

# Living with the Body of Christ: A Field Guide to Quaker Process



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July 2008

# I. Monthly Meeting: A Primer

**M**onthly Meeting for Business<sup>1</sup> consists of several purposes interwoven with each other. The most obvious purpose is gathering together to discern what the work of the Meeting is and how it should be done. The Meeting's work varies over time, naturally. In recent years, Cincinnati Friends has considered how to support an individual's leading toward mission work; whether and how to alter the appearance of the meeting room for the sake of improving its acoustics; and what value to place on the risk of climbing a ladder on top of a table on top of a pew in order to change light bulbs in the meeting room.

In all its business, Monthly Meeting considers how to attend to the life of the Meeting community, both physically and spiritually—and sometimes how to attend and care for the world beyond the Meeting.

## *What Happens and How Does it Work?*

When you attend Monthly Meeting for the first time and sit down in one of the chairs set up in a circle in the Grueninger Room, you will find that the presiding clerk has prepared an agenda for the day's meeting. The agenda includes business which occurs regularly, such as the treasurer's report and business from committees, continuation of any business yet undecided, and a place for new business, which is where members or attenders might raise special concerns.

The clerk will begin the meeting with a period of centering silence, and then proceed through the agenda. You might discover that the conversation over each item is not the unstructured discussion you were expecting. For one thing, a person who wants to speak raises a hand or nods at the clerk, and asks for the clerk's attention by saying, "Clerk, please." The request seems odd and formal, but it serves to remind us that we are not trying to

persuade each other to one course of action or another, and we certainly aren't trying to argue a point—we are placing ideas before the community in order to listen for the resonance of God within them. That's why we don't address each other directly, but address the entire community through the clerk. We leave a period of silence between statements—so we have a chance to listen to them. We don't argue points; if we feel differently than the previous speaker, we let there be an appropriate silence before we speak our own feeling or experience, without rebutting the other. We try hard not to speak more than once to a question unless we have factual information to convey that others don't have (as when the treasurer presents the monthly financial report).

When the clerk perceives that the discussion is all beginning to go in the same direction, she or he will try to formulate a minute that states the “sense of the meeting”—the action or feeling we have apparently come to agree upon. Something like, “I think I hear us saying that we want to go ahead with the bid from Jones & Smith to repair the sewer line,” or “It sounds like we agree that we want to let the yearly meeting know about our concern for safety at the yearly meeting camp. Do we approve of sending a letter with these concerns to the camp committee?” If the response is “approve” or “agree” and the nodding of heads, the minute is approved. Sometimes the minute is read back to the group to make sure the sense of the meeting is adequately expressed. Sometimes the Meeting tinkers with wording before final approval. Then the next item of business is discussed.

*Beyond the Basics: Listening, Weighty Friends, Standing Aside, and Life in the Body*

So Monthly Meeting, at its simplest, is about making community decisions. The manner in which we make our decisions adds a second, deeper level of purpose to Monthly

Meeting. The truism about Quaker decision-making is that, because we don't do anything until we *all* agree, we don't vote. Or, as the old joke says:

“How many Quakers does it take to change a light bulb?”

“All of them.”

We use the phrase “sense of the meeting” to indicate unity, but with experience we learn that unity and unanimity are not the same. (More on this complexity later).

As we search for the one decision in which we can all be united, we discover that the deeper purpose of Monthly Meeting is to practice listening. Ideally, we listen—outwardly and inwardly—not for the best idea, but for where we feel God's leading. In practice, that means each one of us is forced to listen in at least three different locations.

I, for instance, one individual, am pressed to listen for the murmuring of the still small voice which I recognize as God's, whether I find it outside the window conveyed by birdsong, or rising in my heart as prayer that speaks through me. I'm pressed to listen to other individuals, to hear what is important to each one in the matter we are discussing—and to how God may be speaking through their voices. And I'm pressed to listen to and examine my own voice, in order to discern the difference between the opinions of my heart and mind, and the voice of the Inward Teacher.

Even when we discuss matters in which I can reasonably imagine God's interest—like what kind of program we want to create for our Young Friends, for instance, or whether we want to become involved in some ministry within Cincinnati—even then it can be difficult to listen in all of these locations (to God's voice purely, to God's voice expressed in the community, to the individuals beside me, and to my own thoughts). It's even more difficult to listen in all those locations on matters which I want to think are mundane: questions of carpeting and tile, or snow removal, or gutters and drains. But the truth is that there are no

mundane questions. Because, for one thing, human relationships and interactions are involved in every question we consider. And, for another thing, while there are certainly half a dozen different methods we could use to figure out the best way of fixing a drainage problem, we're here in Monthly Meeting because we've chosen to use the method of listening for God's direction.

I tend to feel—I think we all feel—a great deal of pressure to give up the idea of listening for God's direction when it comes to questions of carpet and drainage. We don't want to waste anybody's time, we don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, and deep down, I think there's always a little bit of doubt about whether waiting for the Spirit to lead us is actually going to work. So instead of waiting, we want to rush ahead, we want to use our minds and our reason. And we end up making logical, rational decisions, but not always Spirit-led decisions.

There are worse things that could happen. We could wind up making decisions that were neither Spirit-led *nor* rational. Rational isn't bad. But it isn't necessarily where life moves for us, either. By life I mean Life, that which has God moving in it.

In fact, we don't prepare for Monthly Meeting in any reasonable way because what we really want to understand about any decision is where the Life is in it. Michael Birkel writes that if he discovers that he's come to Monthly Meeting with his mind made up on some course of action, he uses the opening worship of Monthly Meeting to "unmake up" his mind so that he's able, in the discernment process, to encounter God on God's terms.<sup>2</sup>

We trust our committees, also, to go through a process of Spirit-led discernment, so that the recommendations they bring to the larger group are already seasoned, and the movement of Life as they saw it will be made clear.<sup>3</sup>

When a committee asks Monthly Meeting for guidance, or two committees have followed a discernment process to conflicting decisions, or an individual raises a leading or concern in Monthly

Meeting, then the listening process can become more complex. We may feel as though we need more information, as though we don't have enough material knowledge to catch God's outline. Those are the times when what we call Quaker process becomes synonymous with "exercise in patience." When Quakers don't know enough—factually or spiritually—to make a decision, we wait. We ask for the business to be held over to the next meeting. We ask someone to bring more information. We ask for more time in which to listen. Waiting isn't a decision only the clerk can make. Any one of us can make the request that we wait a while longer.

When we do wait, we often move into yet another dimension of Monthly Meeting, which is the practice of community when we are not in unity. Of all the purposes of Monthly Meeting, this may be the most profound. Even on a question of carpet, we can find ourselves stretched and growing in our capacity to be the body of Christ.

The body of Christ is the shorthand term that Paul uses, in many of his epistles, to describe what a Christ community should be:

"The body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? . . . As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Corinthians 12)

At its best (and it can be this even when we are most divided), Meeting for Business is both the practice and the reality of being the body of Christ, and a profound experience of the communion of Christ. In fact, Meeting for Business is the most

radical form of communion of which I am aware. The decision-making process of Meeting for Business is based upon the faith that, because we *are* the body of Christ, the foot and the ear and the rib and the appendix and the elbow and the molars, all of these belong to the body, all of them have a contribution to make, any one of them might best hear the leading of God in the process of discernment.

“If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” That’s what’s at stake when we go over to the Grueninger Room and sit down and talk about the budget, or about refinishing the pews, or about inviting the people of Cincinnati to our meetinghouse to hear a lecture on peace.

When we talk about these things, mundane as they may sometimes seem, it’s not *what* we talk about but *how* we talk that defines us as Christians. Do we remember that we are one body? That’s what our business is ultimately about—remembering that we are one body. We establish our faith in the conviction that the Spirit is able to lead us to the place where God would have us, provided we are willing and responsive. And so we are as far out on the edge in testing our life in the body as any Christians I know. Our Quaker process says to us, “the ear and the toe are equally deserving of respect.” When we *live* up to that ideal, when we live that, we are living the communion of Christ.

Although, as our own bodies teach us, life in the body isn’t always comfortable. We go hiking, for instance, and while the senses revel in the grandeur of creation, the feet and the back ache and groan. We indulge the love our tongue has for chocolate, and our teeth get cavities. Sometimes the stomach aches, sometimes the throat hurts. Sometimes we think too much. That’s life in the body: not always comfortable.

Sometimes Meeting for Business is that way. The ribs are happy and the spine is grumpy and the feet are ready to leave the

room. It could be that this happens more frequently when we slip and start looking for good ideas instead of God's direction, or when we allow our ideas and our identities to get tangled up together. For whatever reason, there isn't a Meeting in existence which hasn't had to figure out how to deal with sheer human stubbornness and an occasional bout of truly principled discord.

A while back I came across a passage in Thomas Hamm's book, *The Quakers in America*, which is bracingly enlightening about how Friends actually maneuver through the discord of life in the body, respecting the ear and the toe without becoming paralyzed by their conflict. (We try to avoid paralysis and stalemate on account of the insight expressed in one of our queries on stewardship: "Do we recognize that we speak through our inaction as well as our action?")

One of the virtues of Hamm's book is that he doesn't write about the theories of Quakerism—about how Friends *describe* themselves – he writes about Friends as they can be *observed*. So when writes about the business process, he doesn't describe the way we think it ought to work, but the way it works in practice. Friends are fond of saying that any one person can stand in the way of agreement, or unity, so it was startling to me to read this passage from Hamm's work:

"Friends do not make decisions through voting, as they do not believe that the will of the majority is always the will of God. Instead, objections from a principled minority can be enough to stop action until the meeting finds unity to proceed in some way ... While Friends believe that any speaking to a matter should come only from a clear conviction that the Spirit is leading the speaker, they recognize that human nature often asserts itself and a clerk may be faced with diametrically opposed views on an issue. One way that Friends have traditionally dealt with such differences is to acknowledge that Friends are usually at different levels of spiritual maturity. A clerk will judge individual comments by their



‘weight,’ (by) whether they manifest signs of a divine leading and a good spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

I was startled to read that passage, so at odds with conventional Quaker wisdom, but the more I pondered it the more I realized the truth it contained. In my experience, it has been true that not *any* minority can keep business from moving forward. In practice, it’s the *principled* minority that counts. The reality of Quaker business is that some voices *do* carry more weight than other voices. We do our best to listen, with equal respect to both the ear and the toe. But it’s possible that the toe will be more persuasive to us about where discernment lies. What makes the difference?

Well, certainly the characteristics that Hamm identifies: signs of a divine leading and a good spirit. The voices that carry weight with me in Meeting for Business are those whom I trust to be able to tell the difference between their own impulses and the nudges of God. They are also the voices of the persons whom I know will not pout or stomp off in a huff if things don’t go their way. A good spirit—the ability to confess that others may have more Light, that one might be mistaken, the willingness to stand aside when unity is flowing the other direction—these are signs which convince me that a voice deserves my attention. If there comes a time when one with a good spirit is not able to stand aside, the standing aside in the past will be a reason that his or her position bears more weight with me now.

I think what I’m saying, paradoxically, is that someone else’s ability to listen plays a large part in my decision about whether or not they bear listening to, whether their discernment carries much weight with me.

I also tend to hearken to those who possess the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians, Paul identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,

and self-control. In Colossians he speaks of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.

Paul's use of the idea of self-control seems especially pertinent to hard decisions in Monthly Meeting. To me, self-control extends beyond the ability to keep one's emotions proportionate to circumstances. When I don't find God's direction within me, and the individuals around me are holding up directional arrows which point in opposite directions, I am more likely to be persuaded by the messenger who shows evidence of self-knowledge, of self-reflection. I want to know that the person to whom I am listening has some practice differentiating between her or his own voice, the voice of the gathered community, and the still small voice that may be God's.

I also find that I am much better able to listen to those who possess some of the other fruits of the Spirit. I am more likely to let myself be influenced by a man, woman, or child who is loving, who is kind, who speaks with compassion and humility. Someone who isn't able to recognize or respond to my own humanity is not someone I am likely to listen to very attentively.

It follows that if I would like others to listen to my words, I would do well to remember what it takes for me to listen well to another: I would do well to be loving, to be kind, to speak with compassion and humility, and never to forget the very humanity of the one to whom I speak.

It would be possible to understand the phrase "sense of the meeting" without referring to the multiply-layered purposes of Monthly Meeting. We could simply accept that Friends don't vote because we are not trying to figure out either the best course of action, the most reasonable course of action, or the course of action which has the most support—we are trying to discern, even in questions of carpet and lighting, where God is leading us. But in my experience, it's only when I remind myself of the multiple purposes of doing business in this complex way that I actually

treasure the differences between Quaker process and *Robert's Rules of Order*, or any other worldly method for business. It's only when I accept that the purpose of Monthly Meeting is really the practice and the reality of the body of Christ that I begin to have the patience for what it means to make decisions without voting.

As we gather in our meetings for business to understand where God is leading us, what we attempt often seems to me so difficult I wonder whether there's any point trying to achieve it. But the times when we *do* achieve what we attempt—when answers come to us clearly by the Spirit's influence and not by our own will—confirm for me that the process by which we do our business is at least as important to our discipleship, and sometimes more so, than the questions we are given to answer. Listening is our first and most fundamental task—the work we are given to do is, literally, the afterthought of listening.

## II. Unity and Unanimity

**T**he quest for unity—expressed as agreement, as sameness—is part of the reality of a church. We treasure Quaker process because we hope it leads to unity, and our ability to be in unity seems to be the proof of our foundational belief that there is one Truth which we can all understand, to which we can all have access. My guess is that no matter how often we've heard Paul's comparison of the church to a body, we focus on the *oneness* of the body, not the difference expressed by the body parts. We don't hear that the foot and the hand are different, we hear that the body is the same. But in a passage similar to the passage from 1 Corinthians 12, quoted above, Paul actually highlights the body's *differences* by highlighting the different gifts that members of the church might have: some might be prophets, others ministers, or teachers, exhorters or givers, leaders or nurses. (Romans 12:6–8)

In fact, Paul writes about the church as a body precisely *because* churches are *not* the ideal bastions of sameness that we sort of hope they will be. They aren't places where everyone is always on the same page about stewardship and mission, places where people generally agree on what's moral and what isn't, they are not places where there tends to be a common understanding about who ought to be in charge, about who best listens for the voice of God, about where, in fact, God is leading us.

One of the essential reasons for joining a Meeting or any other church, no matter how that community may fail to live up to its ideals, is that a faith community is one of the only arenas in our lives where we are forced to confront and live with difference, to find peace with what is essentially and always *Other* than ourselves. In general, we surround ourselves with sameness: we want to be with other people who think like we think and dress like we dress and vote like we vote and enjoy the same activities we enjoy. And that's only natural. I mean, how easy is it to be friends with someone who wants to go to the opera the night you want to go to the hockey game? We enjoy what we enjoy, and so we tend to enjoy other people who appreciate the same things that we appreciate, who want to spend their time the same way we want to spend our time.

Somehow we all make our way to Meeting thinking we've come together for the same reasons and that we will appreciate the same things, and then we discover, perhaps even with the sense of having been cheated, that we aren't on the same page at all. Oh, sure, on the very largest, most theoretical things, yeah. We probably wouldn't be sitting in a Quaker meeting if we didn't believe it was possible for God to speak to every person without the need for a translator or mediator; or if we didn't believe that probably when God said love your enemies, he meant we shouldn't kill them. Or if we didn't agree that God is able to speak within our hearts through silence, even if we have some disagreement over

exactly how much silence we need to be able to listen for God's voice. So there are some vast, over-arching, theoretical agreements we have, but the nitty gritty dailiness is something else again.

What should we teach in First Day School? How much music should we have in worship, and what kind? What methods should we use to protect the meetinghouse from termites? What is the purpose of investing the Meeting's surplus funds? Well, on those things we're likely to find not only that we have differences, but that we're less tolerant of those smaller differences than we are of the bigger ones. Because about God, after all, who really knows?—but about money and termites, anyone can see that there's a right and a wrong answer to *those* problems.

A couple years after I became a Friend, and had seen my share of ups and downs in business meetings, I began to read in Friends literature, sometimes, that when Friends talk about unity, they don't mean unanimity, and that it's possible to have unity even when we don't all agree.

To be honest, I used to think that distinction was a cop-out, a way to excuse ourselves when sense of the meeting became majority rule. Because no one ever quite explained what that meant: unity is not unanimity.

But I no longer think it's a cop-out. Just in the last couple of years I've come to understand it. Unity is not unanimity. Unity is that we feel ourselves to be one body *even though* we're different.

For example, let's talk about widgets. Let's say that at First Friends Meeting in Red Ditch, most of the Meeting wants to invest some of the endowment in the local widget factory, but two people really *don't like* widgets. Those two people agree to stand aside. The meeting invests in the widget factory. Those two people still don't like the idea of widgets, but they continue to feel part of the body of the meeting—that's unity without unanimity.

Unity is what can happen when we *accept* difference, rather than try to conquer difference by demanding sameness. Unity is what can happen when we say, “some of us are better at seeing what keeps us safe, others of us are better at seeing what keeps us grounded in God’s providence”—and we thank God we have them both, because we are better off when we can see both things. Unity is what can happen when we accept that some persons have a gift for stewardship and others a gift for discipleship, and while in the realm of God those are the same gift, in the messy world we inhabit, for me it’s just good to rub shoulders with the gifted and hope some of those gifts rub off on me.

That’s not the same as saying that any idea is as good as any other. Some ideas are more aligned to the heart of God than others. But it is to say that we need all the difference in order to come closest to God’s heart.

So difference is a strength, and a big part of what we are drawn here for, as the Cincinnati Friends community of faith, is to learn to love those with whom we differ, to value them not because in most ways they are the same as we are, but because in so many ways they are so different from us, from me, they are so Other from every one of us. Which is, after all, why God created them, what God intends for them, and exactly why God loves them. We are here to learn—especially in Monthly Meeting—to be able to say the same for ourselves: that we know how to love what is indisputably Other than we are.

### III. Politics, Politicking, and Process

I learned in philosophy class that *politics*, contrary to both public opinion and the *Oxford American Dictionary*, doesn’t have to be a dirty word. *Politics* derives from the Greek words for citizen and for city. Politics is the process by which citizens make

decisions regarding the common life of the city. By extension, politics is the process by which any group of persons—a nation, an institution, even a church—makes decisions. Because Monthly Meeting for Business is the way in which our community of Friends makes decisions, it is inherently a political process.

Yet even though we engage in a political process, it would be inconsistent with our life as the body of Christ to be political in the dictionary's sense—or the world's. By definition and common assumption, *politics* is the endeavor to gain both power and the authority to command; politicians deal with strategies for building support, setting policies, maintaining power, and asserting control. This is the definition of *politics* that we mean when we talk about a political game, or a political machine.

In a democracy, the political “game” is often about persuasion: How can my group gain the most supporters? How can I make my idea seem better than the other options? What do I need to do to make sure that my supporters show up at crucial times to indicate their support—by their voices, their signs, their money, or their votes?

Monthly Meeting for Business is undoubtedly a political process in the best sense, closest to the root meaning of *politics*. Monthly Meeting is the setting and the manner in which our community of Friends makes decisions for and about our common life. But that very endeavor—the way of deciding together which we mean when we speak of “Quaker process”—is harmed if we allow amongst ourselves any politicking of the second kind. And the easiest way for that kind of politicking to manifest itself within a Meeting is by holding conversations outside the Meeting about decisions to be made within the Meeting.<sup>5</sup>

What would that kind of politicking look like? It can begin with just two people. A member of the Peace and Social Concerns Committee might call a Meeting friend to say, “I hope you’ll be at Monthly Meeting on Sunday, because Peace and Social Concerns

is bringing up our proposal to buy only organic coffee, and we need your support.”<sup>6</sup>

It would be more blatant politicking for one Friend to call another and say, “Hey, Joe, a group of us have been talking over this proposal from the Widget Committee, and we really don’t like it. People listen to you. Will you speak against it for us at this next Monthly Meeting?”

What happens at Monthly Meeting is not meant to be a secret, and very little of it, if any, is even confidential, but Quaker process sustains serious harm when you try to persuade people to attend Monthly Meeting simply because you want them to “vote” on one side or the other of an issue, leading, or concern. That’s because we are trying to discern where God is leading *all of us* on any given issue—not just you, not just you and a group of members whom you trust, not just me, not just me and my friends. We are trying to discern where God is leading *all of us*. And not a single one of us can know that on our own, outside the bounds of community discernment. We can wonder. We can pray. We can turn it over in our minds. We may even get the answer, in prayer or in the shower, and know that we have an idea to bring forward. But we cannot decide whether this idea is the right idea for the *community*, the idea God has put forward for us to follow until the community itself says so. What God wants for the community is not something individuals can learn in private conversation outside the bounds of Monthly Meeting.

So we covenant with each other, loosely, not to talk about Monthly Meeting concerns outside Monthly Meeting. Not because they’re meant to be secret—they’re not. Not because only some people should know, and others not—Monthly Meeting has greater decision-making authority than any one of its committees. But because it’s so difficult, once we get started talking about the issues, not to leap forward into discerning what we cannot actually



discern on our own, and what we are not meant to discern on our own.

Since we covenant to reserve our discussion on the leadings and concerns which lie before us for the time and space of Monthly Meeting, it can be easy for Monthly Meeting to become shrouded in mystery, like some kind of guild of secret knowledge. Yet ideally the work and discernment of Monthly Meeting should be transparent to all who attend. I think we all partake in some measure of the natural human tendency to protect information: to want to protect each other by withholding names, by pretending ideas don't carry emotions with them, by keeping our cards close to the vest about who said what, and why. Most of us have learned that being polite or professional means keeping things private, rather than public.

But Monthly Meeting works best with openness and transparency. The more everyone has the same information, the better we can distinguish all the separate voices for which we're listening. (See Section I.) The more we know about decisions in the past—what they were and what the sense of the meeting was at the time they were made—the more we know about each other's experiences, histories, and yes (horrors!), even emotions,<sup>7</sup> the better able we are to know both what we're hearing, and what's at stake in the decision. We covenant with one another to discern only together what we need to discern together, but our decisions, our decision-making, Monthly Meeting itself—none of these are secrets.

Perhaps one way to keep apparent the difference between politicking and discerning is to remember that while Monthly Meeting might look like democracy in its purest and most idealistic form—because decisions can't be made or implemented without unity—it is, in fact, nothing of the sort. Monthly Meeting is intended to be a theocracy under the governance of the Light, in which we gather together, not to discern our own will and sort out

our own ideas, not to see what most of us want to do, but to listen for God's ideas and to discern God's leading. We are not united in support of one idea or another; we become united as we discover, together, the path the Spirit reveals to us.

This kind of unity means that we may wind up "owning" decisions we wouldn't have made on our own. But for Quaker process to work, we agree that we will participate in implementing the decisions Monthly Meeting makes. Our covenant as members one of another is an agreement to move forward with the work because of our unity—even if my idea didn't carry the day, even if we didn't feel concerned one way or another, even if we weren't certain but approved the minute expressing the sense of the meeting, even if we felt ourselves out of unity but stood aside, or even if we missed the relevant meeting for the best of reasons. Owning the decision expresses not our unanimity, but our unity. It's how we honor the fragile nature of Quaker process.

The obvious corollary is that if we fail to honor Quaker process, we often discover that the Meeting lacks unity. Nor can we be sure that what seems to be the sense of the meeting will be honored by actual participation in a new agreement, or participation in the Meeting's common work. If the Meeting approves a plan to buy only fair trade coffee for the kitchen but Quaker process isn't honored in that decision, we'll discover soon enough that the local supermarket brand of coffee is back on the kitchen shelves.

Who will we call? We might eventually kick the offender off the Hospitality Committee. If worse comes to worst, or we feel passionately about fair trade coffee, we could maybe kick them out of Meeting. But the truth is we have little in the way of punitive power, and not much desire to use it. We come together by voluntary association. Our failure to carry out a common decision is sometimes the result of one individual's stubbornness, but is more frequently the result of a flaw in the way we've conducted

our Quaker process. We made a decision too quickly, or before we ever entered the space of Meeting for Business. Or we didn't actually listen for and respond to God's leading. Or we didn't listen to each other. Or we weren't clear, somehow, about our own motives and emotions.

God help us, Quaker process is difficult work—demanding spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. We can only expect it to bear fruit if we are all equally pledged to respect the participation of the whole body in our common discernment, and to respect, individually, that the common journey of our Monthly Meeting won't always be exactly synchronized with our individual leadings or concerns.

#### IV. Listening to Prophetic Ministry: In Worship and in Business

**A**lmost from the beginning of my time as a Quaker, I have been interested in the difference between madness and prophecy, between revelation and ego.<sup>8</sup> Not as a purely intellectual challenge, but because it seems such a crucial difference to a people who give individual leading as much weight as Friends do. We give individual leading a great deal of power, and yet we want to make sure—both as individuals and as the beloved community—that we are ultimately led by God, not by persons. So when we listen to the words that are spoken in our business meetings, we listen closely for the Spirit within them. And if we cannot hear the Spirit, we ask ourselves whether it's on account of our own deafness, or whether it's the speaker's deafness.

This is never an easy question to answer. The Spirit doesn't speak as loudly on questions of carpeting and landscaping, I think, as on questions involving ministry or outreach. But even more difficult are the questions that involve change and security. Should we undertake serious participation in an urban ministry project?

Should we radically change our form of worship? Should we sell the meetinghouse to the local preservation group which wants to use it as a museum? These are the types of questions where it can become extremely difficult to even know how to listen to the strong voices we hear.

I once belonged to a Meeting which was offered a great deal of prophetic ministry by a few of its members. I believe some of that prophecy was really led by God. Some of it was led by ego or madness. Sometimes it was awfully hard to tell which was which. So when I went off to seminary and had time to think about it, I set myself the task of figuring out how I might tell the difference between madness and prophecy. I thought that listening with certain queries in mind might serve the process of discernment. I tried to incorporate the models of revelation and of prophecy that I encountered in my studies, and what I knew of the way discernment has been practiced in our Quaker history. Eventually I came up with a set of queries that I could ask myself as I listened to a prophetic message, to help me discern how it matched up with Truth. In case these queries might be as useful to anyone else as they have been to me, I offer them here.

*Queries for Listening to Prophetic Messages, Leadings, and Concerns*

- Does this message have resonance with our history; does it reflect who we have been?
- Are we being asked to change our direction, to become a new community? If so, what kind of relation does this new community bear to our present and to our past?
- Is this message consistent with the writings and teachings of our faith, as we know that teaching by the Spirit?

- Is the Friend who brings this message willing to speak on behalf of the community to God, as well as on behalf of God to the community?
- Is this Friend in continuing conversation with God about this message or leading, based on the response of the community? Is this Friend open to the possibility that the message might change?
- Would this action foster the spiritual growth of the Meeting and its members?
- Have we appealed and submitted to the authority of Truth in our consideration of this concern?
- Do I feel that God is speaking to or moving in me through this message? If so, in what way?
- What evidence does this Friend give of the Spirit/Teacher/Guide at work in herself or himself? Is this the cross, and is this Friend prepared to bear it?

## V. Listening, Not Reasoning (Yet)

In describing to newcomers the listening way in which Quakers do business, I often find myself saying that what we are listening for isn't the best idea or the most logical path, but a leading toward the path God wants us to travel. It may sound as though what I'm saying is that God's idea will never be a rational one, but that's not really what I mean. This fictional case study may help clarify how the Spirit's leading takes precedence over reason.

Let's suppose that David and Katherine Hinshaw, life-long Friends who have been members for the past twenty years of Dinwiddie Monthly Meeting in the suburbs of Blue Hole, Iowa, die within a couple months of each other and, under the terms of their joint will and trust, leave the Meeting \$100,000 on the condition

that it be spent in its entirety within two years from the date it is disbursed, along with any income that the gift has earned in those years.

At the next Monthly Meeting, Dinwiddie Friends has a lot to talk about. They decide in short order to set up a Hinshaw Fund on their books. But as they try to decide how to use the fund, the conversation is nervous, unsettled. Eventually they muddle through to the understanding that they have to establish a process for making the decision before they can actually make the decision, and this is what they come up with: In a couple of weeks, a specially called Meeting for Business will gather to attend to this issue alone. As ideas, leadings, or concerns occur to Friends between now and then, they are urged to explain them on paper as far as the Guide has carried them. At the specially called Meeting for Business, the clerk will lead a brainstorming session in which those ideas—and others which occur in the course of the special meeting—will all be aired and recorded, and then the task of sorting the best and most viable will be turned over to an *ad hoc* committee on the Hinshaw Fund, which will be asked to give a report to Monthly Meeting the following month.<sup>9</sup> The *ad hoc* committee will be composed of the presiding clerk of the Meeting, the clerk of Ministry and Counsel, the clerk of the Outreach Committee, the clerk of the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, the Clerk of the Trustees, and two members chosen from Monthly Meeting.

A few weeks after the specially called Meeting, when the *ad hoc* committee reports back to Monthly Meeting, they say that they have listened to all the various ideas, chosen some, combined others, and dropped some, to come up with four proposals for Monthly Meeting to choose among. To wit:

- Use the Hinshaw Fund to hire an architect and put a down payment on a lot in order to build a meetinghouse that Dinwiddie would own. Established

in 1967 by faculty members at the College of Blue Hole, Dinwiddie Monthly Meeting has never met in its own building, but has always rented space from another church or a school. In 40 years, the location has changed six times, and frequently in Monthly Meeting and in several committees, discussion has revolved around whether the Meeting would attract more members to itself—and seekers to Friends' faith—if the Meeting had the higher, more dependable profile that a building would offer.

- Many of the Friends who founded the Meeting are nearing or past retirement age. They have been looking with interest and envy toward some of the Quaker-owned or directed retirement/care communities back East. Even if the Hinshaw Fund couldn't underwrite the entirety of a similar facility out here in Blue Hole, it could provide seed money for the development of a continuing care retirement community on Quaker principles, with ongoing ties to the Meeting.
- A number of Dinwiddie Friends moved to Blue Hole from further west during the Great Plains boom of the 2010s. Growing up in Evangelical Friends Churches which supported missions in Central America, South America, and Africa, they have always felt a vague unease about the lack of missions activity on the part of Dinwiddie Friends. They are excited by the growth of the Samburu and Turkana missions in Kenya, and think that the Hinshaw Fund could be used as seed money to establish the kind of physical plant for those missions that the Kenyan Friends have further east: a hospital and school.

- Use the Hinshaw Fund on behalf of Dinwiddie's neighbors in Blue Hole and environs. Decide to give the entire fund away to families and community organizations who can make a case that they either need it, or could put it to good use. Set up a committee, open to any who are interested, which will gather applications and disburse \$10,000 a month for the next ten months. Potential applicants could be families bankrupted by medical bills, schools in poor neighborhoods which want to expand their facilities, a small group of social workers who want to develop a new way for integrating ex-convicts back into the Blue Hole community, etc., etc. We'll find the good works as we go along.

While logic and reason can help us carry out any of these proposals in the best way, the proposals themselves are so different from one another that we probably won't use reason to decide between them. That's what I mean when I say that when we search for sense of the meeting, we aren't searching for the best idea or the most logical path. In lieu of using reason to decide among the proposals, we might fall back on a number of other instinctive methods for making decisions. These instinctive methods can certainly lead us to a decision, but not necessarily a faithful decision. Our instinctive methods might take one or more of several natural forms:

- Bert likes the give-away proposal best, and I tend to think like Bert thinks, so I'm leaning towards the give-away proposal also.
- I've always said it was a shame we don't do more for missions than we do, and that was my idea that I submitted to the committee, and I'm sticking with it. I don't care what anybody else says.



- The retirement home thing is Sarah’s idea; she’s been talking about it for a while, that the Meeting ought to do something, and if we don’t do this now, we know she’ll never shut up. I just can’t take five years of her harping on it, so let’s just throw her this bone and get it over with.
- I don’t know why, I just think the idea of just giving away all that money—some of it to people we don’t even know—is ridiculous.

When I say that we aren’t choosing “the best idea” or making a “rational” choice, it’s because often the very nature of what we’re deciding is an issue not easily resolved by reason. Not to mention the reality that ideas often become attached to personalities. Sometimes a Friend feels rejected personally when his or her idea is not approved. And sometimes I reject an idea because I don’t like the person who put the idea forward or the method they’ve used in putting the idea forward. I can’t see past the person to the idea on its own.

Quakerism proposes an alternative to this kind of instinctual decision-making, which is to listen for the leading and direction of the Inner Guide. At some points, that leading and direction will actually be reasonable—once Dinwiddie has chosen one of the above ideas, for instance, a great deal of reasoning will go into deciding how to carry the project forward: What are the architect’s qualifications? Which Quaker administrators could come talk with us about Quaker continuing care, and when do we want to schedule this talk, and who is going to make an airport run? In the Turkana/Samburu region, what village is most central to the majority of the population? Are there any ethnic conflicts that would prevent some of that population from having access to the village? And there are many more practical questions which will need to be answered. But the first questions of leading are listening questions, not reasoning questions.

## VI. Flow Charts for Leadings and Concerns

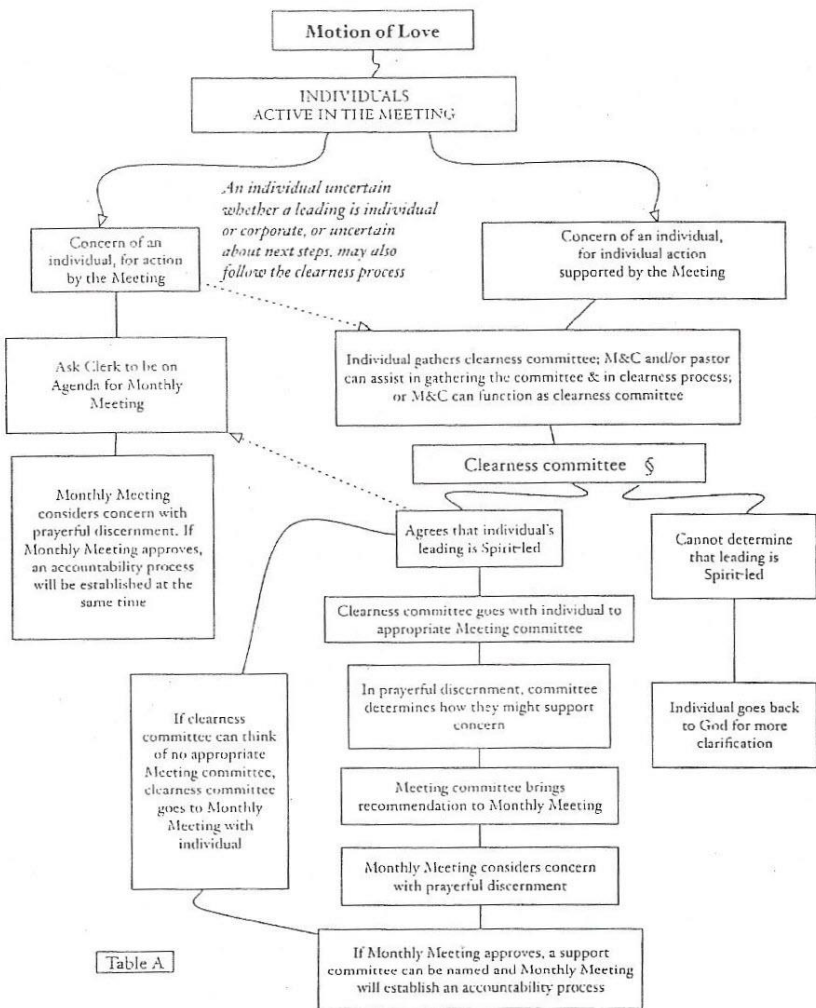
The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* of 2002 defines the Quaker use of *concern* in this way: “A quickening sense of the need to do something about a situation or issue in response to what is felt to be a direct intimation of God’s will.” The Quaker use of *leading* is defined as: “A sense of being called by God to undertake a specific course of action. A leading often arises from a concern.”

A great deal of business considered in Monthly Meeting is generated by the ongoing responsibilities of the Meeting’s standing committees. But sometimes an individual or group within the Meeting (either a committee or a group of Friends with a common concern) wants to ask for the Meeting’s support of a leading, or the Meeting’s agreement to share a concern. Sometimes the request for the Meeting to take some kind of action to share a concern comes from outside the Meeting—from a group of concerned neighbors, maybe, or from the Peace and Social Concerns Committee of a Yearly Meeting several states away.

It can be difficult for newcomers to sort out how leadings and concerns are brought forward for community discernment. The following flow charts are partly descriptive, partly suggestive—and even partly conjectural—on how a leading or concern is brought through successive discernment processes until it comes to Monthly Meeting for discernment by the gathered community. In each case, the leading or concern is indicated as beginning with “a motion of love,” which is the phrase that John Woolman frequently used in his journal to indicate the first stirring of a leading or concern.

Because these flow charts are intended to be a description of a tradition which probably varied and varies widely, and because they can rely on no creed for their validity, I preface them with our famous Quaker postscript from the Elders at Balby, 1656:

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



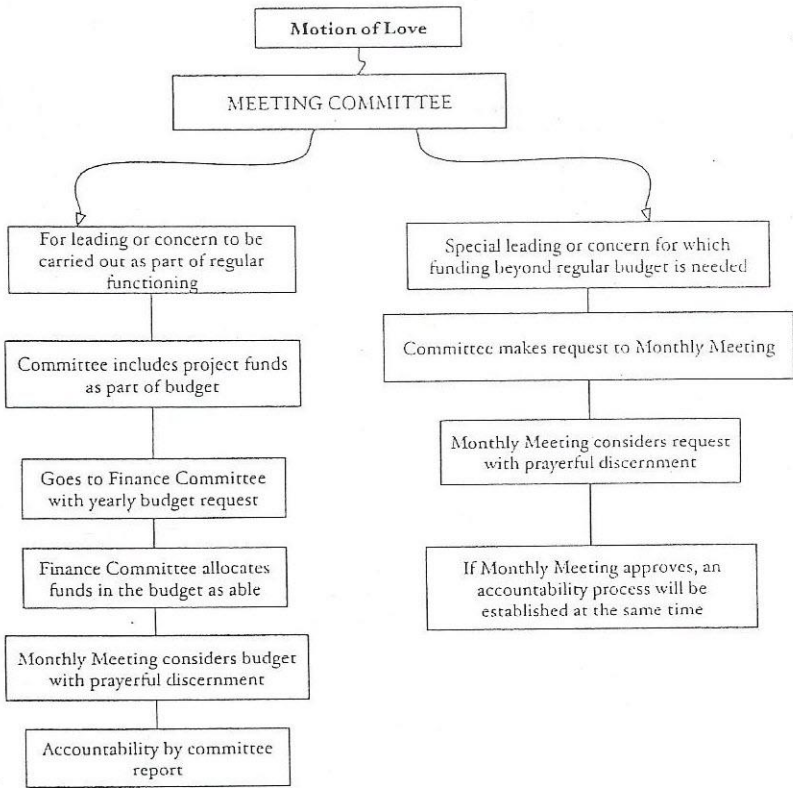


Table B

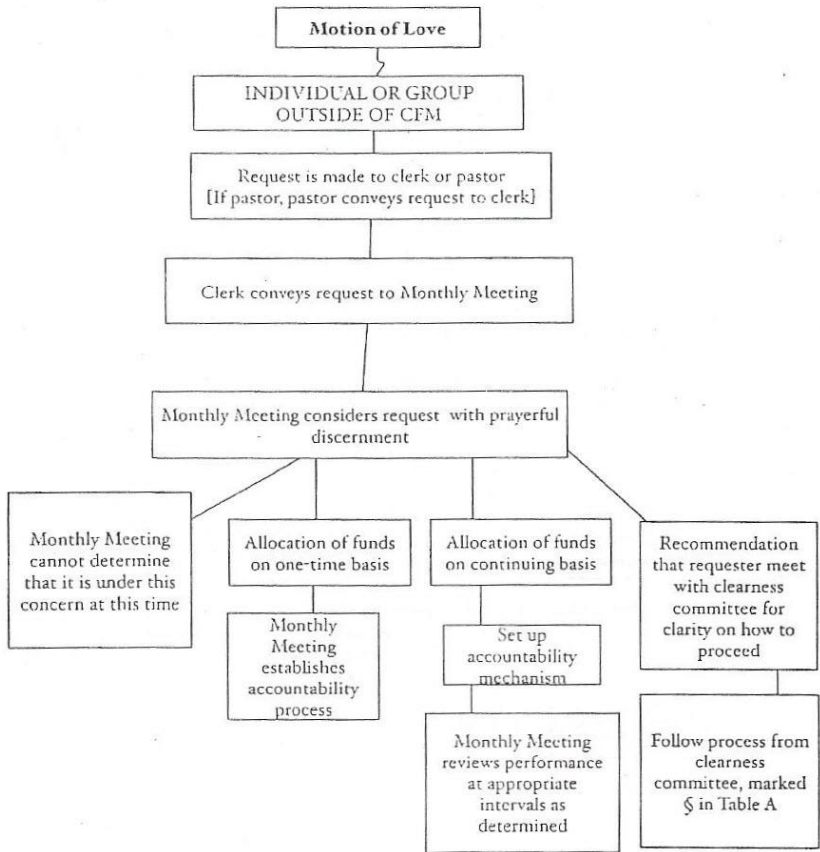


Table C

## VII. Accountability for Meeting Resources

Many of the decisions made in Monthly Meeting involve the use or expenditure of Meeting resources. Therefore, in good practice, the Meeting often establishes some form of accountability during the life of a project and at its conclusion. *Accountability* is a single word for asking some or all of these questions: What have the resources gone towards? Have they had the intended effect? Have the effects—intended and unintended—worked for good? Does the plan we are following need to be changed in any way? What have we learned in the course of answering this leading or concern?

In the past, accountability has frequently been established without special effort, and the Meeting continues to assume that will still be the case most often. Sometimes accountability will be as simple as a thank you letter, a receipt, or a report. For example, when the Meeting sends a donation to the American Friends Service Committee, they send us a thank you note, and three or four times a year send a report of their activities. If the Board of Trustees requests special funds for a lawn mower, they give a report to Monthly Meeting when the lawn mower has been purchased, and they tell us how it's working; most of-us will also be able to see the results.

In the past, Cincinnati Friends Meeting has used a range of options for establishing accountability for Meeting resources. All of these methods are worthy of continued use. New methods might also be created. The following are a sample of some of the methods we might use for establishing accountability:

- A receipt, thank you letter, or acknowledgment
- Sharing information, either with a presentation or in *The Traveling Friend* newsletter

- A detailed budget for a proposed project or endeavor
- Regular or one-time audits
- Regular reports to Monthly Meeting about special projects
- Annual committee reports to Monthly Meeting, similar to the State of Society report which is prepared annually
- One-time reports to Monthly Meeting for one-time events
- Visits to project sites

Other methods of establishing accountability might arise from the Monthly Meeting as it considers a request at hand.

Establishing a means of accountability can be as simple or complex as business demands. Monthly Meeting might say, “Please give the treasurer the receipt for those supplies” or “Please write up something about the conference for *The Traveling Friend* when you get back.” The request might be more complex: “Please provide a detailed budget for your project” or “Please provide tax records which can indicate how you’ve spent money in the past.”

The request for accountability and the decision about how it will be established will grow out of Monthly Meeting’s discussion of a proposal. Generally, accountability will arise as part of the sense of the meeting, as it has in the past. If it isn’t already part of the discussion, the clerk might ask specifically about accountability before the minute for a decision is approved.

Sometimes when Monthly Meeting supports an individual’s leading, our *Handbook* recommends that Monthly Meeting establish a committee of support.

### *Support Committees for Individual Leadings*

When the Meeting decides to support the leading of an individual active in the Meeting, it may also name a support committee for that individual. The three or four members of the



support committee will be responsible for establishing regular meetings with the individual, during which time they will hear what work is being done, how the work is going, where the individual senses the next leadings lie, etc. The members of the support committee will become friends and advocates of the work.

The members of the support committee will also be concerned about the well-being of the person doing the work. They will point out trouble spots as they see them, and work to find solutions. And, eventually, they may suggest that it's time to lay down the work, or to pass it on. (If the work is passed on to another member of the Meeting, a new support committee will be appointed.)

Our Quaker history provides notable illustrations of how support committees have functioned. In the 1700s, many American Meetings appointed one Friend to accompany another Friend who was led to travel in ministry. The Meeting's oversight, and the accompanying Friend, served as one kind of support committee. In 1763, when John Woolman felt a leading to visit the Wyalusing Indians, a group of Philadelphia Friends discerned the truth of his leading with him, and then helped him prepare for the journey. When they heard on the night before his journey of English-Indian conflicts in the area where he was headed, they traveled from Philadelphia and woke him in the night to be sure he was aware of the danger. Both the formal planning and the spontaneous concern of the Philadelphia Friends were forms of support.

More recently, Friends John Calvi in Vermont and Patricia Loring in Maryland were both released by their Meetings for public ministry. Each had a support committee which took on the responsibility of gathering and disbursing the funds which supported their work. Ruth Paine, who worked with Southeastern Yearly Meeting's Pro-Nica Committee and St. Petersburg Monthly Meeting's Sarajevo Project, appreciated the work of support

committees which worshipped together, helped to raise money for the work, and were buffers in difficult situations. Vicki Cooley, working for the New York Yearly Meeting Alternatives to Violence (AVP) Project, had a support committee which provided a midweek meeting for worship, since her AVP work took her away from worship on Sunday. She appreciated that the support committee kept her company in her work, and assisted her discernment about directions the work should take.

More information on the responsibilities of support committees can be found in the *Report on the National Conference of Quaker Volunteer Service, Training, and Witness*, pages 17–28. Copies of the report are available in the Quaker section of the Meeting library.

## VIII. Process, Decision, and the Body

As bystanders or participants, many of us will eventually find ourselves in the middle of a Quaker decision gone bad. Meeting for Business will become uncomfortable at best, contentious at worst, tempers may be lost, persons will stop attending Monthly Meeting and perhaps stop attending worship. Small political parties may gather at exclusive tables during potluck or around certain cars in the parking lot.

In these times when the Meeting can't find or recover its unity, we do well to remember that our decisions together always exist in at least two dimensions. There is the actual *decision* the Meeting has made. And there is the *process* by which the decision was made. When a Meeting is in turmoil, we often discover that the upset is a great deal more about the process than the actual decision.

I didn't understand this in my first years as a Friend, and frequently found myself confused about why things were going badly in Monthly Meeting. When I would speak to more

experienced Friends from other meetings, they'd invariably ask, "What's going on with the Quaker process?" And when we would go through a timeline of events, we'd discover that somewhere along the way a step had been skipped or an opportunity for listening overlooked. It took me years to learn to ask that question for myself: "What's going on with the Quaker process?" It isn't always easy to find the answer, but distinguishing between the actual decision and the method by which the decision was made is often the first step in understanding why Monthly Meeting has become so unfriendly.

The following illustration doesn't represent any actual Meeting, any actual problem, or any actual Friends, but it does represent some actual ways in which I've seen Quaker process break down.

For a number of years, members of Red Ditch First Friends Meeting have admired the valiant fight their old elm tree has made against Dutch Elm disease. But in the past couple years it's become evident that the tree has essentially lost the battle. One half of the tree is already dead, and the other half has come to the point of bearing more dead than living branches.

The old tree sits in the middle of the front yard, where it shades the west side of the meetinghouse, the sidewalk that runs across the front of the property, and a portion of the street. Because the tree is so expansive—and therefore so potentially damaging when the large limbs start to fall—the House Committee brings to Monthly Meeting in June a recommendation that a tree removal service be hired to cut the tree down. But some members object. "I just want us to give the tree all the chance we can," Jane says. "Why can't we wait to cut it until it's completely dead?"

"I saw a pileated woodpecker rooting around the base of that tree just a couple days ago," Michael says. "And I think I saw a saw-whet owl there the other night. I know it's getting harder and harder for these tree-dwelling birds to find habitat, especially with

all the development we're seeing in Red Ditch lately. I'd like to see us leave that tree up as long as we can to provide habitat for the animals that depend on dying trees." When Michael finishes, several other Friends affirm that "this Friend speaks my mind."

Members of the House Committee reiterate their concern for what might happen if a limb fell onto the sidewalk or street. "Our thinking was that someone might be hurt," Dorothy, the House Committee clerk, explains. "And certainly property would be damaged—we all know how parked up this side of the street gets during the day. Are we prepared to pay damages for any cars those limbs will fall on? And what if someone were to be badly injured? We've left the tree up a long time, but things are getting serious now. A couple of the smaller branches came down in that last big thunderstorm."

Speaking from silence, one Friend offers that maybe the tree isn't as close to the street as it seems, and another wonders why we are so prone to believe our human lives are much more valuable to God than the lives of the birds.

Tom, the presiding clerk, lets the discussion continue for a while, then eventually suggests that there is not yet a sense of the meeting, and perhaps the matter should be laid down until next Monthly Meeting. Members agree. The question of the elm tree is laid down for June and taken up again in July. A sense of the meeting is still not achieved. This time Tom suggests that the question be laid down for two months, to be taken up in September, and Monthly Meeting agrees.

Sadly, on a Wednesday morning in early August, a heavy thunderstorm with wicked straight-line winds blows through Red Ditch. The old elm can't withstand the battering wind, and the deadest half of the tree—the half nearest the street—splits off from the main trunk and crashes to earth, crushing the Meeting's wrought-iron fence and the parked car immediately beneath the main limb, breaking all the window glass in the cars parked ahead

of and behind the crushed car, and blocking the road until the Street Department arrives to clear the way. Neighbors call the pastor, the pastor calls Dorothy, and by late Wednesday morning an emergency meeting of the House Committee is convening with chain saws around the downed tree.

The damage to the street looks pretty bad. The one car is totaled for sure, it's hard to tell how badly the other two are damaged, and it looks as though even some cars further down the street in both directions may have been dented or scraped. The head of the Street Department comes over to say that in his opinion, that tree should have been taken down a long time ago. Committee members start with the big limb and the branches at the sidewalk, and gradually cut their way back past the crushed fence and toward the standing trunk. The three committee members with saws switch them off, set them down, and turn to help the other committee members who have been gathering wood and dragging branches to a mulch pile around back. The sky begins to darken and a wind picks up, and when the committee looks south past the edge of town, they see a thunderhead growing on the horizon. They quicken the pace of their gathering and dragging. As the wind builds, they hear the old tree start to creak and moan. With one especially strong gust they hear a loud crack within the tree, but when they look up, they can't see any obvious damage.

Dorothy gathers the committee around the partial trunk of the old elm. "Look," she says, "the way it's leaning now, it's clear that if this half comes down, it's falling straight onto the meetinghouse roof, and it will break through, there's no question. We've seen what the smaller half did to the street. I think we need to cut the whole thing down now. This isn't a question anymore, it's an emergency." Heads nod all around the circle, and they manage to hire a tree service to take down the rest of the tree the following morning.

Most Friends in Red Ditch have seen the picture of the fallen tree in the paper by the time they reach meeting on Sunday. But they walk sadly around the stump of the tree as they enter the yard, they go over to examine the bent and broken fence, they remark on the strange brightness in the western windows once they're seated in the meeting room. A few Friends who live at a distance from Red Ditch are taken by surprise when they come to the meeting and discover the empty space where the tree had been. Tom is disquieted when he hears Michael say to one of these out-of-towners, "I guess the House Committee just used the storm as an excuse to do what they wanted to do anyway, no matter what Monthly Meeting thought."

Sure enough, Monthly Meeting on the next Sunday is contentious and ill-tempered.

"You folks on the House Committee just used the storm as an excuse," Jane says.

"You didn't see the damage to the cars. Take a look," a committee member says, passing around photos.

"Yeah, so the worst damage was already done. You could have waited until Monthly Meeting to see how we felt now," someone else puts in.

"You didn't hear the tree cracking. We were afraid it was coming down that same day. We *couldn't* wait."

"I think you just heard what you wanted to hear."

Tom asks for silence, and asks for some members to hold the Meeting in prayer. Eventually the community grows quiet. When someone suggests that the Ministry Committee come to Monthly Meeting next month with a proposal for how to resolve this conflict, there is united approval.

Here is a case where Meeting members might have ultimately agreed with a decision, but are angry about the process—or lack of process—by which the decision was made. Given the damage to the fence and the nearby cars, and the clear

threat to the meetinghouse roof, even those who most wanted to see the tree stay as bird habitat would probably have agreed that the risk of keeping the tree had become too great. There would probably have been no fight if the House Committee had come to the Monthly Meeting in mid-August and said, “Look, we know we said we weren’t going to talk about this again until September, but the situation with the tree has changed. Most of you are aware how much damage it caused during that last storm, and if you’re not, here’s a re-cap ... We really think the meetinghouse itself is in danger now. We’d like approval to cut down the tree.” My guess is that approval would have come.

But because the process was short-circuited—under pressure of time and wind, it’s true—the unrest will quite probably last some time. The unease, the outright anger, will be about the *process*, not the decision. But it will be mistaken as anger about the decision. People will continue to think they’re arguing about the old elm tree, when what they they’re actually upset about is the fact that six committee members made the decision to cut down the elm without the approval of the Meeting community.

How could the process have been protected? Not easily, in these circumstances. Our Quaker process is always most at risk when we’re under deadline pressure or when we’re afraid, since fear creates its own sense of crowded urgency. But bringing even a few more people into the process would have helped Red Ditch First Friends. What if Dorothy, standing beneath the creaking elm, had whipped out her cell phone, called Tom, and said, “Tom, it looks like this whole thing is going to have to come down. Who else do you think we should call before we’re okay to start looking for a tree service?”

Tom could have said, “Call Jane and Michael and Bridget. Explain the new situation and see whether they can be in agreement with cutting the tree.” Or he might have said, “Let me see if I can get hold of the members of the Oversight Committee,

and we can all meet over there together tonight, and see what we think.” Maybe between the House Committee and the Oversight Committee and a bunch of cell phones, every active member of the Meeting might have been called, informed of the situation, and asked for approval to cut the tree down. Maybe the couple hours it took to gather the Oversight Committee to join with the House Committee would have been enough time for that southern storm to bypass Red Ditch, and Dorothy could have said, “If we can hold a specially called Meeting for Business after meeting for worship this Sunday; I think it’s worth the risk to wait another four days before we do something we can’t undo, like cutting down that tree.”

Every one of these alternatives is an attempt to keep alive the possibility of sense of the meeting by bringing as many people as possible into the decision-making process. If we tried to put those options into a formula, we might come up with something like this:

- Evaluate the actual—as opposed to the perceived—urgency of the situation.
- Find a way to expand the time available for the decision.
- Depend upon prayer and faith to overcome the urgency and fear which may be pressing toward a hurried decision. In this regard, it can be helpful to ask some members of the Meeting to specifically hold the Meeting in prayer during a difficult decision. Not only can the prayer be useful, the fact that people are praying is a reminder to all present that our business is done under the covering of God’s presence, and within Christ’s body.

There will be a very few times when business can’t wait until Monthly Meeting, or when the Meeting doesn’t have time to



prolong the decision-making process until sense of the meeting is reached. But most of the time, the sense of urgency which propels us into decisions made by bad process is an artificial urgency. It arises from a deadline imposed by an outside organization, or from a prophetic impulse on the part of an individual or group within the Meeting, or from a sense that this is the proper season for the decision. (For instance, we want to think about a new lawn mower in the spring, not necessarily in late autumn when we're done cutting the grass; just like we want to adopt a new curriculum for the First Day School in the fall, not the middle of the year.)

Michael Birkel makes a point that might help us rest easier about the time it takes Friends to make decisions—even, or especially, about carpets and landscaping. He supposes that one of the reasons our decisions seem to take so long is because in the world we're accustomed to a short decision-making period followed by a lengthy implementation process. The majority who make the decision may still have a long time ahead to persuade enough people to agree to the idea that the work can be completed. Friends, he says, reverse the world's custom—our long decision-making process is made up for by our speedy implementation. Once the decision is made, there's no foot-dragging, no extra persuasion required, no obstacles manufactured for the purpose of bringing things to a halt. Birkel thinks the obstacle-free implementation may balance out with the lengthy period between idea and decision.<sup>10</sup>

That thought can encourage us when we wrestle with how long it takes Friends to get anything done. Still, our commitment to Quaker process isn't primarily a commitment to efficiency. It's a commitment to being the body of Christ, with all the discomfort that life in the body entails. When we fail in our process, we fail in our life as the body, because failure of the process inevitably

means that one part of the body has been judged less to the body than another part of the body.

While the reality is that some voices carry more weight than others, I don't think that's where our process usually breaks down. The process breaks down when something gets in the way of all the members of the body being able to speak in the midst of a community gathered for the purpose of listening to each other and discerning the common path to which God calls them all. One practice that obstructs that common listening is any kind of attempt to manipulate what happens in Monthly Meeting around the discussion of a particular idea. I've called this politicking. Another obstacle to our common listening is the urgency or fear which can lead a small group within the Meeting to make a decision that rightly belonged to the entire group. I've called this bad or broken process.

Either of these obstacles, or any of the others with which a Meeting might grapple, can result in a good decision arrived at by poor means. That's why it's important, during a Meeting conflict, for elders and members to try to sort out whether it's the actual decision or the process by which a decision was made that's caused the upset. The Meeting members who will try to bring about reconciliation will approach that task differently depending upon whether process or decision is the issue.

To reiterate: it's not *what* we talk about but *how* we talk that defines us as Friends. That becomes especially clear when we realize how many of our conflicts are over the way we talked (or didn't), not over the decisions we actually made. Did we remember that we are one body? That's what our business is ultimately about—remembering that we are one body. Friends establish our faith on the conviction that the Spirit is able to lead us to the place where God would have us, provided we are willing and responsive.

And so we are as far out on the edge in testing our life in the body as any Christians I know. Our Quaker process says to us,

“the ear and the toe are equally deserving of respect.” When we live up to that ideal, when we *live* that, we are living the communion of Christ. Good Quaker process leads to that communion.

## Further Reading

If you want to discover still more about the whys and wherefores of Friends’ business, these are some good resources to which you can turn:

- The chapter on discernment in Michael Birkel’s *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).
- Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, and Bruce Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God’s Way Forward in Decision Making* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007).
- The several sections on decision-making in Tom Hamm’s *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1996).
- Barry Morley, *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is also known as Monthly Meeting, Meeting for Business, or Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business.

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Although it is always possible that Monthly Meeting will see Life differently. Michael Sheeran writes about witnessing a committee clerk bring forward a recommendation for remodeling which was concluded with these words: “Of course that’s how we think it might be done. It might just be that Friends will have other ideas.” Sheeran then watched the clerk cheerfully revise the proposal as the Monthly Meeting reflected on options his committee hadn’t considered.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> There is a very fine line here, sometimes microscopically fine, between giving information and planning or endeavoring to persuade.

<sup>6</sup> Here is where we discover one of those microscopically fine lines. Your friend may call you to ask, “Do you have any ideas what we’ll be talking about in Monthly Meeting?” Is it okay if you respond, “We’ll probably continue the discussion on whole wheat bread that was laid over from last time, and Peace and Social Concerns is going to bring up a recommendation about organic coffee”? Well, that doesn’t seem like an overt attempt to influence. On the other hand, folks are not encouraged to pick and choose which decisions they participate in based upon their own interests. It’s more difficult for the Meeting community to become the body of Christ when some members of the body are present only occasionally.

<sup>7</sup> Both Barry Morley and Michael Sheeran talk about the legitimate role of emotion in the decision-making process.

<sup>8</sup> By prophecy here, and throughout, I don’t mean the intention or ability to predict the future. I mean the intention to call the listener, individually and in community, to a radically different way of living in the present. This was the intention of the biblical prophets, from Amos and Isaiah to Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

It was also the intention of early Friends, from George Fox to John Woolman to Lucretia Mott to Thomas Kelly.

<sup>9</sup> This kind of specially called Meeting for Business, with particular focus on a difficult issue where the Meeting lacks clarity, is often called a “threshing session.”

<sup>10</sup> Birkel, *ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> Those usually include Ministry and Counsel, with or without a pastor, and often with the help of an outside mediator.

Cover Art: Cathy Barney