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## Beyond Consensus: The Quaker Search for God's Leading for the Group

by Matthias C. Drake on October 1, 2005

When a group of North Americans gather to make a decision, one of three processes is usually used: the autocratic, the democratic, or the consensus decision-making process. Quakers, especially in their meetings for business, use a fourth process: the Quaker way. This way is fundamentally different from the other three. Some techniques of the Quaker way are similar to the consensus process. But, as Howard Brinton pointed out in *Reaching Decisions: The Quaker Method* (Pendle Hill pamphlet no. 65), the Quaker way "differs radically in being religious." George Fox was quite clear about the uniquely religious nature of the Quaker way. Fox wrote, "Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business . . . but to wait upon the Lord!"

Authors disagree whether the Quaker group decision-making process arose spontaneously among Quakers or whether Fox adopted procedure already in use by the Seekers or some other group. Whatever the origins, the Quaker way was developed early in the life of the Religious Society of Friends. Its continuation to the present is an impressive fact. Other evidence of the importance of the Quaker way to our Religious Society is its use throughout the various programmed and unprogrammed branches of Friends. (Some Friends meetings no longer employ the process, however.) Most yearly meeting books of faith and practice discuss the process and offer queries for its use by the meeting and by individuals. At least one, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*, states that our "way of conducting business is of central importance to the very existence of the meeting" and that "it is the way that can create and preserve a sense of fellowship in the meeting community. From there it can spread to larger groups and

larger decisions in which individual Friends or meetings have a part. Thus it contributes to the way of peace in the world in which we live." Yet the greatest importance surely has to be that this decision-making process has enabled Friends to discern God's will for the group. Experiences of such discernment have left the participants changed men and women, empowered to do God's work in the world.

The basis of the Quaker way is the belief that a group of persons can discern God's direction. D. Elton Trueblood wrote in *Beyond Dilemmas* (edited by S. B. Laughlin, Kennikat Press, 1937) that the immense belief of Friends in the reality of continued revelation made them expect a revelation of God's will in a group meeting. "They accordingly arranged a group meeting in a manner best calculated to know the revelation if it was forthcoming."

Unity results from finding God's direction for the group. God leads us in unity. Howard Brinton explained that since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light be faithfully followed, unity will result. He stated that the nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another, "as the spokes of a wheel approach each other as they near the center."

The following six essentials provide a description of the actual process involved in the Quaker way of reaching group decisions.

1. **Worship**—The Quaker decision-making process takes place in a context of worship. Worship opens and closes the meeting and can be woven throughout. Silence is employed during the meeting to enable thoughtful listening and prayerful consideration to occur.
2. **Presentation of business**—Business can be presented by the clerk, a committee, or an individual. It is presented as clearly as possible, with relevant back-ground and context descriptions.
3. **Discussion**—The subject for business is spoken to by all who have information or opinions regarding it. The vocal contributions are helpful in content and presented in a sincere manner. In the discussion, the participants seek full information, attempting to see God's direction arising from any side of an issue. Differences are recognized, accepted without antagonism, and worked through to an understanding of them and/or to creative solutions to them.
4. **Sense of the meeting**—In reaching decisions, participants seek divine guidance within themselves and in one another. When the consideration reaches a stage where a reasonable degree of unity has been reached, the clerk announces what he or she believes to be the sense of the meeting. The group decision is identified by a

statement which all agree expresses the sense of the meeting.

5. **Writing the minute**—The clerk or an assistant places the clerk's proposed sense of the meeting statement into written form, called a "minute." This may be modified, but once accepted, it becomes the judgment of the meeting and is preserved in the records.
6. **Response to serious differences**— When serious differences of opinion exist, the meeting may search for unity through silent prayer, followed by further discussion. When the meeting cannot achieve unity on a subject, the subject is either dropped or postponed ("held over"). If a decision cannot be postponed and a serious difference of opinion exists, the decision may be left to a small committee that acts for the meeting.

Unity does not mean unanimity. A person may find that he or she is not in unity with the sense of the meeting. In such a case, at least three alternatives are available to the individual. The person may agree to stand aside, having expressed a contrary opinion but seeing that the group has clearly reached a sense of the meeting. A more serious stand is to ask to be recorded as opposed. In this situation the person's objection is minuted, although the group is still able to proceed with its decision. The most serious alternative is for an individual to be unwilling for the meeting to proceed. In this situation, the clerk usually has to determine the seriousness of the individual's objection. If the objection is determined to be frivolous, the clerk may state that the sense of the meeting is in another direction and proceed with the meeting. If the objection is a serious one, the group will delay its decision on the issue. The time gained by the delay can be used constructively to enable all the participants to reconsider their positions through thought and prayer as well as to listen to and "labor with" the objecting Friend. The original issue then becomes an item of business at a succeeding meeting.

Three conditions especially favorable to the success of the Quaker way are: the participants bring to the meeting a common understanding of, a faith in, and a commitment to the Quaker way; a real community exists among the group participants; and the participants bring helpful skills and abilities to the group.

The first is the most important. Any Quaker decision-making group needs participants who share the belief that Truth/God's will/a right way/God's leading exists in any given issue and can be discovered by a corporate, loving, patient, persistent, open search. Another helpful shared belief is in the worth of waiting, that is, enabling the group to stop short of a decision until the next meeting to allow individuals time to seek within themselves or with one another. What if each participant came to the meeting committed to finding God's solution for the group and willing, in most cases, to set aside

his or her own opinions and desires in favor of that? This would be a great asset. The group also needs the shared belief in the Spirit-controlled and -directed life, in the continued revelation of Truth—through one's self and any other participant. Such understandings, beliefs, and commitments shared by the participants provide the basis for the group search for God's direction.

Individuals in any Quaker group will be aided in their work if they know one another. According to Howard Brinton, "The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another, better still if real affection exists among them." Friends groups improve their decision-making abilities as they increase and deepen their community-building activities within their meeting. Small group discussions, prayer groups, fellowship times, shared meals, and work days are important ingredients to creating community. Is transportation to meeting provided for those who do not drive? Are baby-sitting and other youth activities provided so that parents of children can participate? Every effort should be made to encourage attendance in Quaker decision-making groups.

In many ways, monthly meetings for business are the crucibles of our Friends churches and meetings. Participation in such a group requires us to be open to change, open to one another, and open to God. Can we disagree and love at the same time? Can we go beyond our initial misunderstandings of one another? Can we get past our judgments of others and appreciate their insights? We can, if real affection exists among us.

The third condition especially favorable to the success of the Quaker way consists of the participants' skills and abilities. Each participant is essential to the group's search. The participants' ability to worship, to open themselves to God's leadings, is one of the most important abilities to bring to the group. The abilities to listen, to be patient, and to speak audibly and gently are very helpful. Dealing constructively with conflict and being imaginative in the search for solutions are other helpful skills. The ability to gracefully withdraw objections and to help others accomplish this is important.

Constructive use of humor is a real gift to any group.

The Spirit-filled, facilitating abilities of the clerk can greatly encourage a meeting for business. The clerk's abilities to submerge the group in worship, to call for silent searching, to gain participation by all, to clarify the issues, and to keep the discussion on track are extremely helpful to a meeting. Such clerks are a blessing.

Our goal as Friends is to search for divine guidance for the group, to find it, and to

embrace it. To accomplish this we need to use many of our capacities. All of our human abilities should be used to help each member of the group to understand each issue, to listen to one another, and to be patient with the process. All of our divine/human capacities should be used to open ourselves to God's direction.

Individual prayer at home is good preparation. Full participation in the "centering down" opening worship period melds us into the group's search for God's will. When each of us holds the group "in the Light" while we participate, the group's spiritual awareness is increased. Listening for God's guidance expressed within ourselves and from any other member of the group keeps us truly attentive. Looking for the creative alternative, "the way through" confusion and conflict helps us recognize God working among us. *Expecting* God's direction for the group prepares us to find and to embrace divine leadings.

God's guidance has been experienced by Quaker groups in at least three ways: through silent worship, through statements by individuals, and through the group's discovery of a "new way." Michael Sheeran has given a great gift to Quakers by his presentation of "real life" 20th-century reports of some of these holy occasions. In his book *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* he includes the following recollections of a former American Friends Service Committee staff member:

“ *In 1948, there were 750,000 refugees on the Gaza Strip; the new state of Israel had just been established. The UN asked AFSC to take responsibility for feeding, housing, etc. At the meeting of the AFSC Board of Directors, all speakers said the work needed doing, but all agreed it was just too big for the Service Committee. They counseled that we should say no, with regrets. Then the chairman called for a period of silence, prayer, meditation. Ten or fifteen minutes went by in which no one spoke. The chairman opened the discussion once again. The view around the table was completely changed: "Of course, we have to do it." There was complete unity.*

Another report by Sheeran describes the way in which one person's statement brought a previously divided meeting into unity. Sheeran feels this case illustrates a number of factors common to such a situation. In his words: "The group feared disunity, and was attempting to conduct itself in a prayerful, even a gathered atmosphere. The speaker himself felt moved to speak. The speaker's remarks were so deeply consistent with the atmosphere of united, reverent searching that he seemed to speak in a divinely authenticated way."

God also works through the group discovery of a new way. This occurs in instances where the group's result is greater than the sum of the parts. Way opens after much struggling together, and the solution is different from and superior to anything any individual had so far offered. Bit by bit, a new way, God's way, is found. Our Religious Society would benefit from more reports of occasions when God's will was discerned by a group. Descriptions of how the leading came and how it was recognized provide a basis for future discoveries.

I am well aware that in many ways I have presented an idealized view of the Quaker way of reaching group decisions. We can achieve it, however. And we must keep trying because the process holds the ultimate potential: knowledge of God's direction for our meeting. Let us work to regain this essential of our Quaker heritage. Pray for it; prepare for it. Seek God's leading in meeting for business.

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*When he wrote this, Matthias C. Drake was active in Wilmington (Ohio) Meeting, and had served as clerk of North Columbus Meeting and as director of New York Yearly Meeting's Powell House. This article, which appeared in the March 1986 Quaker Life, is excerpted from his address to the Consultation of Friends on Spiritual Discernment held in Richmond, Ind., December 12-15, 1985. This is the unrevised text of the article that appeared in the June 1/15, 1986, issue of Friends Journal.*

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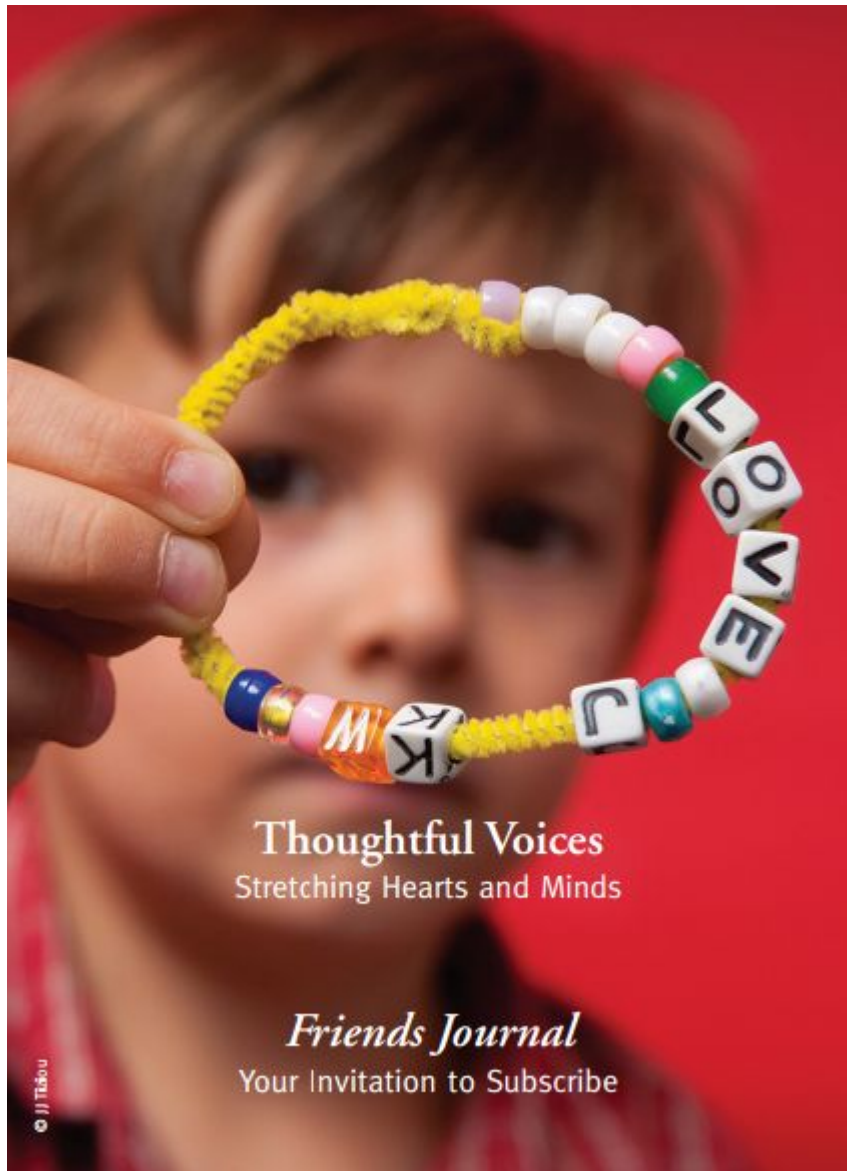
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