

QUAKER DECISION MAKING IN THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP WITH ATTENTION TO BUSINESS – Matt Drake 1/9/22

I'm going to present what I believe are the essentials of Quaker decision-making in the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business. I will do this by pretending that I'm a chef putting on a cooking show. So, in your mind's eye, see me in a kitchen wearing a chef's hat and apron and holding a bowl and spoon. Are you doing that? Thank you. Here's my official introduction.

“WELCOME TO THE QUAKER COOKING SHOW. TODAY WE'RE GOING TO REVIEW THE INGREDIENTS OF MEETING FOR WORSHIP WITH ATTENTION TO BUSINESS.”

Before we review the ingredients, we must first talk about “the container.”

- It is not one in which votes are taken
- It is not one in which the group attempts to reach consensus
- The container is a meeting for worship - *George Fox wrote a letter from Worcester Prison around 1674 pointing out these differences. Fox wrote: “Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men's or women's meetings but to wait upon the Lord.”*

Now the ingredients. The first one consists of three historic beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends.

1. There is a God/Spirit
2. We, as individuals, can be in direct communication with and guided by this God/Spirit
3. God/Spirit is available to direct, to guide us as a group, as a Meeting

Now, we will add the ingredients of three favorable conditions:

1. Participants bring to the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business a common understanding of, a faith in, and a commitment to the Quaker process
2. Another favorable condition is identified by Quaker author Howard Brinton. He observed that a favorable condition is when: Participants “. . . are acquainted with one another, better still if affection exists among them.”
3. A third favorable condition is when participants bring helpful skills and abilities, such as to be patient with the process, to worship, to listen, to set aside one's own desires or personal solutions, and to help search for “the way through.”

The process, its self, is an ingredient. Five essentials of the Quaker decision-making process are:

1. Worship – at the start, interspersed, at the close
2. Presentation of the business, of the decision to be made
3. Discussion, sharing, practicing Quaker courtesies (waiting to be recognized by the clerk before speaking, speaking only once on a topic, speaking so all can hear you . . .)
4. Arriving at the sense of the meeting
5. Writing the minute or seeing that the minute that describes the decision is written

A process also exists when serious differences exist. The clerk can identify the new information or insight and focus on it. The clerk can “hold over” consideration until the next meeting to enable further discernment to take place. If a Friend cannot unite with the decision, the clerk can invite the Friend to voluntarily “stand aside.” The clerk can even inform the Friend that she/he can be recorded in the minutes as standing aside. The clerk may also discern that the “sense of the meeting” is clear, even when not everyone agrees, and state that as the decision of the Meeting.

The role of the clerk is a major ingredient. The clerk prepares the agenda; helps the meeting move into and continue in worship; serves as a neutral facilitator; encourages all who wish to speak to do so; identifies “the sense of the meeting;” and sees that this is placed into a minute.

The final ingredient consists of the responsibilities of each participant: to: attend be prepared (having read the previous month’s minutes and reviewed the current agenda), to worship/pray listen share seek the best decision for the meeting/God’s leading for the group . . . change own opinion be surprised help carry out the decision.

To return to the analogy of the “container,” Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business is the crucible, the container where faith and action meet, where the individual and the corporate body meet, and where the corporate body and God/Spirit meet.

Friends Journal, October 1, 2005, “Beyond Consensus: The Quaker Search for God’s Leading for the Group,” Matthias C. Drake

Faith and Practice, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, Revised 2017, printed 2018, see Index for Meetings for Business. Also, pp. 17-24.