue is ripe for consideration by the Meeting or needs further seasoning by a committee. The Clerks are responsible for judging the "weight" of each comment by discerning the movement of the Spirit in the Meeting, rather than developing a tally of opinions pro and con. The Clerks are servants of the Meeting and not participants in the discussion. On rare occasion, when a Clerk finds that he or she must speak to an item of business, a replacement Clerk must be found until that item is concluded. Thus we avoid the temptation to assign any authority to human figures which would obscure our utter dependence on the authority of God.
- *role of written minutes:* The Clerk makes sure the Meeting understands what is being approved by stating it in clear language which is written down, read back, discussed and approved by the Meeting at the time the decision is made. The minutes, once approved, become authoritative. They are kept and referred to indefinitely. Thus minutes and minute-taking are crucial to the process, and are seen as a weighty spiritual practice rather than clerical function.
- *preparing an item of business:* Generally, the Business Meeting benefits from having items seasoned beforehand by a committee. The committee usually brings the item with a recommendation, but even if it does not, it should have done some work on preparing the item and anticipating various questions and concerns.
- *personal conduct:* We usually only speak once to each item. We only speak when recognized by the Clerk. We don't plan messages ahead of time, but listen instead to the movement of the Spirit and pray for guidance as to whether we are being led to speak. We fully expect that our message may not be needed, as God may have empowered another individual to offer the same insight. We do not offer redundant messages, since the Sense of the Meeting is not discerned by a tally of opinions. We pray continuously for the Meeting and its Clerks. Friends often find the Meeting for Business to be a purgative, humbling and awe-inspiring experience as we let go of our own self and personal agenda. Although the Meeting is a solemn event, humor is sometimes appropriate and helpful. We refrain from comments which suggest argument, debate or an attempt to convince, and rather give testimony to our experience of the leading of the Spirit in this matter. We listen thoughtfully and respectfully, observing a pause between messages for deeper listening. Each person present has a responsibility to participate and not hold back if they are led to speak. Every member of the church has the responsibility to attend the Business Meeting to the extent they are able.

- *on dissent*: "If an individual differs from what appears to be the general sense of the Meeting, it may be taken as a sign that the Divine will has not quite been grasped."⁹ The Meeting should be especially sensitive to sincere expressions of difference from the growing Unity. These may indicate that the Meeting has not truly listened to God's prompting among us. When a Friend feels he or she must "stand in the way" of Unity, the Meeting and the Friend will patiently labor together in hopes of coming to a truer understanding of God's will. However, individuals do not hold a power of veto, and should be ready to recognize the validity of corporate leadings and to submit to them if conscience allows, being recorded in the minutes as "standing aside". While we boldly profess a spirituality of unmediated relationship with the Divine, we are always mindful of how the human person is, in fact, already a mediating force. Our own past experience, our fears, our sin, and the influence of our cultural context, can all obscure our discernment of God's will. The presence of dissent and discord in the Meeting is therefore always an occasion for prayer, repentance and conversion by the whole Meeting.
- *on time*: Quaker decision making takes time. We can not allow ourselves to be hurried. A sense of urgency or pressure can quickly erode a process of deep seeking. We don't impose a deadline for making any decision. If Unity is not reached in one Meeting, the matter is laid over.
- *on not finding the sense of the meeting*: We take no action until there is Unity on taking action. Thus the Quaker process is essentially a conservative process in that respect. Things stay the same until we are in Unity on changing them.

Friends would not claim to have perfected this process, or that we always practice it with complete faithfulness. What I've described in this paper is Quaker process in its ideal form. Most Friends are painfully aware of how our humans falls short of the spiritual ideal, and of how fragile our process can seem. Corporate discernment of the will of God is a risky and imperfect proposition. In relying so extensively on the Holy Spirit, we make ourselves vulnerable to pitfalls and failures. However, far from being a weakness, such vulnerability is central to our understanding of the power of worship (and business) "in spirit and in truth." To fall into the hands of the living God requires leaping, laying ourselves open to risk. Our commitment to this process, and our assurance of its outcomes, can only be proven in the eschaton, but still we give testimony to the truth we have been given, and are able to say that we have tested this method and found it that it does indeed bring us into Unity with the will of God.

More could certainly be said about how Quakers make decisions, and I hope others will supplement this paper with their own contributions. It is exciting to Friends that the World Council of Churches is looking at models of decision making in hopes of developing one which is less conflict-based and more spiritually grounded. Quakers believe that we hold our process in trust for the whole Church, and now may be a time to share it. I hope that my contribution here has been faithful to the gift I have been given, and that it will prove helpful to the Special Commission as it continues to discern God's will for the future of the World Council of Churches.

Sources

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- Morley, Barry, *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307, Wallingford PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993.
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- Scott, Janet "Business Meetings", manuscript submitted for inclusion in the forthcoming *Dictionary of the Religious Society of Friends*, 1999.

Notes

1. George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends in the 1650's.
2. Thomas Brown, *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends* (hereafter NEYM F&P), p. 117.
3. Janet Scott, "Business Meetings" manuscript.
4. From a Quaker position paper written and offered by the three Quaker delegates to the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order in 1927. This paper, which tried to explain the Quaker position on sacraments and the non-use of outward elements, became the center of a heated debate on whether Quakers could be considered Christian, and more broadly on the matter of religious liberty. The question was finally determined by Bishop Charles Gore of the Church of England with his statement "God is not limited by His sacraments." see Ferner Nuhn, *Friends and the Ecumenical Movement* Philadelphia PA: Friends General Conference, 1970, p. 19-22.
5. NEYM F&P p. 222.
6. Barry Morley PHP p. 5.
7. George Selleck NEYM F&P p. 116.
8. Janet Scott, "Business Meetings" manuscript.
9. George Selleck NEYM F&P p. 116.

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