

Are Committees Still the Answer?

by Joyce Zerwekh

Liberal unprogrammed Quaker meetings are organized or disorganized by committees. We are led or misled by them. Without an identified pastor or priest, we count on the wisdom of committees. How can we find the proper balance between the committee structures that have worked in the past and what we need to do to live out the mission of Friends for the future? How can we discern what to hold onto and what to let go?

However, at every level (monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting) we are having trouble filling our committees. Not enough members. Disappeared members. People refusing to clerk. What circumstances lead to this? Sometimes the Nominating Committee is blamed for not trying hard enough, but the truth is that most of our committees are filled with the same old Friends (suspects?) who have been playing musical chairs (committees) for years now. Some disappear and may appear in name only on a list of members. New people refuse nomination to save themselves the stress, and sometimes they volunteer but find themselves in “over their heads” with demands and disagreement. Too often even the simplest decisions drag on as members hesitate to decide and to express any authority. Too often committee experience results in so-very-human disagreement and pettiness, too often preoccupation with minutiae. Too often members pull away, quietly or in protest, perhaps estranged. Although we are Friends committed to nonviolence, we may not have the conflict resolutions skills necessary in committees. For whatever reason, refusal to decide, perhaps believing this is Quaker process, can lead to failed accountability.

Let’s acknowledge the lives of the newer generation of younger adult Friends, potential recruits to fill committees and lead them. Many are living in limbo, which my thesaurus explains as living in an “indeterminate state.” How does this affect their participation amongst Friends? Contrast my lifetime (I am 70) and many of my generation. College graduation (We could work our way through) came soon after high school, followed by marriage and family, and then parallel work responsibilities with a living wage. Friends around me in the 1960s and 70s welcomed leadership in political and community responsibilities, churches and meetings. Quaker meetings were often run by adults in their 30s and 40s. I clerked business meeting at Pendle Hill when I was 25!

What’s different in 2015? For one, the failing economy and lack of opportunity has changed young adulthood into a period of uncertainty and sometimes prolonged partial employment. Friendly committee participation is simply not a priority. Too often wages are poor, often requiring pasting together several jobs. Injustice in the workplace is pervasive for all who labor, even in professional positions which are increasingly demanding and dehumanized. Robin Mohr, our Friend in Residence for the coming Annual Session, writes about the tug of priorities when a Friend is called to ministry among

Friends and is also trying to make a living wage and care for family. Child rearing is struggle as many of our kids are diagnosed with a shocking array of mental disabilities. Then comes young adolescence with Internet dominance posing unfathomable parental worries like bullying and sexting and a wide variety of addictions. Our youth reflect the unresolved anguish of larger society! And in Quaker adulthood there is growing mental health suffering, particularly depression as documented in Multnomah Meeting's "Hold in the Light" requests.

What can be done? Is it even possible for Quaker monthly, quarterly, or yearly meetings to function and worship in the absence of multiple demanding committees? NPYM *Faith and Practice* (1993) proclaims that "Committees are tools of the Monthly Meeting...There is no obligation to create any committee, although most monthly meetings find a Committee on Ministry and Oversight and a Nominating Committee essential.....often found in Meetings are those on Religious Education, Finance and Budget, Peace and Social Order, Property, and Social...." Committees should be "useful tools rather than extraneous burdens."

How can perceived extraneous burdens be transformed into opportunity and blessing? Can committees become true opportunities to make a difference in our beloved communities, to build loving communities? What opportunities are realistic?

- For the social committee, a chance to welcome those who are searching and to nurture long-timers.
- For oversight (Care and Concern), a chance to care for and encourage Friends in good times and harsh.
- For peace and social concerns, a chance to focus on selected issues and take meaningful action in the effort to "Do justice and love mercy."
- For worship and ministry, an opportunity to deepen spiritual experience of all.

What alternatives should we consider to reduce the number of committees and improve the effectiveness of remaining essential committees? Could simplification be sustainable? Might some responsibilities be undertaken by employing folks? How might we be able to worship and communicate as Friends with lightness of spirit that takes away the occasion of committees experienced as burdensome? I have recently learned that some monthly meetings and yearly meetings have declared one-year suspensions of committees as usual in order to consider restructuring that works. **What does the Light require? Let's talk.**

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