

Notes:

Does Membership Matter?

Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 3/21/2019

Participants:

- Alan Edgar – Santa Cruz Meeting (Santa Cruz, CA)
- Mimi Edgar – Santa Cruz Meeting (Santa Cruz, CA)
- Elizabeth Elliott – Whittier First Friends (Whittier, CA)
- Travis Etling – Durango Meeting (Durango, CO)
- Steve Harris – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Talley Kenyon – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Fred Koster – Albuquerque Meeting (Albuquerque, NM)
- Larry Lebang – Santa Fe Meeting (Santa Fe, NM)
- Nichoe Lichen – Quaker House Meeting (Santa Fe, NM)
- Betsy Lombardi – Quaker House Meeting (Santa Fe, CA)
- Joe Magruder – Berkeley Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Jerry McBride – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Joy Conrad Rice – Interior British Columbia Meeting
- Jay Thatcher – Corvallis Meeting (Corvallis, OR)
- Kirby Urner – Multnomah Meeting (Portland, OR)
- Cathy Webb – Isolated Friend (La Grande, OR)
- Jane Yett – Santa Cruz Meeting (Santa Cruz, CA)

Introductions:

- Our meeting has really been struggling with questions about membership. We have a group of long-time members who cherish their membership in the Religious Society of Friends, but not necessarily in our meeting, and not in any active way.
- I am on the cusp of membership in a meeting.
- I am an isolated Friend. I am a member of a meeting that's far away, and there's no meeting near my home now.

- We are having a clearness committee meeting tomorrow for membership for a young family and I'm wondering what we should focus on.
- We have many attenders who feel no need to request formal membership. I'm curious to hear what others think about why that's so.
- We're having trouble in our meeting with a member whom some think should lay down his membership and some don't; how do we have a good process considering that question?
- There have been times I've felt like the only one in my meeting who cares about the question of membership. But recently, we've had three people decide they'd like to join, so I look forward to learning what that will mean to them.
- We have people in our meeting who have been attenders for years, and they see that we have members who are not involved in the meeting community, so they don't see much reason for joining. So I feel some tension around the question of whether membership has validity.
- We're starting a new worship group; as we put it together, I want to get refreshed about what membership means, what the current Quaker culture is about this.
- Because of moving I was a member of different meetings over the years. Then I was in the odd situation of having helped found a new meeting, as an attender, and then I applied for membership. The clearness process was really wonderful in opening me up to new areas of exploration I hadn't considered before.
- We're doing a lot of education about what it means to be a Quaker, what it means to be a member, because we have so many new people.
- Our meeting has a conversation running about what positions attenders can hold in our meeting and what positions are reserved for members.
- I was on a clearness committee for someone's membership, and I want to consider whether we covered all the dimensions of membership that we should have.
- I was in a meeting once where one member was dropped unceremoniously because of personal conflicts, which makes me wonder what our responsibilities are in supporting members.
- I am especially interested in considering what membership means to the spiritual life of individuals and of the community – how it affects how we think of community and how we act in it.
- I found the process of becoming a member to be meaningful in helping me clarify what it would mean to make a lifetime commitment to being a Quaker.

Query: How do members in your meeting view the meaning of membership? Membership in your meeting? Membership in the Religious Society of Friends?

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- In my meeting, we are committed to membership as an institution. People like to keep good records and go through the process. On the other hand, we don't want membership to seem like an initiation into a secret inner circle. We think it's important for nonmembers to audit and see everything Quakers do. We even allow nonmembers to convene clearness committees for membership, which is a little controversial in the meeting.
 - Our meeting sounds similar. I am an attender, and I am clerk of our adult education committee. I see examples in our meeting of people who view membership as something covenantal and examples on the other extreme, of people who see it as something casual. So I'm still learning what is the practice, what is the language, and what does it all mean.
 - I belong to a very small meeting that has tapered down to about six members. We have almost no restrictions on who can do what. I think the only position we have that should be a "member" is clerk of the meeting. There are so few people that anyone that wants the meeting to continue steps in and helps with the process. This includes some long-time attenders who are quite active in the meeting; they don't become members, and I don't know their reasons for that.
 - We don't talk about the meaning of membership very often in my meeting. Everyone is invited to participate in business meeting and committees, but we tend to only have members serve on clearness committees for membership, but not for other types of clearness committees for people seeking other types of support. Traditionally, we tend to have only members on committees that deal with confidential matters, but that's on a case by case basis.
 - For me, my sense of membership is very much more as part of my monthly meeting than as membership in the larger Religious Society of Friends. This is reflected in my minimal participation in our quarterly and yearly meetings. Though I do rely on resources from the wider Quaker world for my own religious growth and to support our meeting.
 - I think I'm on the other end of that. I feel like I'm a part of the Religious Society of Friends, and I'm part of my monthly meeting because it's close to where I live. If I moved someplace else, I would transfer my membership. I know you can't belong to the Religious Society of Friends without belonging to a monthly meeting, but to what degree is our allegiance to our monthly meeting and to what degree to the religious society as a whole?
 - As a clerk of my monthly meeting, I do try to listen to the entire meeting during meeting for business, but on the other hand, I know who is a member and who is not. Ultimately, it is the members who make the decisions for the meeting.
 - In the meeting where I first became a member, we almost never talked about membership. This was partly because two of the longest-standing participants in the meeting believed that membership is meaningless. George Fox was never a member. These were very important participants in the meeting, so sometimes they would be clerk of our meeting, even though they weren't "members," and we would always have co-clerks, so that one of them was a member in the formal sense. The non-

member clerk would perform in the role in every capacity except signing any official paperwork. In this situation, I really had to think about what my reasons were to become a member. For me, the answer was that I wanted to make a commitment to a kind of life, which became even more clear to me during the clearness process, which for me was a very helpful process.

- Membership is like that step of getting married, even if you have a great relationship without it. Our meeting has a beautiful certificate that we sign when someone becomes a member, it describes the commitment that our meeting is making to them and them to the meeting, and everyone signs it.
- Our family has Quakers in it from the 1700s, though that is not how I was raised. I decided suddenly, in my twenties, that I was a Quaker. I still don't know what makes me so certain. In the sixties, when a lot of new people were coming to meeting, it would happen that individuals applied for membership and I was surprised, because I already thought they were a member. I think the real membership is something we bestow as a community by recognizing the role that a person is playing in the community. Formal membership is important for record keeping, but I question whether it's really necessary.
- Because our meeting only formed last July, we didn't really have any members – except those who transferred from other meetings – so this issue is very alive for us. I have found in this that our book of Faith and Practice doesn't do a good job of explaining why membership is important, it only explains the process. What I learned from a Friend I respect is that membership is about trusting the people you're making decisions with. To be a member is to make a commitment to searching very deeply with your Quaker friends and to be committed to following the practice – to make decisions under the guidance of the holy spirit. Membership is an outward way of saying you've made that commitment. We had a member of our meeting who was a member for thirty-five years and never came to business meetings and never served on committees and is just now learning what it means to be a member. My own recent clearness committee for membership in my current meeting helped me with this, too, even though I've been a member in other meetings for years.
- We live in an individualistic culture, which affects our meetings. Our meetings are committed to the individuals in the meetings, but a really strong meeting would be united in its commitment to God. It's not easy to understand what it means to be a Quaker. It's a commitment to really work hard.
- Membership is a seriously divisive issue in our meeting. We're considering laying down the membership of someone who has done something quite egregious and has made no clear apology for it. We wonder if we should reach out to him and if he should reach out to us. It's not clear what process we should use here. Unless we find a way to follow a loving process, any decision will leave us with a divided meeting.
- Of course, our meeting doesn't seek out conflict, but we do have conflict. We accept that. It isn't divisive.

- I was part of a meeting that eventually took out a restraining order against an individual, to keep them from attending the meeting, because others didn't feel safe when the person was there. They didn't read the person out of membership; they kept their hearts open to the possibility that the person would change. But I think the restraining order is still in place. It's hard.
- It's like the pain of divorce in a marriage.
- We had a member of our meeting who was convicted of pedophilia, and it was very divisive in the meeting concerning our obligation to him and concerning his membership. Some felt we did not attend to his needs sufficiently.
- I'm thinking about a clearness committee we'll be holding tomorrow – for a family that's applying for membership. Our clearness committees are composed of members, and the idea is that they are people who can bring some experience to the conversation.
- It seems common for attenders to shy away from membership because they don't hold a traditional belief in God.
- Our meeting changed our bylaws concerning who makes decisions for the meeting. It now says these are made by "members and faithful attenders." This is more accurate to what our actual practice is.
- Our meeting's sense of identity is more built around our sense of community, less around a sense of being a "religious society" in a traditional way.
- A clearness committee for membership is a wonderful experience. Having the opportunity to explore what brings people together into the community is something I really love to participate in.
- A rich area to explore in a clearness committee for membership is the way the prospective Friend uses the word "divine" – does it have any meaning for them? It did for George Fox. What does it mean to them to say "there is that of God in every person"? What do the other members of the clearness committee think about this? There are certainly nontheist Friends among us.
- It would make me nervous if it wasn't clear that a new member was committed to making difficult decisions according to the same process that we use in our meeting – to the best of their ability. New members can sometimes still treat the decision making like they are voting. That's the most important thing in my mind – that they have some sense of participation in a corporate body that's making decisions and that's listening, to the best of their ability, to the divine in making those decisions. It really isn't an intellectual thing. So I would take enough time in the clearness process to make sure they understand that a commitment to seeking divine guidance is the core of corporate decision making. Without that, we're open to enormous conflict. We are anyway, because we're human.
- When I was growing up, some people came to our meeting because they opposed the Vietnam War. They were conscientious objectors, and membership in the meeting mattered to them because of that. The meeting would be able to verify that they were members. How we relate to the general public is part of what

membership entails. It could be important to someone that a meeting could verify their membership. This is a bureaucratic aspect of membership.

- I don't think membership has as much to do with the depth of your worship as it has to do with your willingness to be public about your affiliation.
- This gives strength to the individual and it also gives strength to the organization. Strong religious organizations benefit society generally.
- When thinking about whether someone should be a member or not, it comes down to relationships. It's not a matter of checking off boxes. It's about the quality of the relationships and the trust.

Notes from the "chat" box, typed during the discussion above

19:26:34 From jerry mcbride : Perhaps Mimi could use the chat feature

19:29:12 From talleykenyon : Sorry to have to leave. Look forward to reading the notes for the rest of this discussion.

19:33:21 From Alan & Mimi : To me, membership is somewhat analagous to marriage. One can live with another person for years and have a great relationship, feeling no need for marriage. But to me, the step of getting married is an outward commitment, something to share with family and friends. I see the step of becoming a member of a Meeting as a way to announce to your community your commitment, and to celebrate that commitment together.

19:33:52 From Mary Klein : Thanks Mimi

19:43:24 From Jay T. : from the Pacific YM Faith & Practice:

19:43:27 From Jay T. : If a Friend by behavior or expression appears to harm the Meeting or to misrepresent Friends, the Oversight Committee should appoint a small committee to meet with the Friend. In a spirit of loving concern, this committee should counsel with the member, seeking to understand his or her views and actions. When termination of Membership must be considered, it should occur over a minimum of three Meetings for Business. If there appears to be no hope of restoring unity with the Meeting, the Oversight Committee should report to the Monthly Meeting, and recommend that the membership be terminated. The Meeting may then wish to appoint a special committee to confer further with the Friend before taking action. If that committee reports that there is still no hope of reconciliation, the Meeting should notify the member in writing of its intention to consider termination of the membership at a Meeting for Business. If the Meeting agrees that the membership should be terminated, a proposed minute should be written, not

19:44:33 From Jay T. : should be written, noting that final approval will be sought at the Meeting for Business on the date scheduled. That minute should be sent to the individual by registered mail with return receipt requested. At the appointed Meeting for Business, the minute should be re-read to the Meeting for its approval.

19:45:50 From Jay T. : North Pacific YM and Intermountain YM will have recorded procedures that differ a bit.

19:46:19 From Jane Yett : Since my voice didn't come through clearly, I'll "chat". In our meeting membership has become a seriously divisive issue. Do we or don't we lay down the membership of a member who has seriously violated humane behavior? With people taking moral stands on both sides of the issue, how does the meeting decide and maintain its sense of love, trust, and community? Is the most important issue making a correct decision or having a healthy decision process? What would a healthy Quaker process look like? What are the obligations of the person in question? What are the obligation of the meeting to a member who has taken deeply egregious action? (He has not apologized in the way some feel he needs to.) Does he have a right to remain a member, and what might he need to do for that? What does the meeting need to do to make this controversial decision?

19:51:15 From Elisabeth Elliot : faithful attenders. thats good!

19:54:09 From Jane Yett : dkostar - James' are questions that can continue into membership and on through life, about a relationship with the greater good, God, love, however one says it. Having questions is a good sign for membership, depending on how they are approached.

20:01:57 From Travis : Thanks everybody! I really appreciate all the thoughtful reflection.