

Friends' Decision Making Process / Clerking
Notes from Jacqueline Stillwell & Art Larabee

Friends' decision-making process is a group process that invites spiritual awareness and guidance. It is called “sense of the meeting.” Decisions are identified by the unity of the group. The attitudes, methods and practices of a Friends meeting for business are for the purpose of supporting this process. Remember to go where Spirit leads, expect surprises.

Sense of the meeting is a shared awareness of a place to which the Spirit has led us. It may or may not contain within it a decision. If it does contain a decision, the decision alone is sometimes referred to as “sense of the meeting.”

Sense of the meeting / discernment	Consensus
A spiritual method	A secular method
Involving a spiritual process	Involving a rational process
Expecting a Spirit-led decision	Producing a general agreement
The authority is the Spirit as discerned by the group in a spirit of worship	The authority is the group
“How are we led?”	“What can we agree to?”

Basic Assumptions of the Friends Meeting for Business:

- There is a spiritual energy in the world.
- We can access this spiritual energy to guide us in the conduct of human affairs.
- There is a difference between being guided as an individual and being guided as a group. It is possible to give over our individual desires in order to discover together how this energy can breath spiritual vitality into our community.
- When we choose to do this, life is more satisfying for both the individual and the group. There is more love, more joy and more peace. There is less fear, less separation and less violence.

Comments:

For many Friends, the name of this spiritual energy is the Spirit, or God. It is not necessary, however, to use these names in order to welcome this energy into our lives. If other names are right for you, use them.

*Friends believe, when we open ourselves to the Spirit, that it will lead us into a place of unity among us. **Sense of the meeting** is a shared awareness of a place to which the Spirit has led us. It may or may not contain within it a decision.*

Friends have developed distinctive practices to support a sense of the meeting method of decision-making. These methods are dynamic, however, they are not etched in stone. Whatever helps us to be open to the guidance of the Spirit in the conduct of our business is appropriate in a Friends meeting. It is the intention we hold to understand how God is leading us that matters, not the form we use. At times laughter, song or movement will help the Spirit move through us.

The Role and Responsibilities of those Present

- ❖ Come prepared both intellectually and spiritually – in your head and in your heart.
- ❖ Be open to a spiritual process of seeking a truth larger than your own.
- ❖ Start and end meetings promptly at the appointed times.
- ❖ Wait to be recognized by the clerk before speaking.
- ❖ Speak your own individual truth/experience, and then release it to the group.
- ❖ Listen to others, and to yourself, with the inner ear as well as with the outer ear; to listen empathetically for what “is really being said.”
- ❖ Refrain from speaking if what you have to say has already been said.
- ❖ Make an effort to trust the light which is given to others; to be open to new truth, revelation and insight; to be teachable.
- ❖ Help the meeting move forward by opening your consciousness to the group as a whole. This may include asking for a moment of silence, or voicing a sense of the meeting.
- ❖ Offer to work between meetings, and do it.
- ❖ Support the decisions made by the meeting.

Trust each other; on difficult issues trusting is more difficult and so is discernment.

Listening is an essential element.

What is God trying to tell us through this person who is speaking now?

Healthy committee work is necessary preparation for business meeting.

Any member can ask for a moment of silence.

The Role of the Clerk

The clerk’s role is not a passive one. The job is more than merely recognizing speakers until the discussion is over. The clerk is helpful to the meeting by being active, not as a participant in the substance of the meeting, but as a facilitator and recorder of the spiritual truth of the community.

The clerk helps to focus the discussion; keeps it on track; articulates interim conclusions during the course of a discussion; senses the underlying currents of the meeting and helps to articulate them; gives the meeting a sense of form and direction.

The clerk plays a large role in maintaining the worshipful character of the meeting. Leadership from the clerk encourages the corporate discipline that makes it easier for the meeting to sense and respond to the Spirit.

Absent leadership from the clerk, fear and ego may take over and these energies create barriers to the Spirit.

Language:

Use inclusive language. “A proposal has been made, how are we/Friends led?”

Be aware of your body language. Consider – sit when the focus is with the body of the meeting, stand to bring the attention to the clerk.

Prior to the Meeting:

- Draft an agenda. For each item define: who will present the item, estimate time, is this a report/discussion/decision? Is the homework prepared?
- Research any anticipated procedures or needed information. (reference Faith and Practice)
- Check-in with committee clerks. Ask for written reports – know who will be reporting about what, and if any action/decision items will be presented.
- Meet with recording clerk to review the agenda and prepare for the meeting. Consider what minutes you anticipate being written.
- A week before the meeting, remind members about the time/date for the meeting and about major agenda items or homework that needs attention.
- Check-in one-on-one with Friends who you anticipate may have difficulty with an agenda item, process, or another individual.

Clerking the Meeting:

- a. Ensure the room is set up for all to hear and see one another. Set up a table for the clerks. Do whatever is necessary and helpful to create a spiritually centered space.
- b. Begin promptly. Ask for help as needed so the responsibility for the meeting rests with everyone and not just you. Be open to movement of Spirit.
- c. Begin with a period of settling worship. May read a query into the worship.
- d. Review the agenda and ask for its approval. As you introduce each agenda item be clear if it is a report, discussion, or is this body needing to make a decision. Be clear about who will be making the decision and how much time is allotted for each item.
- e. Ask for an agreed upon end time for the meeting.
- f. Support the recording clerk during the meeting by holding worshipful space while s/he writes each minute. Pause to review the minutes as you progress through the meeting, taking care to approve wording on decision items.
- g. Summarize periodically, helping to build a sense of the meeting. Check with the group each time you do this to make sure your summary is accurate.
- h. Listen carefully to what is said, both with words and otherwise, so that you will be able to gather a sense of the meeting.
- i. Discern when the group has come to a sense of the meeting. State your perception of the sense of the meeting, and ask the group if your statement is accurate. It is the group that is the final authority and not you. Don't hesitate to suggest a sense of the meeting early on if you feel one is present.
- j. Sense the unity, or not, of the group and ask the group to confirm it.
- k. Before the end of the meeting, summarize what may be the unfinished business, and make a plan for how it will be handled. Assign homework.
- l. End the meeting on time (or ask for approval to extend it) with a brief period of open worship.

Work toward a spiritually safe environment.

- Insist that people be recognized before speaking.
- Ask people to address you, or the meeting as a whole, and not each other.
- Interrupt if two or more people get into a dialogue with just themselves.
- Slow things down by deliberately being slow to recognize the next speaker.

- Ask the meeting to “settle,” inviting time for reflection.
- Interrupt people who burden the meeting by repeating what has already been said, by speaking at too great a length, or who use a tone and language that is hurtful to other.
- Intercede on behalf of the group in order to create a climate of safety.
- Call for a period of worship if needed to bring the meeting back to a centered place.
- Help to bring out the full range of views on a particular matter, but keep in mind that it is not a purpose of the meeting to hear everything that could be said on a matter. Help people to say what may be difficult for them to say. Invite “minority” views before they are overwhelmed by the many.
- Help people who speak to stay focused on the matter at hand. Identify matters that belong elsewhere on the agenda, or in a different meeting.
- Speak the difficult truths for the group. In any group, some things may not be said to avoid conflict or because they are too painful. If they belong in the group’s deliberations, the clerk has a responsibility to speak them, or ask someone else to do this.
- Remain neutral. Refrain from speaking your personal thoughts. If you must speak on a topic, be clear with the group that you are speaking as an individual and not as the clerk. Ask for a temporary clerk for an agenda item if you are not able to remain neutral.

Create Safety by Interrupting

It is useful to think through in advance how to interrupt people, if this should be needed. Language that asks permission is useful:

- “May I make a suggestion ...?”
- “May I interrupt you ...?”
- “Would you be willing for me to ...?”
- “May I have your permission to ...?”

As difficult as it is to do, it is absolutely necessary for the safety and well-being of the meeting for the clerk to interrupt people who are burdening the meeting. The clerk is the only one who can do it. The meeting expects the clerk to do it. It’s hard, but do it.

Give difficult feedback/advice to individuals privately.

Situation – In leading a Pendle Hill workshop, there was in my group a very talkative, long-winded and weighty Friend. I knew I was in trouble. At the first break, I approached him, over tea, and asked if I might have his permission to interrupt him as I perceived the need to do so. He readily agreed. After we reconvened, he resumed his talkative ways. I was quite direct in interrupting him. Everyone gasped. I then explained that Friend X and I “had made a little deal over tea.” and everyone relaxed.

After the meeting: Review the minutes for accuracy/grammar/dots & commas with the recording clerk, and do any required follow-up with individuals or tasks.

Recording Clerk

- Review the agenda with the clerk prior to the meeting. Note details for upcoming agenda items and possible decisions.
- Take minutes during the meeting, and read back for approval during the meeting. Ask to be held in worship while discerning wording.
- Review and correct the minutes with the clerk after the meeting.
- Send the minutes to the clerk for distribution, or send directly to everyone promptly after the meeting.

Dangers for the Clerk

The most significant danger for the clerk is that s/he will have feelings about the matter under consideration, or the direction in which the meeting is going. In this case, the clerk must ask her/himself whether or not her/his feelings are getting in the way or an ability to perceive the sense of the meeting. The meeting may be moving in a direction very different from the clerk's own preference. If this happens, the clerk must "step aside," and ask the meeting to choose another clerk for the time being.

Dangers for the Meeting

- A clerk who has a point of view and is unable or unwilling to set it aside.
- A clerk who does not recognize s/he has a point of view and that it is getting in the way of discerning a sense of the meeting.
- A clerk who is unable to hear what is being said, verbally or non-verbally.
- Members of the meeting who come with their minds made up.
- Members of the meeting who are not willing to see issues through the eyes of others.
- An atmosphere that is not conducive to a spiritual process of openness and mutual respect.

Wise Words from Former Clerk Tom Waring

I would like to offer the following comfort:

1. If you feel you know the sense of the meeting, members will correct you if you are wrong.
2. If you are not sure you know the sense of the meeting, you can ask and some member(s) will help you.
3. If you are sure you don't know the sense of the meeting, Friends will talk some more until it becomes clear.

So you are safe no matter which of these problems arises.

Don't worry about shoving things along or allowing them to drag - there will be about equal expressions of concern on each side after each meeting for business, no matter what you do.

Standing Aside

There may come a time in a meeting when someone feels that they are not in unity with a proposed sense of the meeting, but they are nevertheless willing for the group to go ahead because they can feel, and trust, the way in which the Spirit has moved in the meeting and the Light that has been given to others. In this way, the meeting is liberated to go forward.

If someone stands aside, s/he must nevertheless be willing to support the decision of the group. The meeting may wish to record the cause for standing aside (while not identifying the individual). It is not acceptable to stand aside, and then sabotage the decision outside of the meeting.

“Standing aside” may be an indicator that the matter needs further seasoning, or that human resistance is clouding the sense of truth. Ultimately the clerk must sense whether the item should be held over for a future meeting. “Standing aside” should be a rare occurrence.

Understanding that Impasse is Not Failure

Friends’ decision-making process has the potential for impasse, with corresponding frustration, not unlike any other group decision-making process. If impasse and frustration are present it does not necessarily mean that the meeting has failed. Rather, it may mean that more work needs to be done. There may be important issues to be addressed and worked through.

In the face of change or a difficult decision, time for the emotional processing may be needed (ie. grieving/letting go what has been). Naming the issues can help the group move through them more readily. Be careful not to confuse human “stuck-ness” with inability to hear where the Spirit is leading.