

## Turned Down for Membership

*by michael eric burnside*

to whom it may interest:

membership in the religious society of friends is a very specific result of a very specific monthly meeting process. the process culminates in a business meeting that may or may not be a meeting for worship with a concern for business. god may or may not be involved. he is not excluded, he however is neither required, nor particularly encouraged. what is required and more than merely encouraged is the absence of any current member willing to stand in the way of the new membership request. no current member normally stands in the way as a matter of respect for the process, even if they do not believe the person requesting membership should be a member. if the committee for membership recommends to the business meeting that a person be extended the gift of membership, the normal result is membership being granted. this is because no member will normally disrespect the process the committee has implemented. socially, "standing in the way" in business meeting is seen as disrespectful and disruptive. the member standing the way "should" have given voice to his dismay during the committee process, and if he did give voice should have accepted the committee's decision on the matter. thus business meeting itself is often seen by outsiders as a mere rubber stamp. quakers respect process. they believe right process will result, in the end, in right outcome. there are exceptions. they are exceedingly rare.

committees for membership have restricted themselves over time with a vague, generalized, but existant written process through which an attender requests change of status to member. these membership pamphlets can be found in the meeting's library and should be read. however, they are only semi helpful. specifically certain important points are omitted. please note, officially the meeting will not be the asking party. the potential member must officially ask to become a member. this official ask is a written letter to the business meeting which then refers the letter to the committee for membership. this is important because in no case will the meeting take direct public responsibility for filling up its membership list. it will literally lay itself down first.

meetings and individuals inside the meeting will often at some point socially and unofficially ask a long-time attender why he or she has NOT applied for membership **yet**. this is the most important step in the real, verses official, membership process. it is the first step. if you have not been asked by a half dozen for so members of your meeting why have you not applied, this is a big sign they do not want you to apply **yet**. if you have been socially and unofficially asked why you have not applied **yet**, this the big sign that you should apply. this is particularly true if the people asking you are weighty in some way. clerks of meeting, clerks of membership care committees, clerks of worship and ministry committees, [past or present] these all count as weighty in this regard.

you will be unofficially and socially asked why you have not applied for membership after people want you to be officially connected to them. this want on their part [specifically not

yours] is highly dependent on popularity and time spent together. if you were popular in high school, the odds are, you will be popular in meeting. if you spend time doing what other people want you to do, hospitality, burial ground clean up, peace vigiling, etc, again the odds are you will be popular in meeting. if you were born to quaker parents, went to a quaker school, were a vietnam war draft resister, etc, etc, you will start out with some bonus popularity. the more popular you are; the sooner you will be asked. still the most unpopular person will eventually [read years, max case i know of personally was nine years] be asked. this assumes the unpopular person actually spends time with the meeting.

\*\*my friend terry directly disagrees. she has seen people so unpopular and at the same time so connected to a specific meeting that they both stay in that specific meeting and also are never asked into membership. i have not experienced this rare exception. in my experience the severely unpopular either leave the society all together, or shift their attendance to a different meeting.\*\*

basically speaking you spend time with the meeting in two ways. one is physical attendance in meeting for worship. if you only show up on easter and christmas, no matter how many years you stop by, it is unlikely that you will be asked to become a member. however, unbroken sunday attendance is both unexpected and weird. the other way you spend time with the meeting is participation in some monthly meeting committee while your status is that of a long-time attender. you are expected socially and unofficially to have done some amount of committee work prior to asking for membership. your participation in committees is an act of social respect for the current members of meeting, and specifically not an outward response to a god given command. please note: it is not actually desired that you attend every business meeting and stand and talk on any, much less all, issues while an attender. it is not *yet* your meeting. people will say things they do not actually mean in this regard, often unknowingly. they are naive, not lying.

so after you have been socially and unofficially asked by a half dozen members why have you not asked for membership *yet*, ask. send the letter. attend the business meeting where it is read. see it assigned to the committee for membership. answer questions. do not make statements. wait. smile. please note: if you chose to never ask, despite being socially and unofficially asked by them, you will hurt them. at some point they will begin to wonder why *they* are not good enough for you join yourself to them. that is a situation not further covered here.

eventually a subcommittee of three specific named people will be formed to address your membership request by the committee on membership care. do not tell anybody who you want on the subcommittee. do not tell anybody anything. smile. be vague. wait. it can be months for them to make *their* subcommittee. either 1) a lot of behind the scenes politicking is going on, or 2) everything and everybody is just being slow. no committee meeting in august. the clerk is out of town on vacation. "Mary" is sick and in the hospital, but she is expected out in a week, etc, etc. keep your mouth shut. smile. these are the real people and *their* real actions. you asked to join *them*. they specifically did not ask to join you. keep that fact firmly in mind. it is actually very important. they seek to change you, and at the same time to not be changed by you. they hope to break newton's third law. they do not want you to be an agent of change in their lives. they want you to be a physical continuation of their value system. they do not really want to lay their meeting down, nor do they want to change it.

the subcommittee will contact you and introduce themselves. they might have volunteered for this duty. they might have been dragooned. you should already know them. one of them, you should know well. that person is most likely the advocate for you and your request. that one person probably starts wanting you to be a member. one of the other two will start not wanting you to be a member. it might take you a little while to figure out all the details. you will not be told explicitly. the third person is the neutral arbitrator. officially and at the beginning he or she has no real position, other than the process is to be respected. nobody ever comes out and says this explicitly. however, each person is NOT representing themselves personally. they are representing groups. there is more than one person made uncomfortable by your request for membership. there is more than one person made joyous. there are lot of people who do not care, but do not want their meeting disrupted nor disrespected. these three people are going to receive emails talking about you. they will keep the authors confidential. they will share some of the contents of those emails with you. they will ask you questions based on these emails. your answers are not confidential, and will be shared.

the name of the game is social pressure. the group that does not want you in membership merely needs to keep it's mouth shut at business meeting. if they actively stand in the way, you are not a member. if they merely don't come to business meeting that month, you are a member. [assuming both the subcommittee and the committee as a whole have passed your request on with a recommendation for approval.] this grand game is as complex as electing a pope. you will have surprisingly little influence over the outcome. be honest. do not be rude. let the advocates for your membership both on and off the subcommittee do the heavy lifting. all your past is coming home to roost. part of it is you. part of it is your actions or lack of the same. however, a surprising MAJORITY of it is not you. it is them. who are they? who do they self perceive to be? and this is most dangerous, who do they want to become or remain in the future? you bring change, no matter how small. they react to that change. output is input modified by the system. you are merely the input. you are not yet part of the system. you actually do not determine output. a system can output the same response to different inputs. yet some inputs do change outputs. breath. smile. if both parties are serious, it is like asking for a person's hand in marriage. they don't have to say yes. they should be very flattered to even have been asked. brutally speaking, the less change you are seen to be bringing, the faster and easier your path to membership.

if they say no, they will often soften the blow by asking you to reapply in a year. this is not bullshit. they mean it, even if you might not want to hear it. they will often tell you one or two official and true reasons you were turned down by the subcommittee, or the full committee for membership. your advocate on the subcommittee will often tell you an additional one or two unofficial reasons you were not accepted into membership. you are unlikely to get the whole truth. whatever you are told will be true, but unlikely to be complete. you are unlikely to get very many names. the business meetings are public. you should attend. unless specifically asked, you should say nothing.

you are not a member until told you are. wait. eventual somebody will ask: why have you *not* reapplied? who that person is matters a lot. if they were an advocate on your first try, just say you are waiting. if they were neutral, ask them vaguely how have things changed and listen. if they were in the camp that did not want you, take their ask very seriously. if you want to be a member, ask if you can have lunch with them and talk... you do

not have to leave all the heavy lifting to your friends. any reapplication by you will be fielded by a different subcommittee. this matters less than it might seem. groups matter, individuals only rarely.

if they say yes, you are them and they are you. start using the pronoun "we" and congratulations. simply because 99% of the time yes is the answer does not detract. party while you can. too often life becomes a game of avoiding divorce rather than joyously being married. if they say no a second time. leave. cry in private. you can not force a we.

*michael eric burnside*

*twice turned down by the religious society of friends. once i was naive. once i was not.*

ps none of this is true for meetings with less than a dozen or so members. they will often not even meet for business on a regular schedule and will not have committees much less subcommittees.