

CLERKS RETREAT, CHAPEL HILL FRIENDS MEETING
SEPTEMBER 27, 2008 – Matt Drake
THE ART OF DISCERNING THE SENSE OF THE COMMITTEE

1. In Friends Meetings we don't make decisions by edict or by voting.
2. Also, we don't decide by consensus . . . although using consensus is mighty tempting. Three definitions of consensus that point out its power and effectiveness are:
 - "A decision participated in by all the members of a group and representing the maximum area of common acceptance" English, A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms
 - "a decision process for making full use of available resources and for resolving conflicts creatively" Jay Hall, "Decisions, Decisions, Decisions," *Psychology Today*, November 1991.
 - "Simply stated, consensus is different from other kinds of decision making because it stresses the cooperative development of a decision with group members working together rather than competing against one another. The goal of consensus is a decision consented to by all group members. Of course, full consent does not mean that everyone must be completely satisfied with the final outcome – in fact, total satisfaction is rare. The decision must be acceptable enough, however that all will agree to support the group in using it." Auvine, Avery Streibel, Weiss, Building United Judgement, 1981.
3. As Quakers, we decide by "the Quaker Way," seeking go beyond human processes and interactions to find God's guidance/Quaker unity in our decision-making.
4. How do we do this? First, we begin and end our committee meetings in worship. Worshipping together 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 different 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 fine committee meeting, for praying for any difficulties, and for preparing all to move into the "outside world."
5. With the clerk's leadership, the question/issue to be decided is brought before the committee as clearly as possible, with helpful background information, etc. Committee members may assist with this.
6. All committee members use their individual skills to clarify, bring helpful information to, and, if needed, seek alternatives to the question/issue before the committee.
7. The committee clerk guides the process, keeps it on track, involves those not speaking, reminds, summarizes, brings up points not yet shared, etc.
8. Ultimately, the committee clerk identifies the point at which a reasonable degree of unity exists and puts this into words (all the points that are needed for a good minute).
10. The clerk reads the minute or repeats the wording of the decision and asks if the committee unites with the decision.

11. Usually the committee agrees or suggests some helpful wording and then agrees, and the clerk moves to the next item on the agenda . . . and the committee proceeds through its agenda.
12. If unity is not present on a decision, what can the committee clerk do?
13. The clerk can ask a number of clarifying questions, such as:
 - a. Where is the confusion; what are we not clear about?
 - b. What additional information do we need?
 - c. What else is needed to assist us in making this decision?
14. After collecting the answers 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.
15. If the committee agrees to set the question/issue aside, the clerk then guides the committee with plans to obtain the needed time/information/understanding for a successful return to the issue.
16. Sometimes (rarely?) all the necessary information has been shared, the discussion seems complete, and the clerk discerns that the committee is clearly ready to come to unity, but one member is not ready. At this point, the clerk should identify what is going on in the committee/describe the current situation.
17. The clerk can then move to several alternatives:
 - a. call the committee into silence/worship. Ask each member to share out of the silence/worship where s/he is on the issue.
 - b. ask the one person where her/his “stop” is; what insight/piece of the issue does the person have that has not yet been shared? (Her/his response may bring new insight to the committee and lead it in a new direction.)
 - c. if the clerk discerns that new insight has not resulted, that the person’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.
 - d. 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 her/him recorded as opposed.
 - e. If the person does not accept this alternative and feels that her/his “stop” must also keep the committee from moving forward, the clerk must determine the seriousness of the individual’s decision.
 1. 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 obviously in another direction and proceed with the agenda.
 2. 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.

In considering points 16 and 17, Friends are reminded that

1. all this can be done in a spirit of worship, “holy seeking,” gentleness, perseverance, and loving patience.
2. such 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.”
3. “unity” as utilized by Quakers is not the same thing as “unanimity.” “Unanimity” is a word from democratic decision-making. It is used to describe the times when everyone votes the same way.