

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Revision Committee Proposed Advices, Queries and Voices

Meeting for Business: Advices

Participation in the meeting for worship with a concern for business is the responsibility of all. Come with open minds, seeking the spirit, listening carefully, discerning the truth in what others have to offer. Proceed with forbearance and warm affection for each other. If you cannot attend, prayerfully uphold the meeting.

We do not seek a majority decision nor even consensus. As we wait patiently for God's guidance, our experience is that way will open and we shall be led into unity. Speak only when God gives you new insight into the matter at hand. Think it possible that you may be mistaken.

Meeting for Business: Queries

Are our meetings for worship with a concern for business held in the spirit of worship, seeking the guidance of God?

In what ways do we each take our right share of responsibility in the service of the meeting?

Meeting for Business: Voices

So Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men's nor women's meetings, but to wait upon the Lord; and feeling his power and spirit to lead them, and order them to his glory; that so whatsoever they may do, they may do it to the praise and glory of God, and in unity in the faith, and in the spirit, and in fellowship in the order of the gospel;

George Fox, 1674

And that all may be careful to speak short and pertinent to matters in a Christian spirit, and dispatch business quickly, and keep out of long debates and heats; and with the spirit of God keep that down, which is doting about questions and strife of words, that tend to parties and contention: which in the church of God there is no such custom to be allowed. And likewise not to speak more than one at a time; nor any in a fierce way; for that is not to be allowed in any society, neither natural nor spiritual; but as the apostle saith, 'Be swift to hear, and slow to speak;' and let it be in the grace, which seasons all words....

George Fox, 1690

The meeting for the transaction of church business is as distinctly a religious exercise as is the meeting for worship, but it has a different objective. The meeting for worship is focused upon the divine-human relationship and the meeting for business is mainly concerned with inter-human cooperation, the two being interdependent. From another point of view, the meeting for worship concerns being while the meeting for business concerns doing. What is implicit in worship becomes explicit in action.

The meeting for business should, therefore, be preceded by a period of worship in which the hard shell of egocentricity is dissolved and the group united into a living whole. It is also well to conclude the business meeting with a period of silent devotion. George Fox wrote to Friends,

"Friends, keep your meetings in the power of God, and in his wisdom (by which all things were made) and in the love of God, that by that ye may order all to his glory. And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and continue awhile quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God Almighty may be felt among you... For the Power of the Lord will work through all, if you follow it." (Ep. 162, 1658)

Howard H. Brinton, 1952

For the preservation of love, concord and a good decorum in this meeting, 'tis earnestly desired that all business that comes before it be managed with gravity and moderation, in much love and Amity, without reflections or retorting, which is but reasonable as well as comely, since we have no other obligation upon each other but love, which is the very bond of our society: and therein to serve the Truth and one another; having an eye single to it, ready to sacrifice every private interest to that of Truth, and the good of the whole community.

Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting, 1678

BYM Proposed Advices, Queries & Voices

Partly because of its rarity, sense of the meeting is a gift of enormous worth, more valuable, perhaps, than any other Quaker gift or practice. Quakers are not the only people who worship in silence. They are not alone in waiting for continuing revelation by attending to the Light within.... But where, except among Friends, has the practice of discovering the sense of the meeting become so entrenched?
Barry Morley, 1993

Friends have traditionally so valued the fruit of group discernment that they have been willing to labor hard and to wait long to come into unity with one another before proceeding in a matter of substance.
Patricia Loring, 1992

Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God's will can be recognized through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making process from the secular idea of consensus. We have a common purpose in seeking God's will through waiting and listening, believing that every activity of life should be subject to divine guidance.

This does not mean that laughter and a sense of humor should be absent from our meetings for church affairs. It does mean that at all times there should be an inward recollection: out of this will spring a right dignity, flexible and free from pomp and formality.

Britain Yearly Meeting, 3.02

We sometimes overlook that meetings for business are also meetings for worship, even as Friends' weddings and memorial meetings are meetings for worship. Thus meetings for business are subject to the same kinds of abuse and require the same kind of nurture and discipline as meetings for worship. ... The Quaker business meeting is as dependent on the sensitivity, good will, and spiritual readings of its participants as is meeting for worship.

Barry Morley, 1993

Spiritual discernment lies at the heart of Quaker spirituality and practice. It's grounded in the central Quaker conviction of the availability to every person of the experience and guidance of God, immediate as well as mediated. Discernment is the faculty we use to distinguish the true movement of the Spirit to speak in meeting for worship from the wholly human urge to share, to instruct, or to straighten people out. It is the capacity we exercise in a centered meeting for worship for the conduct of business to sense the right course for the meeting to take in complex or difficult circumstances. It is the ability to see into people, situations, and possibilities to identify what is of God in them and what is of the numerous other sources in ourselves – and what may be both. It is that fallible, intuitive gift we use in attempting to discriminate the course to which we are personally led by God in a given situation, from our other impulses and from the generalized judgments of conscience.

Patricia Loring, 1992

In some people this gift [of discernment] may be given or developed to an unusual degree. Part of the Quaker experience, however, has been that we all have been given some measure of the gift of discernment. In a life lived with other priorities, the gift may be left undeveloped. But as we grow and are faithful to the spiritual life we may well be given more.

Patricia Loring, 1992

Consensus – a secular method, involving a rational process and producing general agreement. The authority is the group.

Sense of the Meeting – a religious method involving a spiritual process and producing a spirit-led decision. The authority is God as discerned by the group in worship.

Arthur Larabee, Clerking Workshop

Consensus is the product of willfulness. We will ourselves to a decision. Sense of the Meeting is a product of willingness in which we allow ourselves to be led. It is the difference between reason and faith.

Barry Morley, 1993

Central to the Quaker understanding of unity-based decision making is Fox's idea that there is "that of God in every one." When a group of believers comes together to deliberate about the best way to serve God here and now, each looks to find in others some manifestation of "that of God," and looks for the mark of the Spirit of Christ - Truth with a capital 'T' - in everyone else's remarks. In short, since the same Spirit speaks in each heart, the members expect to end their meetings united.

Michael J. Sheeran, 1996