
QUAKER PROCESS

LARGE PRINT EDITION

Madison Monthly Meeting

Religious Society of Friends

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What we try to do

Quakers conduct business through “monthly meetings for worship with attention to business” and through committee meetings. The Quaker process that is used to conduct business is radically different from the manner in which business is conducted in modern society. In making decisions, Quakers strive for a “sense of the meeting.”

A sense of the meeting is the discovery of God’s will in the group. It is not a compromise. It is not achieved by vote or veto or persuasion. Because Quakers believe that there is that of God in each of us, we work to hear the thoughts, beliefs, and leadings of everyone present. The sense of the meeting may coincide with a particular viewpoint, but it is not produced from debate or competition.

We believe that by following Quaker process, we will be led to a view of the truth and God’s direction for us. The paradox is that we value both individual leadings as well as our process, even where they seem at odds. Through holding both up together, we believe that we will transform and grow into that which God would have us do or be.

With the Spirit’s help, and by listening to and seeing our individual pieces of truth, we are able to knit these little pieces together into a larger and more glorious piece of our corporate truth.

This process requires patience, and we often need to be reminded that we are working in God’s time and not in society’s time. Through this process, through listening to God in all present, we may be able to determine the path that the Divine would have us take. This from Britain’s Faith and Practice:

“...our meetings carry the 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.” [3.02]*

* - Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995

What the individual brings

The discernment process requires work up front. As individuals, we know the details and issues related to a concern, perhaps by reading bulletins, newsletters, and by having conversations with other members. Another form of preparation is clarifying our own experience and opinion about the issue to be considered. Yet another level of preparation is submitting possible agenda items well ahead of time.

Individuals strive to be present at business meetings with open, non-judgmental states of mind. Part of that involves a willingness to lay aside our preconceived opinions and personal agendas in favor of emptying ourselves to the motions of the Spirit. We listen carefully, holding the speaker in love so that a sense of the meeting may be found in the atmosphere of God's love. We remember that no one person, including oneself, speaks God's will alone.

Strong feelings and reactions of individuals might be best examined by the individual. Is there a strong emotional reaction from past experiences? Is there an ego-driven reaction? Is there a true leading of Spirit? There may be a distinction made between an individual leading and a leading for the meeting as a whole. Strong individual leadings should be trusted to the discernment of the community.

How we work together

At business and committee meetings, Friends respect and invite the diversity of opinions and viewpoints brought by individual members and attenders, seeking from each message a kernel of truth that could add to or shape the emerging sense of the meeting. What is sought is unity, or a sense of the meeting, not the justification of personal points of view.

The Clerk/Convener guides the Meeting, and comments should be directed to that clerk, not to other individuals. The clerk is responsible for guiding the discernment process, in addition to sifting both the intellectual and spiritual components of the interactions. The clerk chooses the order of speakers and paces them, and tests a sense of an emerging spirit of unity by speaking it aloud so that people can speak to any remaining differences.

Differences of opinion are voiced in a respectful manner, and hurt feelings are expressed and acknowledged with tenderness. A dialogue must not be engaged in by individuals; instead, prayerful silence is observed between messages to allow for thoughts to be reflected upon and absorbed. Friends understand that concerns about topics should be voiced with brevity and without repetition. Restraint is observed when pressing a point so that everyone in the Meeting or on the committee has a chance to be heard. Friends who experience changes in their understanding or position are encouraged to speak to those changes.

Challenges

We acknowledge that this can be very difficult work, as people allow themselves to open and be vulnerable. Britain's Faith and Practice acknowledges this:

“Part of the creative experience of a community is learning how to deal with conflict when it arises, and Friends are not usually good at this. ‘Speaking the Truth in love’ is a Quaker cliché, but ‘papering over the cracks’ is the principle more commonly acted upon.” [10.22]*

In the event of conflict, a group may feel it appropriate to shift from the particular conflict to some of the queries below:

- How do we respect each other?
- How do we speak tenderly to each other when we feel unheard, hurt, and upset?
- How do we discern what message from the Spirit is coming through the Speaker?
- When difficulties arise, how do we react?

Dig deeply
Cast forth the loose matter
and get down to the
rock, sure foundation
to the Divine Voice
which gives a
clear and certain sound.

- JOHN WOOLMAN
