

IV. MEETING FOR BUSINESS

Every meeting should hold a business session at least once a month. This should be preceded by a time of worship in order that the spirit of worship may pervade the transaction of business. In both the meeting for worship and the meeting for business, guidance is sought from the Spirit of Truth and Life by whose operation the group is brought into love and unity.

It might appear at first sight that the principles of Quakerism are inconsistent with any form of church government. This would be true if each individual is expected to follow his own insight regardless of the insight of others. Such individualism could readily result in religious anarchism. This view had considerable following in the time of George Fox. It was called "Ranterism." Many Ranters who had become Friends left the Society when its system of church government was set up. Quakerism is not anarchistic. The principle of corporate guidance, according to which the Spirit can inspire the group as a whole, is central. Since there is but one Truth, its Spirit, if followed, will produce unity. To achieve this unity is practicable, and the Society of Friends has practised the method of achieving it with considerable success for nearly three centuries.

In the transaction of business the meeting assumes that it will be able to act as a unit. No vote is ever taken. If unity cannot be reached, the meeting does not act. The only necessary official is a clerk whose business it is to appre-

hend and record the decision of the meeting. The deliberations of this type of meeting are notably different from procedure by parliamentary rules.

Gathering the Sense of the Meeting

The business before the meeting is generally presented by the clerk, but it may come through a committee report or from an individual speaking under a sense of concern. The members of the meeting should freely express their opinions regarding the action which they think should be taken. By listening to these expressions the clerk seeks to gather the sense or opinion of the meeting as a whole. When the discussion has reached a stage that indicates that the meeting is arriving at a fair degree of unity, the clerk, or his assistant, prepares a minute which states the judgment at which he thinks the meeting has arrived. The minute is read, either immediately after the decision is made or at the close of the meeting, the former being the historical practice which is still followed in some areas. Corrections or additions may be suggested by members at large. The minute is not valid until it has been both read to the meeting and approved by it.

On routine affairs little or no discussion may be necessary, and the clerk may assume that silence gives consent. In such matters the clerk may prepare his minute before the meeting begins, but it must in any case be read and approved in the course of the meeting. On matters which require it, time should be allowed for members to deliberate and to express themselves

fully. A variety of opinions may be voiced until someone arises and states an opinion which meets with general approval. This agreement is signified by the utterance of such expressions as "I agree", "I approve", "That Friend speaks my mind." If a few are still unconvinced they may nevertheless remain silent or withdraw their objections in order that this item of business may be completed, but if they remain strongly convinced of the validity of their opinion and state that they are not able to withdraw the objection, the clerk generally feels unable to make a minute. In gathering the sense of the meeting the clerk must take into consideration that some Friends have more wisdom and experience than others and their conviction should therefore carry greater weight. The opposition of such Friends cannot, as a rule, be disregarded. Chronic objectors must be dealt with considerately, even though their opinions may carry little weight.

If a strong difference of opinion exists on a matter on which a decision cannot be postponed, the subject may be referred to a small special committee with power to act, or to a standing committee of the meeting. Often an urgent appeal by the clerk or by some other Friend to obstructive persons will cause them to withdraw their objections. It must be remembered, however, that minorities are sometimes right. When a serious state of disunity exists and feelings become aroused, the clerk or some other Friend may ask the meeting to sit for a time in silence

in the spirit of worship. The effect of this quiet waiting is often powerful in creating unity.

Theoretically the clerk is not a presiding but a recording officer. However, the situation is often such that he must become in some sense a moderator, as for instance when two persons rise to speak at once. Under other circumstances recognition from him is not necessary in order to gain the floor. A clerk's most difficult problem is to determine the right speed with which business can be satisfactorily transacted. He must wait for a full expression of opinion, but he should not allow the procedure to lag, especially if there is a great deal of business to be transacted. Sometimes he must encourage Friends to express themselves. Experience will acquaint him with the subtler aspects of his task; on how much vocal expression and on whose judgment he can most wisely base his minute and on what kinds of questions complete unity may or may not be essential.

The clerk is responsible for seeing that only one subject is discussed at a time. The meeting is at liberty to change the subject, but it is the clerk's duty to keep discussion to the subject in hand until the meeting itself has decided to shift it. He must also remind Friends regarding items of unfinished business. He must ask a speaker who addresses an individual to address the meeting as a whole. If a speaker is not easily heard or understood the clerk may repeat his remarks to the meeting. If someone takes up too much time, the clerk or some other

Friend may feel it right to ask him to conclude his remarks.

Sometimes, and this is peculiarly necessary in large gatherings, the clerk may be helped by one or more assistant clerks in reading reports and in drawing up minutes. The record may, if desired, include a brief summary of discussions and vocal spiritual exercises. Such minutes of previous meetings as will aid the meeting in determining the nature of the business which should come before it should be read. All the minutes of the previous meeting may or may not be read as the meeting directs.

Minutes are preserved and, for more important meetings, they are printed. A record is thus kept which has become throughout the history of the Society of Friends both a spiritual diary and a chronicle of social action. Gratitude is due to the faithful scribes who have qualified themselves for this important religious service. When, in any meeting, there is a considerable amount of correspondence concerned with such matters as keeping an active list of names and addresses, notifying committee members of the time and place of meetings, aiding committees in implementing their decisions, arranging for lectures or for hospitality for travelling Friends, the meeting may employ a secretary to attend to such current requirements. It is important that such a secretary feel no special responsibility, different from that of other members, in regard to the meeting for worship.

Difficulties and Value of This Method

As compared with parliamentary procedure this method of conducting a meeting requires more patience and takes more time. To succeed fully the members should be bound together by friendship, affection and sympathetic understanding. Factions and chronic differences are serious obstacles. The members should be religiously minded, religion being a powerful solvent of the type of self-centeredness which makes group action difficult. Here the Quaker method differs fundamentally from several other consensus methods. Persons who are dogmatic, who speak with an air of finality or authority and who go to the meeting determined less to find the truth than to win acceptance of their opinions are exceedingly difficult to absorb. The attitude of a debater is out of place. The object of speaking is to explore as well as convince.

Questions before the meeting could be decided quickly by taking a vote, but the object is not speed but right decision. Sometimes insight into the one truth accessible to all evolves slowly when many trends of thought interpenetrate. The voting method, depending as it does on quantitative relations, is mechanical, but the Friends' method of attaining results exhibits principles typical of organic growth. The synthesis of a variety of elements is often obtained by a kind of cross-fertilization, and the final result is not therefore, or at least it ought not to be, a compromise. Given time and the proper conditions, a group idea, which is not the arithmetical sum of individual contributions nor

their greatest common divisor but a new creation or mutation, finally evolves.

When B speaks following A, what B says is a combination of his and A's opinion. C follows and adds his contribution, which would be different had A and B not spoken. Each speaker credits every other speaker with at least some genuine insight. Thus the united judgment is slowly built up until it finds such expression by some individual as can be endorsed by the meeting as a whole. No minority should remain with a feeling of having been over-ridden.

Even if it requires years, as was the case when the Society of Friends freed its slaves, this way may still be more expeditious than other methods in producing the right result. A minority can keep a question open in a Quaker meeting whereas, by the acceptance of majority rule, the minority's view might have been outvoted and a wrong decision, very difficult to change or perhaps irrevocable, might have been made. It often happens that neither the majority nor the minority is right, in which case the Quaker way may provide time for the truth to become apparent. There is also another point to be noted; in the voting method of "one man one vote" the opinion of the foolish or indifferent counts for as much as that of the wise, interested or responsible. In the Quaker meeting for business, wise and foolish are both listened to, but the contribution of each to the final judgment has at least an opportunity to be gauged in proportion to its wisdom.

This way is based on religious rather than secular concepts. The members of the group discover experimentally that, as they become united with God, so also do they become united with one another. Unity is always possible because the same Light of Truth shines in some measure in every human heart tending toward the same goal. By prayer, meditation and worship that goal gradually becomes apparent.

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