

Dissecting a Difficult Decision

by Nancy Marshall

First, some caveats:

1. This is my opinion, and my opinion only.
2. I believe we were all trying to be and do our best.
3. There was not one decision. There were many decisions, and (if you will) non-decisions, over the course of many years.
4. No names (except mine) are used, to protect the innocent, the guilty, and the departed.
5. I tell this cautionary tale to help other Quakers of good will understand what I see as possible pitfalls in our past and recent decision-making processes, and to consider some current practices and how they might need a fresh look-see.

What was the decision?

The decision, most obvious and most notably within the past two years or so, was whether to allow trespassing persons appearing homeless to camp on the Phoenix Meeting property, and if so, under what circumstances and for how long?

But this “decision,” that has been a years-long process and extremely painful to all involved, was really a host of individual decisions and occurred as a consequence of decisions beginning at least thirty years ago.

Our Meetinghouse was built around 1950. The property had been purchased in the late 1940s. A Ramada was built at the north end of the property, which served as a Meeting worship spot while the Meetinghouse was built. Then the Ramada was enclosed. At the time there was no road over the nearby canal. There was no nearby paved road, much less the freeway with its current overpasses. You could drive only from the east. The building had a covered breezeway on the south side, which seemed like a pleasant feature, especially for the winter months.

Around the 1980’s (I really can’t remember the date of these events), after some campers had been caught drinking and had started a campfire in the breezeway, those at Meeting decided to close in the breezeway and turn it into what is now the Library. So - a decision was made to deter campers. But as far as I know, there was no official Meeting “minute” stating a policy not to allow campers.

Nobody probably thought about it at the time, and hence no decision was made, but by enclosing the Library, there turned out to be alcoves outside, on the east and west sides, both partially obscured from sight by those walking or driving by. On the east side in particular, there is a nook where an individual or two can hide out. Hence the “attractive nuisance” of an alcove amenable to trespassing homeless campers.

Meanwhile, also perhaps somewhere along in the 1980's, the local government decided to build a freeway from central downtown Phoenix to the northern fringes of the city.

One of the side benefits to Phoenix Meeting was the purchase of a home from the freeway right-of-way which we placed on our property as a Residence. We began having an official Resident (with family, children, or housemates, over time), who could walk around the property and observe things, or who might feel unsafe if strangers turned up. None of these realities were part of a "decision" about homeless campers. They just began to happen.

Meanwhile, in the 1990's, we made arrangements with a local acoustic music coffeehouse called "Fiddler's Dream" to be the main user of the "Ramada" on weekends. This arrangement has brought positive vibes to all concerned (and no time or spiritual conflict with Meeting worship).

Enter the overpasses and the notion of living "under the bridge." Without anyone really deciding, a number of men wound up living under these overpasses. I know this because I took a hike with my dog and found all their evidence under the passes - blankets, tarps, plastic containers, food leftovers, etc.

It turns out that our Meeting is right on the footpath from the overpasses to the local grocery store and gas station. Meanwhile, the main road is now paved and goes over the canal. We're fully "in town." The front yard of the Meeting is convenient waiting spot, with a dollop of shade in the east alcove, on the way to and from.

One spring, in the early 2000's as we hosted Arizona Half-Yearly Meeting, some of the children scampering around the property came upon a man and were startled and scared. It turned out that a man had been living in the east alcove, virtually undetected, from fall through spring, for a few years.

This event lead to a discussion and a few decisions. The Resident at the time persuaded Meeting leadership to allow "Alcove Guy" to stay, on the grounds that he was harmless and would deter other campers. This was a "decision" made by a few (Resident, Clerk, another member or two, with I believe the best intentions). But it was not an issue brought to the business meeting for anything like a full discussion or "threshing session" or a Meeting Minute. At the time I felt intimidated into going along with this "decision," (a non-decision on my part), because maybe I wasn't liberal enough, or something like that. "Alcove guy" stayed.

But over the course of years several discomfoting things occurred. A few drug needles and crack pipes and a case of alcohol bottles have been found on the property or in the alcoves. One man who appeared high refused to leave after a Resident's housemate asked him to leave. She called the police. Fiddler's Dream volunteers were accosted by men coming inside and asking for money at night, or men checking out the cars in the parking lot. But Fiddler's Dream didn't want to bother Meeting with its concerns and discomfort. Not enough information was shared. No decisions were made.

In the winter and spring of 2018, the situation intensified. There was evidence of four-five people sleeping along the sidewalk of the alcove. We found bedding, a chair, cat food, backpacks, a bicycle, and more. Someone stored his shopping cart with enough for a personal homeless shelter in a shopping cart behind a bush in the front yard. One couple kept parking their car, leaving it, claiming it didn't work, asking for work, not following up

on job leads, driving off. A number of folks in Meeting (mainly women and/or mothers) mentioned their discomfort at some aggressive (looking like entitled) behavior. Other individuals offered them welcome.

Finally, one day in the spring, we (I) had the car towed. (I have been convener of the Building and Property Committee for about a decade). The license plate had been removed and the battery sat on the ground by the rear tire. The car had all appearances of having been abandoned. When the towing company driver opened the driver's door to find the VIN, he found a gun in the front seat.

The next Sunday, the couple using that car appeared in Meeting and castigated the person who "took their home." They came to business meeting and said that for \$1,500, they would leave. Those at the business meeting decided not to pay.

An e-mail was sent out by a Meeting attender to all on our Meeting e-mail list (about 120 persons) demanding that the car be returned. The car ultimately got returned to the couple, at the hotel where they were staying, aided financially by some attenders. Offers to have the car taken to a shop and fixed were turned down. Only cash would do. The episode of that couple and their car more-or-less ended.

Then things just got more intense and difficult. We had two threshing sessions, at which time it appeared that the overwhelming (but not unanimous) sense of about twenty-five folks at these meetings was that we did not want trespassing campers or non-Meeting cars lingering on the property.

But we did not take this sense to a business meeting for an official decision or Minute.

The issue festered. In early 2019, a young attender pointed out that the Meeting had not made this "decision" by proper Quaker process. It was true.

It was decided (I honestly don't know by whom) to set up an ad hoc committee to work on a proposal about the issue of homeless campers on the property. An attender offered to convene the committee. Someone said OK. Unfortunately, with such a hot issue as this, the convener was not neutral, seasoned, or a member of Meeting. He was one of a very few advocating that homeless folks should be allowed to camp on the property.

Here are some aspects of Quaker process that seemed not to work:

- First, several decisions that significantly affected the Meeting were made without bringing them to a full business meeting.
- Second, the committee that was formed was run by an advocate for something the large majority of folks had opposed.
- Third, committee meetings were set through summer. Several individuals - including several members of Meeting - were away for all or part of the summer and could not physically attend.
- Fourth, emails were used. Not everyone could attend, but they wanted their voices to be heard. Some of the emails were worded in vague or unclear language, others advocating, some analytical, some critical of this person or that opinion. E-mail has become a regular part of our function.

- Fifth, many people chose not to attend these committee meetings. I could feel, palpably, hostility of the advocates toward some of us who were opposed. But I am one of the “bolder” members of Meeting. Many people appeared not to want to participate at all in a committee that had a lot of conflict.
- Sixth, the committee was run primarily by attenders, and the proposal they developed was opposed by most members, who could not be physically at the committee meetings. The *Faith and Practice* description of committees as being the function of those physically present did not work. It did not represent the large majority of those in Meeting.
- Seventh, there seemed to be extreme caution by the leadership to allow all voices to be heard but never ask what the members of Meeting felt. The minority view was being advocated by attenders who had not applied for membership in Meeting. This was not in line with our *IMYM Faith and Practice*, which states that all voices should be given consideration, but that members should be responsible for the decisions affecting the Meeting.
- Eighth, virtually all the women in Meeting, members or not, mothers or not, did not want trespassing homeless campers on the property. But at the same time, most of them also did not attend the committee meetings or business meetings. The committee proposal was formulated primarily by two young male attenders. The sessions were intense, not conducive to inclusiveness or comfort for the timid. There was a significant imbalance of attendance and viewpoint between men (not all) and virtually all women.
- Finally, there seem to be several personality flaws that inhibited our ability as a Meeting community to move through this. (We all have them: I see myself more than once on this list):
 1. The controller - it's my way or the highway. I know how this should go. Both “I have more spiritual insight” and “I know the history and have done the research” were present.
 2. The stickler - “you didn't use proper process,” or “the wording of the proposal is wrong.”
 3. The avoider - “If I go along with it now, even though I don't agree, surely it won't fly at the business meeting. I won't have to stand against it. Someone else will object.” Or, “I can't stand being around conflict. I won't attend the committee meetings or the business meeting.”
 4. The compromiser - “Let's adopt this proposal for awhile, even if it's flawed.”
 5. The pleaser - “I'll be nice and it will all be fine.”
 6. The principled (controller, stickler)- “Only the absolutely right decision will work.”
 7. There were more avoiders - “I don't have the stomach for these discussions so I won't participate.”

8. The Victim - "You are so unfair (or unQuakerly); I worked so hard and you've hurt my feelings and I'm leaving."

Meanwhile, a player that should have been present in our Quakerly discussions, but that remained sadly absent: nonviolent communication. Little to nothing was seen of stating a matter objectively without criticism, owning one's own feelings without blame, accurately expressing one's need, and making a specific request.

There were some stand-out dichotomies:

- First, there appeared to be a fundamental values conflict between the Biblical admonition of Jesus to minister "to the least of these" (assuming the trespassing campers were the "least") versus the Quaker value of caring for our community.
- Second, there were no women who supported having homeless folks camp on the property. Many women feel vulnerable because of past experiences or real possibilities. Most agreed we should be compassionate to those who showed up, but they needed to be referred elsewhere. The only advocates for letting trespassing homeless campers stay were men, mostly young and single.

Such a dichotomy should alert those present that if the women's voice is absent, there should be an effort to provide a safe environment where those voices, including those not in physical attendance, can be heard. In this case, the significant sense of the Meeting that opposed trespasser camping was absent in the committee proceedings.

It became obvious to those still in town that the Meeting community was painfully divided. At the August business meeting, finding no unity in the full committee or the Meeting, the Clerk asked and those present laid down the ad hoc homelessness committee.

In September, most members had returned to Phoenix. By then, several people had either resigned as members or left the committee and left the Meeting, with or without notice, on both sides of the issue, and perhaps for other reasons as well. I believe we'll never know.

For the September business meeting the Clerk drafted a proposed Minute on the homelessness issue which proposed: 1) that we ask people to leave, while also providing emergency food, water, and referrals, 2) call our member trained in social work as the "point man" to deal with campers if found; 3) that anyone could provide more help off campus if they wanted or call police or fire responders if they felt the need; and 4) agreed that we would remove cars not connected with Meeting upon a three-day notice. One attender persuaded several women who had avoided the committee and business meetings to attend the business meeting. After some discussion of the proposal one member (who had avoided the contentious committee meetings) said she found nothing objectionable with the proposed Minute and she would approve it. All members present approved the Minute, as did all attenders except one young man whose objection was recorded.

The Clerk didn't ask for approval by members versus attenders. The Recording Clerk made a note of it in the record of the meeting. Several tasks were referred back to the Building and Property Committee to resume working on projects that would make the alcoves less of an "attractive nuisance." Over the course of the early fall two old crack pipes and one hypodermic needle (among other items) were found in the alcoves.

I'm not sure all the decisions have been made. Homelessness will remain a considerable issue for many people in the Phoenix area. Periodically folks unassociated with Meeting will come onto the property who may want to camp, get help, or leave their vehicle. We may find more drug paraphernalia. I hope that as we move into the future, we are all (including me) willing to be more conscious of the failings of our past decisions, non-decisions, intimidations, assertions, avoidances, and personality quirks.

It is also my hope that we Quakers will look carefully at how to constitute an ad hoc committee, how to provide a safe method for those averse to conflict to have a voice, how to use email and other non-“physically present” social media, when to recognize that a decision should be made at the business meeting level, and whether membership should be considered in the decision-making process.

Nancy Marshall has been a member of Phoenix Meeting for over forty years. She has been convener of Building and Property Committee for about a decade.