



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
— OF FRIENDS —
QUAKERS

The Experience of Unity Among Friends

Estimated total duration: 2 hours

Note: To prepare for this workshop, there should be one or two designated leaders/ conveners, who will keep time, facilitate the division into small groups, and choose a Unity Story to use for Part B (or Friends may decide to let each small group select a Unity Story). You may wish to have Friends stay in the same small groups for the whole 2 hours in order to minimize transition times.

In this session, you are invited to explore the experiences of unity that you have had among Friends. These moments may have been in a committee meeting or meeting for business, or in some other setting, with many others or few.

You are also invited to reflect on what might have made these experiences possible—conditions in yourself at the time, or in other individuals, or in the group involved.

We provide some short readings to help you and your Friends get started on the conversation.

We suggest that you break into small groups of about four, and then come back together for a whole-group conversation.

In each segment, please take care that each person gets some time to speak. No progress will be made if each member does not feel free to speak in their own “heart language.” This means, consequently, that everyone should prepare to “listen in tongues,” to listen receptively and in love. If you hear something that you want to explore further, and there is no time in the group session, make a note of it (mental or written) and make sure to speak with the Friend or Friends whose thoughts drew your attention.

Please remember to speak from your own experience. Statements about what “people” think or say don’t help the group to move forward, except when they are used briefly for context: “I have always thought that most people really know what they’re doing, but I am always in doubt.”

The aim is to know one another “in that which is eternal,” and you should bear in mind all the way through that the people you are speaking with are part of your beloved

community. Practicing love even when there is disagreement or incomprehension is part of how we enact unity.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Brief opening worship, then:

1. Briefly introduce yourselves around the room, and count off into groups (or otherwise divide)
2. Have someone read the Penington quotation to make sure that it's clear to all
3. Move into small groups

Remember, the goal here is to maintain a worship-sharing mood: take care to listen attentively; speak simply and not at too much length, so that everyone has a chance to share; leave space for reflection.

Part A. What is unity? (30 minutes)

Read the following passage from Isaac Penington:

... this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him, and in that he walks in his rank, in his own order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that. And this is far more pleasing to me, than if he walked just in that rank wherein I walk: nay, so far as I am spiritual I cannot so much as desire that he should do so, until he be particularly led thereto, by the same Spirit which led me. (Isaac Penington)

- What light comes to you from these words of Isaac's?
- What troubles you in this statement?
- What feelings about, and experiences of unity does it bring up?
- How would you describe the unity Isaac is talking about using your own "heart language?"

Part B. When have you felt it? (30 minutes)

Break into small groups according to directions from the leader/convener. Read the story chosen from among Unity Stories A, B, and C (at the end of this document. Then, discuss in your small group.

Start with these questions:

- What light comes to you from this story?
- What troubles you in this statement?

- When have you experienced unexpected unity with others? What happened?
- How would you describe that unity?

Part C. Unity and pseudo-unity (30 minutes)

A difficult question came before the meeting for business and opinions were deeply divided. Friends realized that it would take some time and learning to address it. The meeting started with the obvious things—forums, visiting speakers, a video or two. Conversations at the forums, and informally, played an important part, because members could hear others whom they knew and respected as they articulated why they held the views they did—and how they had come to them.

Over the months, however, it became clear to a few Friends that public forums like that were not reaching deeply enough. There followed some quiet, personal conversations, in which the Friends who were most pained by the question before the meeting were not pressured to change their mind, but were heard with real love. These conversations allowed Friends who were in the minority on the question to really feel that they were an essential part of the meeting, and that the “majority” Friends had come to their different position as a result of loving concern. When, after a couple of years, the minute came back to business meeting, Friends were unquestionably in unity. It was easy then—but nobody took it for granted!

In this anecdote, Friends felt the need to persist with their work, because unity had not yet been reached. Finally, Friends were satisfied that they had reached unity. In your small groups, reflect on how you tell the difference between unity and mere assent without unity.

In your experience, what are signs that unity has been reached? How do conversations within the meeting change? How does diversity of opinion feel, when the meeting has reached unity?

In your experience, how does it feel when unity has not been reached (even if a minute “has been passed”)? What are indicators that there is still an impasse in the meeting, or lack of trust? How does diversity of opinion feel, when the meeting is not in unity?

Part D. Closing and looking ahead. Gather back and share (10 minutes)

- What have you learned about unity in this session?
- What would you like to spend more time on as a meeting?
- What from this session might you revisit in your devotional time?

Unity Story A: Part of a report of a clearness committee 6/3/1993, Cleveland Friends Meeting

There is one other thing to which this committee can witness. That is the process we have experienced. In four meetings we dealt with the easy issues, then we laid our own hopes and expectations on the table and saw their divergence. We tasted despair that we humans could figure out a way forward. We then shifted from trying to produce a result to trying to come into the presence of God. Inexplicably and without the adrenaline rush of group dynamics or the mountaintop exhilaration of a mystical experience, we realized that we had come into unity. Our caveats, desires, and hesitations had just simply disappeared. We are grateful for God's gracious response to the many prayers asking for God's help and guidance and for the tendering of each of our hearts. It is hard to put into words because it is not a rational process; we witness to its reality.

From *Seeking God's Will on Same-Sex Relationships: The Experience of Cleveland Friends Meeting* (2010), pp. 40-41.

Unity Story B

About 15 years ago I was clerk of Norway Yearly Meeting. The meeting was facing a decision that it had been grappling with for years without being able to resolve it. Should Norwegian Friends be members of the ecumenical body, the Norwegian Christian Council (NCC)? Norway Yearly Meeting was already a member of the Council of Free Churches in Norway, and this had happened more by default for historical reasons as an earlier organization was rolled into a newer, wider one. Being a member of the Council of Free Churches just meant that Quakers, like other free churches, were dissenters from the state church of Norway. The decision about whether to join NCC was more consequential because it touched on the very core of Quaker identity. For some Norwegian Friends it seemed natural to be a part of NCC since the roots of Quaker faith lay in a strong witness to the inward Christ. These members were comfortable reading the Bible and described themselves either as Christians or Christocentric Friends. For others, membership in NCC signaled a narrowing of Quaker identity. It wasn't that they did not acknowledge that some Friends were Christian, but rather that they did not want the Religious Society of Friends defined exclusively as Christian. And for some, their experience of Christianity had been painful and harmful to them and they did not, therefore, wish to support or be associated with this body, even if they did appreciate the benefits of ecumenism and dialogue. For these Friends, many of whom would describe themselves as universalists, it was important to think of the body of Friends as open and not limited by or linked to the Christian tradition.

The question of membership in NCC had come up several times, and each time the yearly meeting had postponed the decision, in line with Quaker practice when the body could not find unity. But this time several things were different. Over the last two years the yearly meeting hosted two seminars or conferences. One on Quaker Universalism and one on Christianity in Quaker Faith. During these conferences, Friends told the story of their individual faith journeys, talked openly about how they understood their faith, and—most importantly—listened to one another compassionately. These experiences deepened our understanding of ourselves and others and built trust. Prior to the annual sessions where the decision to join NCC was coming up, I also spent a lot of time talking with the Friends that I knew had the strongest feelings about the issue, both for and against. I listened and made sure that everyone had a chance to express what was important to them about the issue.

When annual sessions arrived, business was conducted worshipfully. The issue was given plenty of time and everyone could express their hopes, fears and concerns. In the end, the body found unity in joining the NCC. Compared to earlier years, the process seemed smooth, and constructive, without ignoring the difficulties and strong feelings. After the session, one of the Friends who had been most against joining NCC came up to me and told me that even though the outcome had not been what he wanted personally, the session had seemed to model the way Quaker business should be done. He felt like we had really listened to the Spirit and found unity that transcended personal opinions and preferences. To me it also felt like Friends were connected in a way I hadn't experienced before. We had unity in diversity and there was trust and love.

by Erik Cleven

Unity Story C

In 1999, Wellesley Friends Meeting called a special meeting for worship for business to test our leadings about same-gender marriage in our Quaker meeting. This was the culmination of seven long years of workshops and worship sharing, seven years of threshing sessions and small group meetings, seven years of wondering if we would ever come to clearness.

In January, we had convened a clearness committee for the meeting. Every member and attender was invited to participate, including our Young Friends. At this meeting, no one was to speak for or against same-gender marriage. We wanted only to determine whether we were clear that the time had come to formally bring this concern to monthly meeting for business. At this meeting we reminded ourselves of the work we had done together and sought for what more we should do. We held in worship that concern that some in the meeting may be hurt no matter how we proceed.

The gathered group was clear. The meeting was ready and needed to go forward. Ministry and Counsel labored and prayed over a draft statement to be used to focus the meeting.

Finally, the appointed time arrived. As clerk, I reminded Friends to offer messages in a spirit of love and community, while leaving time between speakers for worship and reflection. More than anything, we needed to keep in mind that we were not looking for unanimity with each other. We were striving for the almost unimaginable goal of discerning God's will for our community about a concern that could become divisive.

Opening worship was longer than usual, and we centered very quickly. The clerk of Ministry and Counsel reviewed the process we had begun more than seven years before and read aloud the draft statement. The clerk of Young Friends read a carefully crafted statement urging us to support same gender marriage. We were impressed by the strength and clarity of their understanding.

People spoke of family members—sisters and brothers, sons and daughters—who were gay or lesbian and in committed partnerships. A woman spoke of the gay adults who had grown up in our meeting and reminded us of the joy we had found in them as children. A beloved older Friend spoke of her granddaughter who had married another woman a few months earlier; she had thought that a ceremony of commitment would be enough until she attended their wedding. People spoke from their hearts about feeling we should be open and welcoming to all people, even though some were personally uncomfortable and wishing for less controversial ways to accept them fully into community. We cried with each other and held each other in the Light.

After ninety minutes, I asked a respected elder of our meeting if he wished to speak. Everyone knew he was opposed to the issue; there was a collective gasp. He told of his discomfort with seeing gay couples and of his belief that such partnerships are unnatural. He stated that he had come to this meeting prepared to prevent the meeting from accepting same gender unions. After hearing the heartfelt messages offered during this worshipful meeting, he would not just step aside but would join with the meeting in approving this minute. His personal transformation was a gift that brought closure to the meeting.

We were stunned, but we were clear. Our meeting had found its way past tolerant acceptance to embrace the diversity of human relationships. On this day, we opened our hearts to God, and we were faithful.

By Nancy Haines