SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMITTEE AND GROUP CLERKS

AT MIDLOTHIAN FRIENDS MEETING

You are likely reading this information because you are serving as a clerk of a committee or similar group at Midlothian Friends Meeting. No doubt you're wondering what will be expected of you as the clerk, what are the processes used by Friends in their committee and group work, and how you can get the most out of your clerking experience. It's hoped that within this document many of your questions and concerns can be answered. However, also feel free to seek the advice of Friends who have served as a committee/group clerk in the past.

We must begin by stating how important committees and groups are to the life of a Friends meeting. Midlothian Friends Meeting is part of the "unprogrammed" liberal Quaker tradition, which includes the lack of a clergy and paid staff. The entire meeting operates in an egalitarian manner which includes groups of Friends who carry out the work and goals of the entire meeting. Without strong, healthy committees and groups a Friends meeting could literally "fall apart", or at the very least begin to have serious spiritual and inter-relationship issues. The final effectiveness of a Quaker committee or group usually begins with the clerk, who acts as the "glue" that enables the committee or group members to work together in order to serve the meeting

CLERKING ROLE

It's not by accident that the facilitator of a Quaker committee or group is called a *clerk* rather than *supervisor* or *manager. Clerk* may seem like a lowly title for someone who's so important to the success of a committee or group. *Clerk*, however, is really the most accurate term available to describe the servant role which you'll find yourself operating in. As clerk, you'll facilitate decision-making rather than direct it. You'll inspire the committee or group to accomplish its work rather than orchestrate solutions.

This clerk role is different than past leadership roles you may have experienced at your place of work, in clubs, or in other organizations. In these secular situations your effectiveness often depends on the personality and persuasiveness you bring to the job. As a clerk of a Quaker committee group, your personality or persuasive ability won't offer you much help. Dedication, tolerance, forbearance, and being responsible will be the qualities you most exercise.

QUAKER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

As with all business conducted by Friends, Quaker committees and groups operate with a concern for the "sense of the meeting", rather than by majority rule. Through this spiritual process individual desires and egos are laid aside when decisions are being made, so the Divine will can come forth in the unified hearts and minds of all committee/group members.

This process will require patience on your part. You'll need to listen closely to what others are saying, summarizing in your mind what you've heard. When everyone is through speaking to an issue or topic, you'll need to state what you've sensed from the discussion. This may take the form of a unified approach that everyone has agreed to. Or, it may require you to verbally summarize one or more alternatives, followed by a question or suggestion on how to proceed. It will take open-mindedness on your part to not dominate the decision-making process.

The use of silence can be very effective during tense situations where words have become heated. Also, asking committee/group members to speak from the silence can help the committee or group to gain clarity when "weighty" decisions need to be made.

If agreement can't be reached, then the committee/group shouldn't proceed on an issue or decision. It can be brought up for further discussion at a later date if desired.

Seven suggestions that will help you during the Quaker decision-making process are as follows:

1. Get underlying assumptions and facts regarding the issue out into the open where they can be honestly and openly discussed.
2. Listen and pay attention to what others have to say. Avoid thinking of a response while someone else is speaking.
3. Encourage others, particularly the quieter ones, to offer their ideas.
4. Judge ideas, not people. Reduce defensiveness by avoiding personal remarks. Avoid discounting ideas because of who originates them.
5. Be cautious about early, quick, or easy agreements. Avoid compromise simply for the sake of compromise.
6. Do not vote. Avoid splitting the group into winners and losers.
7. When the group reaches the point where each person feels good about the decision, then the group has reached the sense of the meeting.

THE FIRST COMMITTEE/GROUP MEETING

If there was a previous clerk of the committee or group, it is best if she/he could conduct the first meeting of the new committee or group, even if he/she is no longer a part of the committee or group. However, this is not always possible. It's at this first committee or group meeting that the new committee/group clerk should be chosen by the committee/group/group members, using the Quaker decision-making process described above.

At this first committee/group meeting, the previous year's clerk should explain the purpose of the committee. If these are in writing then copies should be given to committee/group members. Written roles and responsibilities for many committees/groups at Midlothian Friends Meeting are kept in the ***Midlothian Friends Meeting Handbook*** that is kept in the office. During this first committee/group meeting, the previous year's clerk should also communicate any old matters that must be continued by the new committee or group.

COMMITTEE OR GROUP MEETINGS

It's important to the Quaker decision-making process that your committee or group has occasional face-to-face meetings as needed, especially if ideas need to be exchanged and decisions need to be made. The frequency will vary depending on what needs to be done and when it must be completed if timing is a factor. A few days before your committee/group meeting, it is helpful to remind the committee/group members before the meeting is held.

Items for discussion can come from any committee/group member or *Meeting for Discernment*. If your committee or group has a "calendar of events" you should consult it for agenda items, as well. These calendars or schedules for committees and groups are kept by the clerk of each committee/group either in a committee binder or in a designated storage area or shelf within the meetinghouse. Once the agenda is presented, committee/group members may want to add other items to it.

Each committee/group meeting should begin with a few minutes of silence so the spiritual aspects of your committee/group's work can take precedence over the cares of daily life. Likewise, the committee/group meeting should end with silence. A joining of hands is customary after the closing silence.

Experience has shown that committee/group meetings should generally not exceed two hours so minds are not over-tired when making decisions. If it seems necessary to continue a committee/group meeting longer, permission from those in attendance should be sought. It would be wise to take a stretch break, as well.

Don't expect every committee/group member to have the same amount of time or energy to devote to activities or assignments outside the committee/group meeting. Pressuring Friends to do something they aren't

comfortable with is a sure way to de-moralize a committee or group.

MEETING FOR DISCERNMENT

It's important that a representative from your committee/group be at each *Meeting for Discernment*. Even if your committee or group has no business to transact, there might be a question or decision discussed that involves your committee or group. If your attendance at *Meeting for Discernment* is not possible, you should ask a substitute to sit in for you.

Committees and groups are not to ***direct*** *Meeting for Discernment*. Rather, it's the other way around. Even so, committees and groups may bring suggestions to *Meeting for Discernment*. Only major items of committee/group actions or decisions need to be brought to *Meeting for Discernment* for approval. These items usually fall into one of the following categories:

1. The local community's perception of Midlothian Friends Meeting or Quakerism could be affected.
2. An unbudgeted financial need exists for the committee or group, or there is a desire to distribute meeting funds (as opposed to the committee/group's funds) for an unbudgeted item. Similarly, when a committee or group manages multiple line items in the meeting's budget, and that committee/group wants to transfer funds from one of their line items to another.
3. The entire meeting will be affected by an action that the committee or group wants to implement.

The clerk of meeting should be notified if the committee or group has an agenda item for *Meeting for Discernment*. If an action of the committee or group should go before *Meeting for Discernment* to be approved, but timing just won't allow it; then consultation with the clerk of meeting should occur before the action is undertaken. The clerk of meeting on ***rare*** occasions could decide to personally approve the action on behalf of the meeting because the action is critical and timing will not allow our normal Quaker process. More likely he/she would either call an unscheduled *Meeting for Discernment* as soon as possible, or she/he could simply require the committee or group to wait until the next regularly scheduled *Meeting for Discernment*.

HOUSEKEEPING ITEMS

It's the responsibility of the committee/group clerk to check the committee/group mailbox each time you come to meeting. All committee/group clerks should have a key to the meetinghouse (if not, be sure to ask the Building and Groups committee clerk for a key). When using the meetinghouse, please be careful to leave it orderly and clean, turn all lights off when leaving, adjust the heat or air conditioning back to where you first found it, and make sure the doors are locked.

A SPECIAL NOTE OF THANKS

If during your term as committee/group clerk you should need some advice or assistance, please do not hesitate to contact anyone at meeting who you think might be helpful. And finally, please know that all Friends at Midlothian Friends Meeting greatly appreciate your willingness to serve the meeting.