

Spiritual Responsibility in the Meeting for Business

By Patricia Loring

Hartford Monthly meeting

In working toward a decision, Friends are urged to recall that there are important differences between their process and the one known in the secular world as “reaching consensus”. So many of us sit on secular committees which have as outward resemblance to those of Friends, that it becomes very easy to transfer their methods, attitudes and goals to Friends’ committees. Friends have been so competent at running the business of the world that they have always been at risk of eroding their life as Friends by assimilate-to the secular values of efficiency decisiveness, effectiveness, and dispatch.

When Friends make a decision, they are not seeking a consensus of their membership. They are seeking the will of God in a particular matter. They have found the most reliable guide to that will to be the sense of the meeting. The sense of the meeting may be different from consensus because the sense of the meeting can arise only out of a membership which has in fact given itself over to seeking the will of God and has prepared itself spiritually for the search. It may be that some present have not yet come to that condition of seeking. It may be that some have come seeking that their own will be done - sometimes for excellent reasons. It may be that they come with a leading from God which is quite true for themselves but not a leading for the meeting as a whole.

It is easy and tempting for Friends to fall into secular customs in the conduct of business: each one simply seeking, working, manipulating for one’s own point of view attempting to control the outcome to the advantage of the position with which one has arrived. Unfortunately these methods tend to obscure the sense of the meeting rather than clarify it. The sense of the meeting is better arrived at when each person present relinquishes control, to endeavor to see himself and others not merely with the mind’s eye but with the eye of faith; to discern not only his own leading but the leadings of others; to keep in mind that at any moment the most improbable person may be the prophet of God; to discern how the leading of the meeting may be different from the quiet genuine leading of the individual.

The individual may be lead to go to point “A”, but may have to go there without the support of the meeting or with only its warm wishes. The individual may be led to call the meeting to go to point “A”, so that in fact it will get to point “B” rather than to point “C”. The individual may be mistaken altogether in his leading to go to point “A”. It may be only a good or interesting or poor idea. Or it may be that the individual has a leading which is valid not only for himself but is a true calling for the whole meeting or society to go to point “A”, with varying amounts and kinds of support from individuals within the meeting. Ultimately the responsibility for discernment rests with the clerk. This is the one who must not only intellectually sift what is going on but more importantly - must discern the spiritual dimension of the interaction. Yet it has been said with truth that the clerk can best clerk the meeting only when everyone present is also clerking. That is, everyone present must be practicing spiritual discernment to be best of his capacity while recognizing that the clerk has been chosen for a special gift of discernment.

The necessary discernment of leadings can only be done after the manner of Friends from the deep centering that can arise in an atmosphere of worship. That is why we begin our meetings with a time for recollection of ourselves and for worship. That is why it is important to pause between speakers to recollect and re-center ourselves to listen and to speak in the Light rather than in passions or the intellect: to remember that we are engaged together in a search for the will of God rather than in discussion argument or persuasion. Information and reason are to serve that higher purpose rather than to be ends in themselves. The process also requires of the members tremendous openness, sensitivity and tenderness to one another.

One reason that Friends conduct of business is so slow is that it takes time to sift ourselves and the matter at hand for ego, self-will, sincere mistakes, matters of individual conscience, and for reasons which may be excellent intellectually but not necessarily for God's will. In a meeting which is seeking at the deepest level, there must be time and opportunity for all these matters to rise to the surface, to be examined in the Light, and to settle again to a deeper level of quiet. These must be time not only for those whose interest and concern for the matter has impelled them to go deeply into it, but for those whose inward processes and Row of words are moving at a slower pace - and perhaps at a deeper level as well. There must be time for change to take place inwardly - not just in the head but in the heart and gut - as members search the matter and are searched by it. For no one can come with sincerity to a Friends' gathering for business with a mind unalterably set. To do so would leave no room for the Spirit to move, for Way to open, for discernment to take place. Friends' spiritual process is demanding; and it's difficult to keep it sorted out from the secular models with which we spend so much of our lives. Yet the process is sufficiently precious to make it worth laboring to keep sight of its spiritual basis while we are in the midst of it. Otherwise it may become a set of empty forms used in a secular manner.

One important effect of staying within the Spirit from which the process is derived is that it can keep use in unity even while our opinions diverge. Remaining aware that we are jointly engaged in the enterprise of discerning together the will of God for the meeting, rather than trying to advance or defeat a particular project, we can be held together in holy communion as members of the meeting and of the Society. We can only be divided if we put our partisanship ahead of the unity order and love within the meeting.

During one of my stays at Pendle Hill, the clerk announced at Meeting for Business that we had an unusually long and troublesome agenda, promising to keep us at it until well into the night. The only thing to do, she said, was to alter the time of our opening worship. We would simply have to take more time in worship than usual. And we did. After a few minutes, there were some restless rustlings; but we went on for surely no less than twenty minutes - long enough for the restless impatience to "get on with it" to fall away as we began to come to our center individually and as a group. I have rarely attended a meeting for business conducted with more peace, order, love and even dispatch. From the place of quiet we had come to, many of the difficulties fell away as matters were discerned in a new Light.