



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
OF FRIENDS
QUAKERS

Guidelines for Preparing Meeting Minutes

Approved by Permanent Board Second Month 18, 2017

“Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

(The Epistle from the Elders at Balby, 1656)

I. Background and Introduction

Why do we write minutes?

During New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) Annual Sessions in 2015, the Yearly Meeting secretary offered an analogy between rock climbing and our work as Friends. He spoke of the importance of the role of pitons in rock climbing, saying “It is important, when we have made progress, to drive a stake in a sure spot to hold us when we fall later on.” He compared our minutes to those pitons. Minutes serve as a reminder of the last place that we had clarity. They remind us of what we have said “yes” to and help hold us accountable to that “yes” as we continue on the journey of discerning God’s will for us.

Minutes hold a mirror to the work of the Spirit in us, and can clearly articulate the spiritual sense of the gathered body, which can re-center us and inspire us further, reminding us of the balance of listening to multiple perspectives while capturing places of unity. Minutes can create a feeling of safety, and can teach us by their example how full of care discernment is among us. During the process of discernment, minutes can draw us together, newcomers as well as seasoned Friends.

When read aloud during the business meeting, they can reflect and validate the variety of perspectives among us as well as the unity of purpose. They can articulate how we got to a point of discernment, and can release us to go onward from that point. When read afterwards they can remind us, and inform others, of how the Spirit moved among us; what we considered; what clarity we received and where we seek further light; and what decisions were made.

Who is the audience for our minutes?

The first audience is always the minute-writing body and any constituent groups. Minutes then move in widening circles and through time.

The Larger Quaker Body is one circle. Minutes from a Yearly Meeting group may be read by quarterly and monthly meetings seeking guidance on practice or exploring their own discernment. Other Quaker bodies (e.g. Moses Brown School Board, Northwest Yearly Meeting, Friends United Meeting, Friends General Conference, Cuba Yearly Meeting, Ramallah Friends School) may read our minutes either for practical information or to better understand our mutual relationship. Minutes may be exchanged with more distant yearly meetings or other bodies in order for us to learn from each others' examples. Minutes are often shared widely within NEYM and our constituent bodies, where they both serve as background for further discernment and also guide our work.

The Wider World is a second circle. We may send minutes to the press, especially records of our decisions on current or controversial issues; we may send them to other denominations of the Church, hoping to encourage, advise, or simply to share what light we have found.

The Future includes biographers, historians and memorial-minute writers. People look to our minutes to discover what particular individuals did and how they served. Our minutes can answer questions about Quakers' impact, for better or worse, on historic debates such as slavery, marriage equality, prison reform, or other issues. Minutes may be used for purposes we cannot even imagine.

Advices to Recording Clerks

Minutes are a reflection of the movement of the Spirit between and among the body, the recording clerk, the presiding clerk, and God. Recording can be deeply humbling work, as well as spiritually exhausting. Recording clerks strain to hear the sense of the meeting just as much as presiding clerks. As we write, we become attached to our words, and it is painful to listen to them be criticized. When a minute is rejected, it can feel as if it is our gift or our very self that is being rejected. Be low and humble. Seek, in the inevitable criticism, the voice of God guiding you. Ask for support from others: their prayers, their acknowledgement, and their commiseration when a meeting seems to go badly. Remember that your gifts are a gift, but not to you: they are given to the body.

Conclusion

With all of this context in mind, we offer the following guidelines for the recording of the minutes of Annual Sessions, Permanent Board, and committees (both standing and ad hoc) of NEYM. We have used "pitons" ourselves in the creation of these guidelines, referencing the 2014 *Interim Faith and Practice*, the 1985 *Faith and Practice*, and other resources.

n.B. The Minutes Working Group realizes that the context in which the minutes are being taken (e.g., Annual Sessions, Permanent Board, or committee meeting) has an impact on some specific recording conventions. Overall, however, we find that these differences are fairly minimal. In places where we find that convention varies more significantly by context, we have made a note of it with a double asterisk. **

“... Clerks must be willing to pursue something that can never be stated precisely, to listen for meanings that are sometimes more implied than spoken, to search for unity in the midst of a discussion in which what unity may never be stated in so many words ...”

(Before Business Begins, pg. 30)

II. Types Of Minutes

Generally speaking, there are three loose categories of minutes: decision minutes, narrative minutes, and minutes of exercise.

Decision Minutes

These minutes describe an action that we commit to taking. Example: We approve allocating money for a particular project.

Guidelines for Decision Minutes:

Decision/action items should be clearly delineated within decision minutes, separate from any record of the discussion. Discussions should be documented in decision minutes only insofar as is useful to elucidate the thinking behind the decision.

When there are lengthy discussions leading up to a decision, the minutes should contain only the pieces of the discussion that offer context for how the sense of the meeting emerged. It is not necessary or advisable to record individual opinions or feelings unless doing so helps to clarify the sense of the meeting—or unless a Friend is standing aside, in which case the concern (but not the Friend) should be noted.

There are times when a current of unease is itself part of the sense of the meeting. In these instances the clerk and recording clerks should work together to discern how this is recorded.

Narrative Minutes

These are minutes that describe what happened during the meeting. For example, narrative minutes may reflect a report given by a working group or staff member or a presentation by a speaker, among other events.

Guidelines for Narrative Minutes:

It is generally well-advised to record the name and role (including monthly meeting and/or organizational affiliations) of a speaker who gives a presentation or report. The names of those who speak during the ensuing discussion should not be recorded.

Outside material such as reports, graphs, figures, and tables are often part of our discernment process. In general, such reports should be appended to the minutes and should not be summarized in the body of the minutes. (Note: hyperlinks to reports should not be used, as such links can easily be broken and the report lost if/when minutes are sent to the Yearly Meeting Archives.) If a particular piece of a report is relevant to discussion, discernment and decision, that particular piece can be excerpted in its original form in order to clarify the discussion and the decision, or to help understand the sense of the meeting being recorded. The same is true of epistles, memorial minutes, and travel minutes. These should never be summarized, only appended or excerpted. If a written report has not been made available in advance to the recording clerks, it is reasonable to hold the minute until the clerks' table has been given a chance to review it.

Oral or audio-visual reports, when accompanied by a written report, should almost never be summarized. Sometimes the content of oral/audio-visual reports does diverge from the content of the written report. We must be clear with those whom we ask to report to us that their written report stands as record of their discernment. The oral or audio-visual report is, generally, a (deeply appreciated) courtesy extended to the body. When oral or audio-visual reports sharply diverge from the written reports, minutes should record any fresh movement of the Spirit, but need not include details that were not part of the written report.

Occasionally the body is deeply in disunity with the content of a written report. However, the written report records the discernment and judgment of the reporter, not of the body. If such a circumstance arises, the clerk may appropriately discern whether or not additional minuting is required.

Oral or audio-visual reports, when unaccompanied by a written document, may appropriately be summarized. Occasionally there is a report, a speaker, or a presentation, unaccompanied by a written report, that it is not directly related to business. Examples might include a period of programmed worship, an especially moving message, or any unexpected movement of the Spirit. Again, minuting at these times should capture the movement of the Spirit and not seek to record what is said.

This can be difficult if we feel that our minutes are the only vehicle for recording such events. While what we hear at our meetings is often special, there are other avenues, often more appropriate ones, for recording details of particular events. It might be useful to recall ourselves to the rich tradition of Quaker journaling; our journals have often

captured notable events in business meetings, even when those events were (appropriately) not recorded in the minutes themselves.

Minutes of Exercise

These are minutes that describe what the labor has been, when clarity has not been reached on an action or a particular way forward. Example: “There was a great deal of pain expressed about...” or “We are not clear on how to move forward but during our meeting we did feel clarity that...”

Guidelines for Minutes of Exercise:

Minutes of Exercise often include concerns we have heard or questions we continue to sit with. A minute of exercise is often appropriate when the body is making a decision about particular concerns more broadly (example: minute on torture, minute on White Supremacy).

As with Decision Minutes, it is only necessary to record how the sense of the meeting emerged, rather than a detailed account of everything that was said. When recording a Minute of Exercise, the clerks may wish to pause periodically to test the sense of the meeting as the discussion unfolds.

III. General Guidelines

Recording Names

At the beginning of the minutes there should be a list of those present, including their monthly meeting affiliation and other important designations, such as “clerk” or “recording clerk.” It is common practice to keep a section for “regrets” from those who serve on the committee but are not able to attend the meeting. **Given the size of Annual Sessions and the variability in attendance from day to day, this practice does not apply to Annual Sessions.

When an individual is referenced within the text of the minutes, at the first reference their full name and monthly meeting (and/or other affiliation, if any) should be recorded. Names of those commenting during discernment are not recorded, including (and indeed, especially) those who “stand aside” from a minute.

Details such as spellings of names and affiliations are often tracked down outside of business sessions rather than taking everyone’s time during the meeting; discretion rests with the clerk.

When Recording the Words of One Person

When an individual’s words are recorded, the recording clerk should make it clear who is speaking in order to avoid implying that statements made by one person capture the

sense of the meeting. Example: “The presiding clerk spoke about (topic). He said that it is important to remember that...” is preferred over “The presiding clerk spoke about (topic). It is important to remember that...”

Recording of Announcements

During a long event, it often falls to the recording clerk to keep track of announcements, events happening later in the week, etc. Unless there is an obvious need for this information to be passed on outside the immediate setting of the business meeting (e.g., “The next meeting of this committee will be on [date]”), these details should not enter into the minutes.

Passive Voice

Avoid use of the passive voice. Sentences in the passive voice do not hold any actor accountable for the action. Example: “Permanent Board will raise the funds” is strongly preferred to “Funds will be raised.”

Approval of Minutes

It is best practice to write minutes during Meeting for Business, and best practice to approve them at the same meeting. Where this is not possible, minutes may appropriately be approved at the next meeting of that body.

It is often appropriate to give the clerks’ table “dots and commas” discretion over minutes already approved by the body. “Dots and commas” is generally taken to mean that clerks may edit for clarity or grammar, but not alter the substance.

**Minutes at Annual Sessions are often referred to Permanent Board for approval. This is not best practice. It is acceptable for routine minutes (e.g. “We thank the clerks for their service...”) but unacceptable for any minute of substance.

It is not appropriate to ask the Permanent Board to minute a substantive discussion that took place during Sessions. If Sessions cannot approve a contentious minute, then there is no minute. If the matter under consideration is too exigent to wait until the next Annual Sessions, then Sessions may ask Permanent Board to take the matter itself under consideration.

Example: Annual Sessions was unable to approve a minute of exercise on racial inequality. Permanent Board cannot be asked to minute the discussion that took place in Sessions. Permanent Board may be asked to hold their own discussion on racial inequality and may appropriately minute that discussion.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Minutes are a public record. Sometimes, however, sensitive subjects arise in discussion. In these instances it is advisable to create a second document separate from the public minutes. If such a document is used, note it in the public minutes. Example: We received a request for support from a meeting that is dealing with [sensitive issue X]. We recorded sensitive details in a separate document in order to appropriately share with Friends on a need-to-know basis.

Numbering and Style

Numbering conventions vary dramatically body to body. Adhere to precedent unless there is a clear reason to change. In the absence of precedent, a numbering system which reflects the date and sequence number of the minute (e.g. 1.2017, 2.2017, 3.2017) is most useful.

After Minutes Are Approved

Minutes should be distributed to all members of a committee as soon as convenient after their approval. Minutes can also be re-published in other ways, such as being included in the NEYM News, or sent to newspapers.

**Sessions Minutes have their own particular procedures for distribution and archive, which is outside the scope of this document to discuss; it is well-documented elsewhere ([link](#))

**Permanent Board minutes, as well as the minutes of Yearly Meeting committees, should be uploaded to the web page of the relevant committee on the NEYM website for public access, in addition to the committee folder in the NEYM Google Drive, for long-term storage. It is the responsibility of the recording clerk to upload the minutes to both of these places. The NEYM office manager may be contacted for technical support in this regard at office@neym.org.

IV. Other Resources:

Spiritual Responsibility in the Meeting for Business, by Patricia Loring, 1993

Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting, 1985

Before Business Begins: Notes for friends meeting recording clerks and recorders, by William Braasch Watson, 1996

Interim Faith and Practice, by the Ad-Hoc Faith and Practice Revision Committee, 2014