

THE QUAKER WAY TO MAKE DECISIONS, Chapel Hill Friends Meeting,
Matt Drake and Deborah Gibbs, Approved by Ministry and Worship, June
2, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this presentation is to focus on the use of the Quaker way in reaching group decisions in committees of the Meeting.

THE QUAKER WAY

As Quakers, our goal is to decide by “the Quaker Way,” seeking to go beyond human processes and interactions to find God’s guidance/Quaker unity in our decision-making. To use George Fox’s words, “Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, but to wait upon the Lord.”

WORSHIP: Worship is central to the process. We begin and end our committee meetings in worship. The period of opening worship reminds us that something different is going on here. It settles and centers us. Worship moves us from our everyday world and everyday experiences of group decision-making into a more spiritual setting. In this setting we seek to go within and beyond ourselves into the realm of faith, of holy seeking, of listening to God. Closing worship provides time to be grateful for a loving committee meeting, for praying for any difficulties, and for preparing us to move into the “outside world.”

The clerk should also employ a time of silence/worship/quiet waiting, between agenda items during the meeting. Doing so reminds Friends to continue to be open to the Spirit throughout the meeting.

CONSIDERATION OF THE TOPIC: The clerk brings the topic to be considered before the committee as clearly as possible, accompanied by helpful background information. Committee members may assist with this. All committee members use their individual skills to clarify, bring helpful information to, and, if needed, seek re-wording to the question/issue before the committee.

The committee clerk guides the process, keeps it on track, involves those not speaking, reminds, summarizes, and brings up points not yet shared.

Ultimately, the committee clerk identifies the point at which a reasonable degree of unity exists and puts this into words. The clerk asks if the committee unites with the decision. Usually, the committee agrees or suggests some helpful wording and then agrees. At this point the decision is recorded in the minutes. The clerk and committee then move to the next item on the agenda.

WHAT IF UNITY IS NOT REACHED? If unity is not present on a decision, the clerk can ask a number of clarifying questions, such as:

- Where is the confusion; what are we not clear about?
- What additional information do we need?
- What else is needed to assist us in making this decision?

After collecting the responses, the clerk may suggest that the committee is not ready to make a decision now and needs to return to the question/issue at another time. If the committee agrees to set the question or issue aside, the clerk then guides the committee to develop plans to obtain the needed time, information, or understanding for a successful return to the issue.

In rare situations, after all the necessary information has been shared and the discussion seems complete, one member may not appear ready to decide. At this point, the clerk should identify what is happening in the committee and describe the current situation.

The clerk can then work to resolve the situation. Several alternatives exist:

The clerk first calls the committee into silent worship, asking each member to share out of the silence where they are on the issue. The clerk can ask the one member where their “stop” is. What insight or piece of the issue does the person have that has not yet been shared? The response may bring new insight to the committee and lead it in a new direction.

If the clerk discerns that new insight has not resulted, that the member’s response is a repetition of previous comments, the clerk may ask if the

person is willing “to stand aside,” having expressed a contrary opinion but seeing that the group has clearly reached a sense of the committee.

If the person does not accept this alternative, the clerk may ask if the person is willing to allow the committee decision to stand, with them recorded as opposed.

If the member does not accept this alternative and feels that their “stop” must also keep the committee from moving forward, the clerk must determine the seriousness of the individual’s decision.

- If the clerk determines that the person’s stance has already been considered responsibly/faithfully or that it is not serious enough or is frivolous, the clerk may state that the sense of the committee is clearly in another direction and proceed with the agenda.

- If the clerk determines that the committee should “hold the issue over” at this point, the clerk should ask the person and two or three members of the committee to meet before the next meeting to listen together, to pray together, and “labor with” one another.

The original issue then becomes an item of business at a succeeding committee meeting. Friends are reminded that all this can be done in a spirit of worship, “holy seeking,” gentleness, perseverance, and loving patience.

Difficult situations may arise when committee members have not laid aside their expectations and experiences with group decision-making by methods other than “the Quaker way.” For example, they may think we decide by consensus, while we seek to go beyond consensus. Or they may think that the Quaker way requires unanimity. Such Friends should understand that “unanimity” is a word from democratic decision-making used to describe those times when everyone votes the same way. Since Friends do not vote, “unanimity” is not a relevant goal for our process. (Helping committee members gain clarity on potential confusions is a valuable use of committee time.)

ONGOING EFFORTS OF APPRECIATION AND INCLUSION

As a faith community, loving efforts by the clerk and other committee members will continue to assure that the Friend who is not in unity on a decision continues to be appreciated by the committee and be considered an important member of the committee. In other words, we can disagree on a corporate decision and still love one another.

ADDENDUM: SENSE OF THE MEETING DECISION-MAKING AND CONSENSUS, FAITH AND PRACTICE OF THE PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING, Revised 2017 and reprinted 2018, pp. 18 and 19.

“Friends differentiate between sense-of-the-meeting decision-making and consensus. Consensus is the outcome of a widely used and valuable secular process characterized by a search for general agreement largely through rational discussion and compromise. A sense of the meeting is the outcome of a spiritual process characterized by deep listening to each other and trusting in God’s guidance. While ideally both processes result in a course of action to which all participants can agree, reaching the sense of the meeting relies consciously on the Spirit. Reasoned argument and lively debate are secondary to spiritual insight and divine leading.

Seeking the sense of the meeting is democratic in that all Friends present are encouraged to participate. However, it goes beyond democracy in its expectation that participants set aside their personal convictions in order to be led by a Guide beyond the self. It can be deeply satisfying for those participating in Friends decision-making when the needs and aspirations of the meeting take precedence over individual preferences. When everyone listens with an open heart and remains teachable, the meeting has the opportunity to come to decisions in harmony with the Spirit.”