Meeting for Discernment
And the Quaker Experience

Quakers conduct decision-making like no other group. Many find it odd that the decisions that result from Meeting for Discernment are not the main purpose for gathering once a month for this worshipful experience. The decisions made during Meeting for Discernment are actually a by-product of a spiritual discipline that is just as important to our spiritual growth as is Meeting for Worship.

Perhaps a Friends' Meeting for Discernment can be best described as an exercise in attentiveness, in listening to the promptings of the Spirit. The result is a discernment of the will of the Spirit for the meeting. This is an important exercise in learning to do the same in our personal lives.

Everything from the initial silence to the final joining of hands during Meeting for Discernment is regarded by Friends as worship. As with Meeting for Worship, the goal of the group is to have a gathered experience in the presence of the Spirit. This requires a worshipful attitude with an observance of periodic silence. At Meeting for Discernment we are able to practice letting go of our desires and our ego so that the mind of the Spirit can fill our individual minds, bringing us together as a gathered group. The hope is that through this experience during Meeting for Discernment we will become more comfortable letting the same thing happen during our daily lives. It is believed by Friends that the more we can align our minds with the mind of the Spirit, the more peace, joy, and enrichment we will have in our lives.

Those present during Meeting for Discernment are used as the Spirit's tools to divine the path that should be taken by the meeting. Thus, Friends are careful to ensure that voting or delegation of a decision does not occur. When all persons present agree on a course of action, it is an important indicator that the will of the Spirit has become manifest. When this occurs Friends term it "the sense of the meeting".

Over the past several hundred years, Quakers have developed some practices that help Meeting for Discernment to remain a spiritual process so that it does not degenerate into a worldly business meeting or a casual social encounter.

- We observe silence between individuals' contributions. These silences are crucial, not only for the period of reflection they provide; but also because they enable a meeting to proceed as a gathered body. They act as a "brake" against one or more individuals seizing control of the meeting through rhetorical display, appeal to emotions, or other means.
- We try to come to Meeting for Discernment in a prayerful, open state of mind, so that we may be open to the Spirit. In the actual meeting, we strive to lay ourselves open to others' points of view, no matter how much we may think truth is on our side. We consider the possibility that we may be mistaken. This requires humility and a recognition that the true spirit of Meeting for Discernment is one of attentive listening.
- We should not speak until called upon to do so by the Clerk of Meeting. The usual way to indicate that we wish to speak is to catch the clerk's eye or by saying aloud "clerk". In particular, we do not speak while others are speaking. We do not interrupt.
- We normally speak only once on a subject unless responding to a direct question or giving factual information. This causes us to reflect seriously before speaking. We must trust that if further valid points occur to us, the Spirit will use others to raise them.
- We speak plainly. We do not lecture, debate, or attempt to filibuster as the world does. However, it is appropriate to speak with conviction or with passion.
- We may express contradictory views from others, but we do not argue or belittle another's point of view.
- If documents are brought to the meeting, they may be referred to, but should not be read aloud unless the clerk or others ask for them to be read.

- When it is evident that an item needs more study or discussion, it should be given to a committee for further attention. The committee should bring its findings or opinion back to a later Meeting for Discernment.

While the above practices are not “rules”, it is important that they are adhered to by all present. In this way the will of the Spirit can become manifest, rather than merely an agreement of individual egos. The goal of discerning the will of the Spirit is an important distinction between the Quaker process used during Meeting for Discernment and the consensus process that is often used in business and academic settings in order to ensure buy-in from all stakeholders.

The Clerk of Meeting and the Recording Clerk

The Clerk of Meeting is the servant of the Meeting for Discernment. He or she is a Friend appointed to this task for a period of time, but is otherwise without special status.

The Clerk of Meeting prepares the agenda for Meeting for Discernment and may also introduce an item on the agenda to the meeting by summarizing it. In these activities the clerk wields considerable influence in the way issues are presented to the meeting. When an issue has been clearly outlined the clerk may say that it is now 'before the meeting'. It is then open to any Friend to speak to it. Although the clerk faces the meeting physically, he or she certainly does not either lead the meeting as a convenor or chairperson may, nor does the Clerk of Meeting express a view. In discussion, the clerk can pull together and summarize feelings which are being expressed in the meeting. He or she can act as a shaper of discussion, encouraging silent or reluctant Friends to participate. The clerk can also remind Friends when they are speaking at too great of a length. In these activities, the clerk requires paradoxical gifts of restraint and fluency, discipline and sensitivity.

Perhaps the most important trait of a Clerk of Meeting is the ability to read the collective mind of the meeting. At the appropriate time the clerk will request that the Recording Clerk draw up a minute which will express the sense of the meeting to those present and to others beyond the meeting. The Recording Clerk works closely with the Clerk of Meeting to help those present discern the will of the Spirit.

Sometimes a meeting cannot come to a decision on an issue; sometimes the feeling may be strong that a decision must be reached, but the meeting may be perplexed as to what the decision may be. In these, as in many like situations, the Clerk of Meeting needs to discern the true “sense of the meeting”. The clerk may therefore propose that action be delayed until the appropriate committee has further opportunity to study the issue. Or, he or she may suggest deferring consideration of the item for a time until the entire meeting has had an opportunity to let it season in the Light.

Drawing Up the Minutes

A minute is composed by the Recording Clerk with the assistance of the Clerk of Meeting during the Meeting for Discernment. A draft minute may be prepared in advance for routine matters. The agreed minute is never made or altered after the meeting has finished.

The minute records the decision of the meeting on a given topic. If it is more than simply a factual recording, the minute will also indicate the context and reason behind the decision.

While the Clerk of Meeting and the Recording Clerk reflect on what has been said by those present and compose the minute, the rest of the meeting remains silent. It requires sensitivity on the part of the Clerk of Meeting to discern when it is appropriate to ask that a minute be written. Similarly, we should be sensitive to the role of the Clerk of Meeting for determining when to begin writing the minute.

When the minute is drafted, the Recording Clerk reads it aloud to the meeting, after which those present can begin 'speaking to the minute'. They might want to question its wording, or perhaps the way it reflects accurately one contribution but distorts another. If necessary, the minute is then rewritten by the Recording Clerk and re-presented to the meeting. Once decided upon, the final wording is not generally opened up for further discussion later in the meeting.

Once the Recording Clerk has read a draft minute, any Friend can suggest modifications. The Recording Clerk, with the help of the Clerk of meeting, will note what is being said and continue to modify the minute until all Friends can unite with it. A Friend who is seriously at odds with the Minute on an important topic may say that he or she cannot unite with it. The Clerk of Meeting may ask if that Friend is willing to let the decision proceed nevertheless. The Friend can agree to this, or agree but have the dissent minuted, or continue to oppose the Minute. The Clerk of Meeting may in this last case conclude that 'we are not of one mind' and the decision may be carried forward to the next Meeting for Discernment uncompleted.

In all cases, the meeting must unite in agreement on the minute, for the minute should be an accurate recording not only of the decision reached, but of the collective spirit of the meeting.

Friends recognize that all decisions have been taken to the Spirit by those Friends who were able to attend Meeting for Discernment. Therefore, Friends who were not present will accept the decisions, however surprised or disappointed they might be.