

Clerking a Quaker Business Session

I. Prepare in advance

- A. Hold the meeting in prayer and open yourself to the guidance of the Spirit.
- B. Prepare the agenda: what issues does the meeting need to address?
- C. Reflect on each item
 1. What is being asked of the meeting—receive information? Express a judgment? Commit time or money, etc.
 2. Who will make the presentation? What background information/materials will be needed for the meeting to make an informed decision on this matter? What preparations should be made? Check with the presenter to make sure they have their materials, understand what they are asking of the meeting, and are prepared to make their presentation.
 3. How weighty is the question, i.e. how much time, energy, and unity are needed or warranted?
 4. How is it likely to go?
 - a. Is there substantial unity? Are there factions or an individual with a strongly held position? Is the matter complex, confusing, or carrying baggage?
 - b. Consider ways of presenting the matter or structuring the discussion that can unpack the baggage or create a climate for listening and discerning that will diffuse the tightly held positions and allow all participants to be open to the teaching of the Spirit.

II. Foster a climate of worshipful discernment

- A. Center yourself and provide a climate for others to center, including any opening practices such as reading a query, personal sharing, or singing. Or perhaps, just taking time to settle. It is not a “moment” of silence. It is a time of settling in, inviting meeting members to clear themselves and be ready to listen with open hearts to one another and willingness to be surprised by the mysterious workings of the Spirit.
- B. Keep the meeting focused. It is the clerk’s job to know what the task is at any given moment and to remind participants to stay on task and to ask them to hold other matters until an appropriate time.
- C. Set the tone. If you remain centered, cheerful, loving, and trusting it will help others to do so as well. Sometimes it is helpful to remind the meeting to approach a matter with trust and good humor. If the meeting is seeming tense or if you feel frazzled, settle into a brief period of quiet until you feel the meeting settle. Invite people to take a moment to lay aside their thoughts on the subject and open themselves inwardly to “what are we called to in this moment?” or “what does love require of us in this moment?”
- D. As clerk moderate the pace and see that those who feel led to speak have an opportunity to do so. Keep an eye out for the quiet people and create an opening for them.

III. Help the meeting consider the matters on the agenda

- A. As each item is presented make sure that it is clear what action is being asked of the meeting. If it is helpful, restate the question before proceeding.
- B. First invite questions for information. (If someone’s question is more of an opinion ask them to wait.)
- C. When questions are satisfied, invite Friends to settle in the Spirit and sense what is rightly ordered in this matter. If needed, remind Friends that we are called to be teachable, to listen carefully for the kernel of truth in each person’s message, to help us find the path to unity in a rightly ordered outcome.
- D. Allow the discussion to proceed until the sense of the meeting begins to emerge
 1. State your reading of the sense of the meeting.
 - a. Ask those present if that is an accurate reading of the sense of the meeting.
 - b. If Friends concur that this is an accurate sense of the meeting and no one expresses misgivings, ask Friends to take a moment to settle and test it with the Spirit, are we missing anything? Is it aligned with our Spiritual values and commitments? In other words, it might be a good idea but is it rightly ordered? Allow a brief period of quiet and then ask if the meeting is ready to approve the proposal.
 - c. If misgivings are expressed, continue the discussion until a new sense of the meeting begins to emerge and then return to D-1 above. Continue this process until the meeting comes to unity.

2. If the matter is complex, it can be helpful to identify portions on which there is unity, get approval for them and build on that unity as you move to other portions of the issue.
3. If the meeting is not finding unity, call attention to that and settle into quiet. Open yourself to guidance as to how to proceed.
 - a. Perhaps after recentring and refocusing, the meeting will be able to proceed toward unity.
 - b. If it is your sense that unity will not be achieved soon and that this matter is crowding the time for adequate discussion of other important agenda items, suggest that it be carried over to the next meeting. Often clarity comes in the space between meetings. Perhaps a few Friends could be asked to work on the matter between meetings.
 - c. If the matter needs to be resolved at this meeting, it might be helpful to move on to other timely items and return to this one at the end of the agenda. Again, it might be helpful to ask a few Friends to withdraw and bring back a revised recommendation later in the meeting.
4. If there is substantial unity, but one person or a small number of people are not in unity with the sense of the meeting, pause for the guidance of the Spirit.
 - a. Address the who are out of unity and ask them to seek clarity on whether their concerns are of sufficient gravity to warrant standing in the way of the meeting and they feel led by the Spirit to do so. Give some time in silence for them and the meeting to consider the impasse and seek guidance. You might ask the rest of those present to hold them in light and love. After a few minutes, ask if they are still under the weight of their concern or if they are prepared to allow the meeting to proceed.
 - b. If they are still under the weight of their concern it is a grave matter for the meeting. The deepest, most prayerful seeking is required. Everyone must open her/himself to the possibility that God is calling the meeting to be cautious on this matter and not to proceed hastily in the direction Friends have been moving. Deep searching may result in a course of action not previously mentioned which is richer and more Spirit filled. Sometimes a person's grave reservations lead the meeting to set the matter aside, maybe to the next meeting, or maybe to decide not to proceed on this matter until more light is given.
 - c. On the rarest of occasions, a meeting will decide to proceed in spite of a member's grave reservations. In the end, it is the body, not the individual, which has the authority to act. This must be done with greatest care and caution, holding one another in love and with the understanding that all may have more to learn on the subject.
 - d. Once the meeting has approved the action, thank Friends for their faithfulness in seeking unity. Acknowledge that the Spirit may have more to teach us as time goes on. Meanwhile it is Friends' practice for all in the meeting, including those with reservations, to work together to help our decision to succeed.

IV. Follow through after the meeting

- A. It is the clerk's responsibility to make sure that the minutes are completed and circulated and that the decisions are acted on in a timely manner.

A NOTE ON SENSE OF THE MEETING, CONSENSUS, AND UNANIMITY

Unanimity implies that everyone agrees with a decision.

Consensus is variously defined but has a general sense of a decision to which all present can assent, sometimes arrived at through horse-trading and compromise. Perhaps not everybody agrees wholeheartedly, but it is a decision they are prepared to accept.

Sense of the meeting is subtly different from these. It is a sense that the meeting is approaching the decision that is most in harmony with the leadings of the Spirit. In reaching the *sense of the meeting* Friends are not called to *agree with* the direction of the meeting, but after prayerful searching *to be at ease with it*, to feel that it is *rightly ordered*, to *be in unity* with the Spirit and with the sense of the meeting. The sense is modified not so much through compromise as through deep listening. Often there is not unanimity, some Friends may prefer a different course of action. They need only feel at ease in trusting the movement of the Spirit in the meeting.