



Friends Supporting Friends

Ministry & Pastoral Care Working Group

Baltimore Yearly Meeting

Religious Society of Friends

NAVIGATING DIFFERENCES WITHIN QUAKER COMMUNITIES

A Resource Guide

Quakers Don't Have Conflicts ... Do We?

We Quakers often assume that we are not prone to conflict. We are peace loving. We aspire to spiritual tolerance. The reality can be quite different. Commitment to truth and integrity can foster strong views. When we forget that our truth may not be the entire truth, conflict arises!

What happens then? We have no hierarchy to enforce spiritual discipline. Eldering is often punitive, not lovingly instructive. We have no bishops, no courts, and no HR folks. Our meetings that get caught in self-destructive conflict have no institutional resource entity to intervene. We can transform conflict while drawing on our Quaker faith and Practice.

Conflict in Quaker Communities

Conflict is a natural result of people interacting. A young attender drops out due to the physical advances of an elderly member. A treasurer reports thousands of dollars missing. A long-standing member leaves when his advice is ignored. Coldness between Friends goes far beyond avoidance and blossoms into a public toxic dance.

We are uncomfortable engaging with such conflicts. We are slow to acknowledge them. We may think we lack the needed skills, or the courage, or the presence of the Spirit. Yet by tolerating or ignoring them, we enable bad behavior and community disunity. The joy disappears and too late we realize that we have abandoned the gifts of Light and Spirit that may heal our hurts and broken relationships.

Addressing Conflict as Quakers

What to do? Quakers actually have what we need! With this in mind, BYM's Ministry & Pastoral Care formed the working group Friends Supporting Friends to provide help to entities or individuals experiencing communication issues, disagreements, or any other conflicts.

Friends have from the beginning relied on the presence of the Holy Spirit, that of God in each of us, and Love as the First Motion. And, there is a robust literature around interpersonal conflict that we have gathered. We offer here a selection that will expose you to concepts on the nature of conflict and how to use Quaker processes & beliefs. They are designed for you to bring back to your meeting or committee to practice yourselves.



Things to Keep in Mind

Two useful themes run through most of these materials and provide good advice.

- Each participant in a conflict is usually acting in good faith. Differing views are almost always legitimate. Our Quaker Faith asks us to honor and respect others with empathy and care, even when we disagree. .
- People act out and or experience hurt when they are not getting something they need. Often not merely attention, but rather something more fundamental that the other side has the power to grant.

Keeping these in mind, here are some practices and strategies to address the various types of conflict.

Situations Where One Individual Doesn't Agree

This often occurs in Meetings for Business or committee sessions. Everyone present is seemingly in agreement on a course of action, but there is one hold-out. When not addressed prayerfully, this can cascade into larger group problems. What to do? Each of these approaches seek to merge the Light shining in the individual with that of the rest of the group. No winners or losers!

1. **Pause for Worship.** In the midst of tense feelings, pause for a period of worship. This provides an opening for reflection on all that has been said, reconsideration of one's own position, and discernment of a new way forward. Sometimes that is a third way that wasn't apparent before.
2. **Standing Aside.** Friends operate by "sense of the meeting." This carries a mutual responsibility between the individual and meeting to test our sense of the Truth as we are imperfectly able to sense it at the time. The individual must feel that their concerns have been prayerfully considered by the meeting, yet they still cannot join in the decision. They can make sure their views are captured, then "stand aside" so that the meeting can proceed, in loving tenderness to those who cannot join in the decision.
3. **Eldering.** True eldering is about loving, seeing, naming, & inviting. It aims to build people up, even in response to harmful behavior. It is about the one eldering and the one being eldered each looking beyond their own limited perspectives and seeing each other with the Spirit's vision. It's not about chiding, what should be, or tradition. For more, see the informative article "A Case for Eldering and Discipline" by Herbert N. Lape at <http://www.friendsjournal.org/case-eldering-and-discipline>.
4. **Reshape the Proposal.** Have the person with concerns, together with people who support the proposal, form a small group to reshape the proposal, and bring a revision back to a future meeting. This also allows for reflection and seasoning. It also allows time for conversations among those with differing views, so greater understanding can emerge.

Situations Where Two Individuals Are in Conflict

This type of conflict may have begun as a simple disagreement in a meeting of one sort or other, but has festered into public sniping and disruption. While there may be more than two individuals involved, typically there are two that represent the different perspectives.



- 5. Attempt at Repair.** Either participant may reach out and seek to prevent a misunderstanding from escalating out of control. This can be as simple as “I feel worried ... ,” “I’m sorry about ...,” “I need to calm down ...,” “Stop the action ...,” and “I appreciate” It’s amazing how kind words can heal wounds. There are more insights in the article “Attempt Repair” by Andy Stanton-Henry at <https://esr.earlham.edu/news-events/friendly-reminder-attempt-repair/>
- 6. Informal One-on-One Meeting.** Face-to-face at a time that’s mutually convenient can be a good opportunity to talk and listen. Sharing personal stories and listening is the most important part. Participants sometimes invite a mutual friend to provide neutral observations and holding in the Light. The tips below from the book “On Listening to Another” by Douglas Steere can help.

	Holy Listening	Holy Speaking
Mindset	To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be the greatest service that a human being can perform for another. It requires maturity, patience, self-transcendence, openness to the new.	The human and the divine intersect when we are conscious of the influence of the Spirit, and both speaker and listener have faith that the it will be present in our interactions and guide us in discerning the will of God.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen deeply beyond the words • Be present: eye contact and relaxed body • Show an open & vulnerable heart & mind • Resist classifying, labelling, and judging • Wonder about what the speaker might be feeling, thinking, desiring • Name what you’ve heard & accept correction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face the listener and make full eye contact • Use “I” statements from your own experience • Share important feelings, thoughts, & desires • Go as deep as you can about how you feel • Resist naming the other’s beliefs & values • Keep your messages to bite-size chunks easy for the listener to digest and respond

- 7. Structured 1-on-1 Listening.** Sometimes participants simply need a chance to listen to one another without the pressure of onlookers. This is more structured than the informal meeting above, and almost always involves a neutral third party to lay out ground rules. The key is for each person the share their views in a descriptive, non-judgmental, fact-based manner. The tips above can be helpful. For a more comprehensive guide see the article “Constructive Conflict – A Simple Guide for Quaker Practice” put out by the Boulder Friends Meeting at <https://boulderfriendsmeeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CONSTRUCTIVE-CONFLICT-Guide-for-Quaker-Practice.pdf>
- 8. Clearness Committee.** When a conflict is so serious that a 1-on-1 may not seem safe or possible, it may help to bring in others to provide perspective and a safe place to process feelings. The parties in conflict meet with two or three Friends trusted by both parties, in a safe space, and with time for worship. Each party has an opportunity to speak and be listened to without interruption. After both parties feel heard, those present can ask open-ended or clarifying questions. They don’t give advice or take sides. When everyone feels “clear,” the meeting for worship ends. This process is well described in the blog “Resolving conflict the Quaker way actually works: The Clearness Committee!” at <https://laquaker.blogspot.com/2019/01/resolving-conflict-quaker-way-actually.html>



Situations with Conflict between or within Groups

This type of conflict often occurs during major decisions. There may be two or more significant factions that have strong and opposing viewpoints. Meetings for Business go on for hours and seemingly keep repeating the same arguments. Here are some time-tested approaches:

9. **Threshing Session**. This is a called meeting specifically not for decision-making. The normal Quaker meeting for business practices are relaxed so that Friends can speak more than once to an issue, speak to a point just made, or ask a question of a previous speaker. The group may even take “straw polls” of opinions or go around the circle giving each person an opportunity to speak in turn. Threshing sessions allow everyone to say what they think without the burden of facing a decision. They can benefit greatly from the Holy Listening & Speaking tips above.
10. **Listening Sessions**. Just like the 1-on-1 Listening above, groups sometimes need to truly listen to one another without posturing or advocacy. This almost always involves a neutral third party to lay out the ground rules. The above tips on Holy Listening & Speaking as well as the article “Constructive Conflict – A Simple Guide for Quaker Practice” provide useful frameworks.
11. **Trust Circles**. This approach seeks to assist Friends in focusing on ideas more than personalities, defining a way forward together rather than who is to blame, practice individual and corporate self-examination that will lead to the avoidance of “othering,” and the building of wholesome and trustworthy relationships and a sense of belonging across the worship community. A comprehensive guide is at <https://www.thirdhaven.org/TrustCirclesGuideforFacilitators.pdf>.

Situations You Can't Resolve with the Above

What happens when none of the above work? Don't give up! The Friends Supporting Friends Working Group has advised on all manner of seemingly intractable situations. Sometimes we suggest a small step that turns the tide. Sometimes we simply confirm what the inquirer already knew. Sometimes we propose our active involvement in a facilitated intervention or mediation.

We are here to support you!

For More Information

We have a wealth of additional articles, books, and pamphlets. Please contact us! Especially informative are materials from the New York Yearly Meeting's Conflict Transformation Committee. Filmed modules from their excellent conflict resolution workshop can be found at <https://www.nyym.org/content/conflict-transformation-videos>.

If these are not enough, come join our Working Group!

Closing Thoughts

- “... conflict is always with us. Because that is so, let us make the most of it. Let us take the opportunity to embrace the tension and grow from the experience of transformative practice. Let us have the courage to believe in one another, even in conflict, even in change.” - Peter Phillips NYYM Committee on Conflict Transformation.
- “In a word, the essence of Quaker spirituality is right listening.” Irwin Abrams, Quaker historian

