

The Quaker-Decision Process and The Art of Clerking

by Bob Bernard

Quaker Decision Process

The Quaker decision-making process is mysterious. The process is clouded in terms like “unity,” “discernment,” “sense of the meeting,” “standing aside,” and “standing in the way of.” Making the process even more mysterious to new Quakers is the fact that every meeting can interpret these terms slightly differently. The process is not as well defined and clear as we see in the business world where meetings are run using “Robert’s Rules of Order.”

The Quaker decision comes through communal discernment called the “sense of the meeting” or “unity.” We seek spirit-led unity in our decisions. An individual involved in a decision can agree, oppose, or stand aside. The clerk determines the sense of the meeting and asks for confirmation.

Abbington Monthly Meeting describes the decision-making process as The Quaker “third way” of decision-making, which involves a kind of “Zen” of moving out from the pragmatic and conceptual and into the spiritual and formative – into the “mind of Christ,” as early Friends would describe it.

Quaker.org states that Quaker decision-making is grounded in the belief that when several people come together to labor in the Spirit, they can discern a truth that exceeds the reach of any one individual.

“Quaker process of decision making, is a process for finding unity in all decisions that affect our communities. For Friends, unity is not usually unanimity, which is agreement without dissent. Unity is more often agreement that acknowledges dissent, staying together despite differences, and moving forward with guidance from our common values.”

(<http://www.nontheistfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Notes-on-Quaker-Unity.pdf>)

A Friend from Eugene Monthly Meeting says “you have unity if there is an easiness or willingness to be led.”

It is the clerk’s job to discern or identify “unity” or “the sense of the meeting.”

Clerking in the Quaker Tradition

The committee or meeting is chaired by a clerk. Clerking a meeting is an art. The job of the clerk is to determine the sense of the meeting. The clerk must discern the sense of the meeting throughout the discussion. Then they interpret that discernment as either the decision is ready for approval, the decision requires farther discussion or seasoning to take place, or whether the sense is to disapprove the item.

The clerk has a great deal of leeway in the decision-making process, and therefore I think of clerking is an art. As a clerk handles more and more meetings and committee positions, the decisions tend to get harder. Yearly meetings have administrative decisions but often need to struggle with difficult decisions.

Tools of the Clerk

An article from *Friends Journal* identifies several tools the clerk can use when clerking. The clerk sets the agenda and controls the tenor of the meeting. They introduce each item then allow each person to speak. For very contentious issues, they keep the comments focused on the issue and not on other people.

1. When the discussion is getting heated, the clerk can require a pause to enter worship. During this time each person is to reflect on what they have heard, listening to the spirit and clarifying their position.
2. The clerk can lay the matter over to the next meeting.
3. The Clerk can return the item to the committee or person who asked for it to be considered for consideration of revisions considering the discussions.
4. The clerk can create a committee to season the item with members from both sides of the issue.

Individual Quakers' Choices

During the Quaker-decision process, the individuals' choices are to:

1. Speak In favor of the proposal.
2. Express their concerns but "stand aside." The person takes this position when they disagree but are willing to abide by the sense of the meeting to go forward. So, "Standing aside 'says I have reservations, but they are not strong enough for me to register disapproval of the action. Then the action can go forward with community support.
3. Oppose the proposal or "stand in the way." A person can express their unwillingness to support the decision by "standing in the way or opposing the action.

The clerk can determine that the sense of the meeting is to proceed regardless of those who stand aside and those who oppose. Doing this is, of course, very dangerous and can lead to rifts within the community. So, an experienced clerk will use all the tools in their toolbox before resorting to an action that can split the community.

Clerking is a tremendous burden to place upon someone when there are difficult or contentious decisions to be made.

Let's look at an example. A nominating committee put forth a name for a position. The person had baggage from an indiscretion nine years ago. That was carefully considered by the nominating committee before making their recommendation. When it came before the committee required to approve the nomination (about twenty), three raised the concern

that the baggage would hinder the person's ability to perform the proposed position. After several hours of discussion, five people stood aside, and I believe the rest were ready to approve. The clerk read it differently stating we weren't in unity. And the nomination was not put forward.

In this case, I can only assume, the clerk was trying to discern not only comments made in the meeting but the potential effect on the larger meeting if this person was approved.

Questions on clerking to consider before you agree to be a clerk:

1. Does standing aside really mean that those members were willing to support whatever the meeting decided?
2. Is it the clerk's burden to decide based on other concerns, other information or factors not raised or discussed during the meeting?
3. What does this decision say about the months-long process followed by the nominating committee?
4. If a person is standing in the way of a decision, what does this mean if the clerk can read the sense of the meeting to approve despite the objections? Or disapprove.
5. Does your meeting try to reach "unity" or a "sense of the meeting: in their decision process?

Understanding the difficulties of Clerking is something you should spend time with before you become clerk. This is even more difficult in the world of Zoom meetings.

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