

On Quaker Unity

[Osborn Cresson](#) July 1, 2009, Friends Journal

Unity during meeting for worship for attention to business is familiar to Quakers. It is a commitment to move forward together and, significantly, it does not mean we have to hold the same views. This method of doing business has long been characteristic of Quakers.

To my surprise, the approach also applies to another kind of unity—that of the meeting community. The two senses of the word are fundamentally one: unity during meeting for business is the formation of a small community around a particular issue; unity of the meeting community is a commitment to each other and to our lives together.

There are many implications of applying what we know of unity in meeting for business to the life of the meeting community. One is that we do not need to agree. We can differ—in fact, we need to know when we differ and acknowledge it. Unity based on silence about our differences is not unity.

At first it struck me as remarkable that the concerted action of a faith community does not require agreement on faith, but we all know people who disagree and still love each other and act together. We see this in families that embrace different faiths. We also see it when we worship with those with whom we disagree—something we do every week. And this is not new: looking back through history, we see people manifesting excellent values accompanied by different faiths.

There have been many varieties of Quakers and there still are, even within individual meetings. Differences in religious experience do not prevent cooperation. Shared practice does not require a shared explanation of the practice; we just have to love each other as we love those who believe as we do. Common purposes do not require a common religious language; we can each speak and write as we are moved, responding to the essence of what we hear and read rather than to its specific form.

Lives can stand in for beliefs. To find our collective identity as Quakers we can look to our shared lives. Membership does not have to signify that we hold the same beliefs but can simply be a recognition of the place of the meeting in the life of the individual, and of the individual in the life of the meeting.

All this seems paradoxical because we have thought of unity of belief as the path to unity of action, but Quakers know that unity does not require unanimity. Quaker unity is larger than that.

The embrace of religious diversity in our midst can be our gift to the world around us where differences in belief matter so much. Let us be patterns of living together and loving each other, differences and all. Let us openly and joyfully celebrate our peculiar combination of Quaker diversity and Quaker unity.