

# Quaker Business Meetings: how Friends make decisions

**Note: This is only the first few sections of the document. For the full text, see <http://quakerscotland.gn.apc.org/business.htm>**

This document was written and produced by some Friends and Attenders from Glasgow Meeting, Scotland, who came together in an informal group in 1995 to explore their experience of business methods in the Society of Friends.

## Preface

The aim of this document is to give you some idea of how business is carried out at a Quaker business meeting. It has been written for Attenders and Friends who are new to Quaker business meetings. Quakerism in all its forms is best experienced rather than read about; but having said this, there are certain points on which you can be better prepared if you read this booklet before you attend your first business meeting.

*'Quaker business'* is a general term which covers items such as membership, finance, the concerns of individual Friends in relation to the Society and its work, as well as relations with other organisations.

Quaker business meetings are held regularly. The structure is organised at local level (Preparative Meetings), smaller and larger district levels (Monthly and General Meetings) and national level (Yearly Meeting). Monthly Meeting is the principal meeting for business and deals with membership, property, finance, appointments, arrangements for Quaker weddings etc. It is the main link between members and the Society of Friends nationally.

As you will discover, Friends' business meetings are quite unlike other business meetings you might have experienced. Their form differs from that of a debating society or a union or board meeting. Their form is also liable to vary in detail from one monthly meeting to another. There is a form to it, but it is a flexible one, sensitive to the needs of the individual meeting.

Perhaps a Friends' business meeting can be described as an exercise in attentiveness, in listening to the promptings of the Spirit. The overriding need is to discern the will of God in the meeting, and business meetings should be conducted with that fundamental aim in mind.

The physical setting of the meeting reflects this worshipful atmosphere. Where possible, the members of the meeting sit in a semi-circle facing the Clerk. The Clerk is not in any sense a minister or priest but is there to help the meeting to articulate its decision in the form of an acceptable minute.

## **An overview**

The meeting begins with silence. When the Clerk judges the time is right, he or she summarises the agenda before the meeting, provides any necessary background information, and lays the first item before the meeting. People rise to speak, one at a time. Each item concludes with the agreeing of a minute of the meeting's decision. When the business is complete there is another period of silence. The meeting is formally concluded with a handshake.

## **Making decisions in a spirit of worship**

At business meetings Friends tend to adopt certain customs or modes of behaviour. The following are perhaps the most important in shaping form and atmosphere of a business meeting although not all will be present in every business meeting.

- everything from the initial silence to the final handshake is to be regarded as worship.
- we observe silence between individuals' contributions. These silences are crucial, not only for the period of reflection they provide; but also because they enable a meeting to proceed as a gathered body. They act as a brake against one or more individuals seizing control of the meeting through rhetorical display, appeal to emotions or other means.
- we try to come to meeting in a prayerful, open state of mind, so that we may be open to the Spirit. In the meeting, we strive to lay ourselves open to others' arguments: no matter how much we may think truth is on our side we must consider the possibility that we may be mistaken. The true spirit of the business method is thus one of attentive listening.
- we should not speak until called upon to do so by the Clerk. The usual way to indicate that we wish to speak is to stand up. In particular we do not attempt to speak while the Clerk is trying to draft a minute.
- we normally speak once only on a subject unless responding to a direct question or giving factual information. (We may speak on another subject if we want, however.) We speak plainly. We do not speechify, hector or attempt to filibuster. It is appropriate to speak with conviction or with passion, but not with prejudice.
- we may express contradictory views, but do not argue with one another in meeting. We state what we want to say frankly and briefly without belittling each others' points. The meeting thus should never become a debating club; nor should the situation ever arise where we try to interrupt or shout down another's contribution. Having spoken once to the issue, we must trust that if further valid points occur to us, others will raise them.
- if documents are brought to the meeting, they may be referred to, but should not be read out unless the Clerk or meeting asks for them.

## The Clerk

The Clerk is the servant of the meeting. He or she is a Friend appointed to this task but is otherwise without special status. When an issue has been clearly outlined the Clerk may say that it is now 'before the meeting'. It is then open to any Friend to speak to it.

The Clerk is a recorder of the minute of the meeting, one who helps those present discern the will of God within the meeting. The Clerk prepares the agenda and may also introduce an item on the agenda by summarising it. An assistant clerk sits at the table to help to read out relevant information. In these activities the clerks wield considerable power to influence the way issues are presented to the meeting. Although the Clerk faces the meeting physically, he or she certainly does not either lead the meeting as a convenor or chairperson may, nor express a view. In discussion, the Clerk can pull together and summarise feelings which are being expressed in the meeting. He or she can act as shapers of debate, encouraging silent or reluctant Friends to participate in it. The Clerk can also remind Friends when they are speaking at too great length.

In these activities, clerks require paradoxical gifts of restraint and fluency, discipline and sensitivity. But perhaps the greatest test of a clerk's ability to read the collective mind of the meeting lies in the ability to draw up, at an appropriate time, the minute which will express the sense of the meeting to those present and to others beyond the meeting. Sometimes a meeting cannot come to a decision on an issue; sometimes the feeling may be strong that a decision must be reached, but the meeting may be perplexed as to what the decision may be. In these as in many like situations, the Clerk needs to discern the true sense of God's will.

## The minutes

A minute is composed by the Clerk during the meeting, and the final version is written by the Clerk in the meeting where the members present can ensure the veracity and accuracy of the minute. A draft minute may be prepared in advance for routine matters. The agreed minute is never made or altered after the meeting has finished.

The minute records the decision of the meeting on a given topic. If it is more than simply a factual recording, the minute will also indicate the context and reason underlying the decision.

While the Clerk reflects on what has been said by those present and is composing the minute, the rest of the meeting remains silent. It requires sensitivity on the part of the Clerk to discern when it is appropriate to begin to write a minute. Similarly, we should be sensitive as to when the Clerk wants to begin writing the minute.

When the minute is drafted, the Clerk reads it out to the meeting, after which those present can begin 'speaking to the minute'. They might want to question its wording, or perhaps the way it reflects accurately one contribution but distorts another. If necessary, the minute is then rewritten by the Clerk and re-presented to the meeting. The agreed item is not generally opened up for further discussion.

In all cases, the meeting must unite in agreement on the minute, for the minute should be an accurate recording not only of the decision reached, but of the collective spirit of the meeting.