

Before Business Begins

NOTES FOR FRIENDS MEETING
RECORDING CLERKS
AND RECORDERS

by

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The Mosher Book and Tract Committee is pleased to offer Friends these notes and comments of an experienced Recording Clerk, believing they may be of assistance to Friends in the conduct of their business affairs. Both the author and the Committee intend that the recommendations presented here be regarded as suggestions and advices only and not as prescriptions for the proper conduct of Friends business.

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH it is some years now since I was Recording Clerk of Friends Meeting at Cambridge, I can still recall how surprised I was to hear my own voice reading out the opening minute for the first time. On the principle (learned from Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*) that one should not compound ignorance with timidity, I had decided at the outset to read the minutes in a strong, clear voice no matter how uncertain I might be about what they said. Right or wrong, the minutes would at least be heard.

Some time later, after the meeting had concluded with a period of silent worship, an elderly Friend came up and said, "It's such a pleasure to have you read those minutes; now I can hear everything that goes on." I was grateful to have had that encouragement and also a little disappointed. She had not said anything about how I had written the minutes, which was admittedly my principal concern.

New Recording Clerks can hardly avoid feeling a certain anxiety about their unfamiliar responsibility, especially when they must read back the minutes as soon as the matter is concluded, but I have since reflected that in the truest sense it is not the Recording Clerk, but the meeting and the Spirit that guides it that prepare the minutes. Although it is not always easy to find the right words for a minute that must be prepared promptly, Recording Clerks should remind themselves that the conduct of Friends business is spiritually based and that most of it is conducted in a spirit of unity and harmony. This not only makes the task of the Recording Clerk easier but, for most of us, joyful.

There is still a labor, I recognize, in getting the right phrases in the right places, and this booklet is intended to help make that part of the task easier. The first part deals with those forms and phrases that Recording Clerks might like to have at hand to help them minute the customary business matters of our meetings—accepting new members, appointing a committee on clearness, arrangements for marriages, and the like.

There is a need, I believe, for having these phrases gathered in a single booklet. Some of the actions we customarily take in our meetings are fairly intricate, so that the form of the appropriate minute is difficult to remember or reconstruct on the spot, especially if one has not run into a situation like it in several months or more. Some small meetings may in fact go for years without recording a single marriage or receiving a request for transfer of membership. The yearly meeting's book of Faith and Practice can (and should) be consulted, of course, but it will seldom give the appropriate phrasing for the minute. There are some matters, moreover, that must be recorded quite carefully for legal reasons. Above all it is my hope that having the phrases for routine matters available in a convenient form will save time during business meetings and will free Recording Clerks to concentrate on those matters that are not routine, matters that require the special attention of the Presiding and Recording Clerks.

In addition to gathering these phrases, I have made a few comments on the preparation of more formal minutes and some suggestions on the creating of minutes for matters that are not routine. These suggestions will hardly solve all the problems of preparing a sound minute, but I hope they will help Recording Clerks keep in focus the main purpose of their task. The direct thought and the lucid phrase, just like the clear voice, help Friends to know where they are and where they are going in the conduct of their business. This, I believe, is the essential task of the Recording Clerk—helping Friends to take an active part in the conduct of their own affairs.

This booklet also includes a section at the end on keeping records. It is included here, in part because Recording Clerks, as well as Recorders and Presiding Clerks, must be concerned about the permanent records of the meeting, and in part because the formal membership and marriage records are the product of actions taken by the meeting. This section describes in detail the practices of record keeping outlined in *Faith and Practice* of New

England Yearly Meeting, practices which undoubtedly differ somewhat from those of other yearly meetings. I wish to thank especially Charlotte Blaschke, former Recorder of Cambridge Meeting, for allowing me to reflect in this section the care and creativity she brought to the task of Recorder.

A final section on the care of permanent records follows the suggestions prepared by the Archives and Historical Records Committee of New England Yearly Meeting and the further suggestions made during a weekend conference of Quaker archivists and historians at Powell House, Chatham, New York, in 1980.

It has been more than 20 years since I prepared the first edition of these notes. Although some changes and additions have been made since the first typescript "edition" of 1975, most notably those derived from the 1985 edition of *Faith and Practice* of New England Yearly Meeting, both the substance and form of these recommendations have remained much as they were first presented to Friends. I am gratified that successive Recording Clerks and Recorders in Friends Meeting at Cambridge have continued to find *Before Business Begins* useful and so, apparently, have the Clerks of other meetings who have requested photocopies from Cambridge. Needless to say, I am grateful to the Mosher Book and Tract Committee for making these notes available to Friends throughout New England and elsewhere.

PART I

WRITING MINUTES

A. Before Business Begins

A FRIEND once saw me writing up some minutes just before a business meeting and asked, in mock dismay, why he should bother attending when I had already recorded everything that was about to happen. I assured him that I no more knew what was going to happen than he did. Both of us had seen the agenda and knew from experience that although the meeting usually followed most of it, no one could tell *how* we would follow it, which way some important decisions would go, or what unscheduled items might take precedence over everything else. The only difference between us, I thought, was that he could deal with the unexpected developments as they came up, whereas I, as Recording Clerk, had to prepare for them. And one way to take care of the unexpected, I found, was to take care of the wholly routine matters before business begins.

Most business meetings will probably have some kind of agenda, whether or not it is distributed to members before the meeting begins. I try to sit down a half-hour or so before the meeting gathers and scan the agenda for routine matters that are almost certain to be taken up and whose resolution is likely to be favorable—accepting a new member, receiving a report from a committee on clearness, and the like. I make a checklist of these agenda items, number them in the order they appear on the agenda (even though this may not be the order in which they are actually taken up), and write them up on a separate sheet of notepaper according to the forms I shall describe below under “Prepared Phrases.” These prewritten minutes can then be read at the appropriate time and simply noted in

the minutes at the appropriate place by the number assigned them on the agenda. In a large meeting like Cambridge we may have as many as a dozen such items each month.

This is also a good time to talk with the clerks of those committees likely to recommend members to serve in various capacities, such as welcoming new members, overseeing a marriage, or taking up a committee responsibility. In Cambridge Meeting these clerks are usually from the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel, the Membership Committee, the Marriage and Family Life Committee, and the Nominating Committee. In addition, whenever I learn that a committee is going to present a formal minute, especially where it involves legal or financial matters, I try to have a copy of the text before me so that I can read it back as it was presented or make changes in it if it is amended during the discussion.

B. Prepared Phrases

Having scanned the agenda for routine matters and having gathered the names of people being recommended and any formal minutes that are going to be presented, I sit down and write up the routine minutes, following the forms I had previously prepared for these matters. These forms follow either the models suggested in *Faith and Practice* or those worked out over the years by previous Recording Clerks at Cambridge. I have put these phrases down on 3x5 cards according to their subject matter—"New Members," "Transfer of Membership," and the like—and now keep them in an envelope taped to the back of the Recording Clerk's minute book, where I can easily consult them if I have to. Other Recording Clerks have used a tab-indexed notebook for the prepared phrases. The particular system doesn't matter so much as having the phrases available when they are needed.

Before giving these prepared phrases, let me emphasize

the disclaimer given earlier. These phrases are *not* being offered as *the one* correct version of the minutes. Not only do our practices vary widely from meeting to meeting, but what strikes a New England Quaker ear as perfectly sound usage may come to a Prairie Friend as strange and wondrous news. I would hope, therefore, that Recording Clerks who find these phrases useful would go to their own monthly and yearly meeting records for the phrases appropriate to their own situations rather than copying these forms as I have given them here. They really should be treated as advices and suggestions only. In fact, in a few cases I have given a couple of versions just to show that there can be more than one equally good way to say the same thing.

For the sake of illustration I have used throughout "Friends Meeting at Cambridge." I have also used plural pronouns, where possible, to avoid the cumbersome alternative of indicating he/she. **The underlinings indicate blanks to be filled in by the appropriate names, dates, and so forth.**

1) Opening

Friends Meeting at Cambridge gathered in a regular (or called) Meeting for Business on (Ordinal Number) Month (Date), (Year) at (Hour). Some (Number) members and (Number) visitors were present. During the opening period of silent worship the Clerk read (Query [Number] reminding us to or asking us to...).

Or: The Monthly Meeting for Business of Friends Meeting at Cambridge met on (Ordinal Number) Month (Date), (Year) at (Hour). The meeting was convened by the Clerk after a period of silent worship.

Comment: The use of numbered months and days has become for many Friends an historical anachronism. For many years now the minutes of New England Yearly Meeting have used the conventional style of dating, and many monthly meetings have followed suit. My own view is that the use of the traditional Friends style causes little real confusion, but I will admit that the continued use of this style of dating, although oddly more compatible with the new computer technology formats than the conventional style, does not sit easily with many Friends.

2) New Members:

a) Request for Membership

(Full name)/ and (husband or wife's name) of (city/town/state and/or country if needed for identification) and their minor children, (first names), have requested membership with Friends Meeting at Cambridge. Their request was referred to the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel (or the Membership Committee) for its consideration and guidance.

or

The clerk read a letter from **(full name) / and (husband or wife's name) of (city/town/state and/or country if needed for identification) and their minor children, (first names)** requesting membership in this meeting. The application was received with great pleasure by the meeting, and ____ and ____ were appointed a committee to **visit with them and report back** to the next meeting for business.

Comment: Some meetings may prefer not to report requests for membership to the whole meeting until recommended by the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel or by the Membership Committee. This practice avoids any unnecessary embarrassment or discomfort for the applicant in the event there should be some reason for delaying the recommendation for acceptance. Other meetings, believing that it is of interest to the whole meeting when anyone applies for membership, report these requests before the appropriate committee has acted upon them so that Friends can make themselves known to the applicant.

In those cases where the applicants have been members of another religious society, their previous affiliation might be indicated immediately following their names.

b) Acceptance and Welcoming:

For the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel (or the Membership Committee), (clerk's name) recommended (full names and the first names of their minor children) for membership. Friends accepted them into membership of the meeting and look forward to welcoming them in the near future.

Comment: It is the practice in some meetings to give a brief description of the new members and to present them to the whole meeting at the time of their acceptance. Some larger meetings may appoint several members to "officially" welcome new members. Until recently such appointments at Cambridge were made by the meeting as a whole, but they are now made by the Membership Committee and so are not minuted by the business meeting.

c) Report on Welcoming:

Friends received a report that _____ had welcomed _____ into membership in the meeting.

Comment: Some comments on the occasion of the welcoming are usually added by the person giving the report, but these comments do not need to be minuted.

3) Transfer of Membership:

a) Into the Meeting:

The meeting has received a certificate of transfer from _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/State/Country) for (full names). Friends accepted them into membership of the meeting and look forward to welcoming them in the near future.

Comment: In most cases the state, following the name of the monthly meeting, is adequate to identify the meeting — thus, Sarasota Monthly Meeting, Florida. Sometimes more specific identification of the meeting's location will be needed — thus, Orange Grove Monthly Meeting, Pasadena, California. Once transfer members have been accepted, a receipt of transfer should be returned to their previous meeting.

b) To Another Meeting:

Friends approved the request of (full names) for transfer of their membership / and that of their minor children, (first names), junior members of the meeting, to the _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/State/Country), and instructed the clerk to send a certificate of removal to the clerk of the Monthly Meeting.

Comment: Since the recognition of junior membership varies among monthly meetings of the same yearly meeting, and even within the same monthly meeting some parents prefer not to enroll their children as junior members, special care has to be taken in recording transfers of mem-

bership so that the current membership status of minor children and their current wishes are respected in the transfer.

It should be noted that, at least in Cambridge, the meeting very seldom literally instructs the clerk to send a Certificate of Removal, but rather assumes that in approving the transfer to another meeting it has in effect given such instruction. The minute should nonetheless mention the Certificate of Removal.

It seems to be the practice of some meetings to say that they "regretfully report the transfer of" to another meeting. Whatever the sense of loss experienced by the meeting in a transfer of membership, it would seem more appropriate for the meeting to support the new association of the transferring member rather than recording its own sense of loss.

c) Report of Transfer:

The meeting has received acknowledgment from _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/State/Country), that (full names) / and their minor children, (first names), were accepted into membership of that meeting.

4) Junior Membership:

By Request:

Friends approved the request of (mother's full name) and (father's full name) for junior membership of their children (first names and ages) in the meeting and look forward to welcoming them in the near future.

Comment: Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting spells out some of the variants in requesting junior membership as follows: (1) by request of both parents (as above), (2) by request of a member parent and consent of the non-member parent, (3) by request of a guardian, and (4) under the appropriate circumstances, upon recommendation of the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel.

5) Change in Membership Status:

a) From Junior Membership to Adult Membership:

(Full name) and (full name), who have been junior members of this meeting, are recommended by the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel (or by the Membership Committee) for adult membership. Friends accepted them into membership of the meeting and look forward to welcoming them in the near future.

b) Sojourning Membership:

The Clerk read a minute from the _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/State/Country), asking us to accept (full names) as sojourning members of our meeting. Friends accepted this request and look forward to welcoming them as sojourning members while they are resident in this area.

Comment: British Friends apparently do not use the term "sojourning member," but rather send a letter of introduction to the meeting where one of their members is residing. It seems appropriate for American Friends to consider such a letter as a request for sojourning membership.

6) Removal of Membership:

a) To Another Religious Society (with Recommendation):

(Full names), members of this meeting, have expressed the desire to unite in membership with another religious society and have asked the meeting to grant them a letter of recommendation. Friends approved their request.

b) To Another Religious Society (without Recommendation):

On being informed that our members, (full names), are now members of another religious society, the meeting removed their names from the list of our members and will inform them of this action, suggesting that they consider possible relationship to Friends through the Wider Quaker Fellowship.

c) Resignation:

1) Request:

It was reported that (full names) have submitted their resignations from the meeting. Friends appointed a committee of _____ and _____ to visit them in love and to inquire into the cause of their resignation.

Comment: Some meetings may prefer to have the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel deal with resignations in a more private manner and thus merely record the fact of the

resignation in the minutes once the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel (or the Membership Committee) has investigated the matter.

2) Acceptance:

The committee to visit (full names) reported that they are firm in their desire to resign from the meeting. Friends accepted their wish and granted their request.

d) Discontinuance of Junior Members:

The following Junior Members, having reached the age of twenty-five without expressing a wish to join the meeting at this time, are discontinued in membership and removed from the rolls of the meeting according to the discipline of the New England Yearly Meeting: (full name), and _____ and _____. The Overseers have assured each of them that a future application for membership will be sympathetically considered by the meeting.

Comment: Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting states that junior membership ends at age twenty-five for those who have not previously expressed a wish to join the meeting.

7) Marriage:

a) Intentions to Marry and Committee on Clearness:

(Woman's full name) and (man's full name) [where appropriate indicate whether either or both are members of the meeting or not] report their intentions to unite in marriage and ask Friends Meeting at Cambridge to accept this care. Friends accepted and appointed (four members of the meeting, two women and two men) as a Committee on Clearness for both parties.

Comment: Recent practice, at least at Cambridge, has led to the appointing of a single Committee on Clearness with responsibility as a whole for the clearness of both parties rather than, as before, separate committees for the man and the woman.

b) Reports on Clearness and Appointment of a Special Meeting and of a Committee of Oversight:

For the Marriage Committee, (Clerk's name) reported that the Committee on Clearness had found both (woman's full name) and (man's full name) clear for marriage. Friends accepted this report and appointed a special Meeting for Worship for the purpose of this marriage to be held on (____) Month (Date), (Year), at (Hour) and appointed ____ and ____ as a Committee of Oversight.

c) Report on the Marriage:

_____ for the Committee of Oversight reported that (woman's full name) and (man's full name) united in marriage at the _____ meeting house on (____) Month (Date), (Year) in the manner of Friends.

Comment: However much some Recording Clerks may wish to elaborate the report on the marriage ceremony, it is important for legal reasons to record all the essential information included in the above example: full names, place, and date of the marriage.

d) Request to Marry under the Care of Another Meeting:

(Woman's or man's full name) reports her/his intention to unite in marriage with (woman's or man's full name) under the care of _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/ State/Country) and asks Friends Meeting at Cambridge to report on her/his clearness for marriage. Friends accepted this request and appointed _____ and _____ as a Committee on Clearness for (woman's or man's name).

e) Report on Clearness to be Sent to Another Meeting:

For the Marriage Committee, (Clerk's name) reported that the Committee on Clearness had found (woman's or man's full name) clear for marriage. Friends accepted this report and instructed the Clerk to send its findings to the Clerk of _____ Monthly Meeting, (City/State/ Country).

8) Nominations and Appointments:

a) Of Members to Committees and of Officers of the Meeting:

For the Nominating Committee, (Clerk's name) recommended that the following persons serve as members of the standing committees and as officers of the meeting for the following year to begin on (____) Month (Date), (Year). Friends accepted these recommendations and appointed the persons nominated to serve in the capacities indicated in the report attached to these minutes.

Comment: For most meetings this form may be adequate for the appointment of both officers and committee members, but for meetings that have been incorporated, the laws in some states require that a formal ballot be cast for the officers of the corporation. One of the ways of meeting this requirement would be to minute the following:

b) Of Meeting Officers (Incorporated Meetings):

With the unanimous consent of the members present the Recording Clerk cast one ballot for each of the following officers of Friends Meeting at Cambridge to serve for one year beginning on _____Month (Date), (Year), through _____Month (Date), (Year), or until their successors are appointed and qualified:

Clerk:

Recording Clerk:

Recorder:

Treasurer:

Whereupon the ballots having been cast, the nominees were declared elected to their respective offices.

9) Conscientious Objection:

Friends noted the receipt of a letter from (full name) requesting that we record his conscientious objection to military service and his registration with the Selective Service System under protest.

Comment: Friends meetings in recent years have agreed to accept letters from individuals stating their conscientious objection to military service and to the registration requirements of the Selective Service System. Under present law these letters do not have any legal standing, but their acknowledged receipt does establish a record that could be useful in any future determination of the right of the individual to be recognized as a conscientious objector by the Selective Service System.

10) Closing:

No further business appearing, Friends concluded with a period of worship, purposing to meet next at the appointed time on () Month (Date), (Year), at (Time)/ or immediately after the rise of the meeting for worship on () Month (Date), (Year).

Comment: None of the routine minutes has provoked more comment or has been rewritten more often than this one. I would like to mention some of these changes, because the earlier versions illustrate in one way or another how the casual use of language can sometimes undermine the meaning of our experiences.

It had been my practice for the first several meetings to say that "the meeting adjourned with a moment of silence," until a perceptive Friend pointed out that we just don't sit in silence, but rather silently worship at the close of our

meetings. The phrase "a moment of silent worship," although perhaps accurate in describing how most business meetings are closed, seemed to define the worship by how long it lasted, whereas if it is genuine worship, it is more properly defined by the quality of the experience. Even the silence, it was pointed out by another, could be broken if someone were moved to speak in the closing worship.

Often simplest is best: "Friends concluded with a period of worship...." That seems to be the case here, and it is the principle I have tried to apply throughout in preparing these phrases.