

Minutes  
Asheville Friends Meeting  
Threshing Session 2004/07/11

Asheville Friends joined together at noon on 7/11/04 to thresh some questions arising from our current situation of not having a clerk of meeting. Twenty-two Friends joined in the threshing: Lynnora Bierce, Lindsay Bridges, Alice Brown, Jim Cavener, Karen Cernek, David Clements, George Gjelfriend, Kristi Gjelfriend, Joy Gossett, Martha Huggins, Nancy Kuykendall, Barry Master, Marcia Master, Rusty Maynard, Susan Mitchell, Evan Richardson, Alan Robinson, Dan Teslow, Mary Teslow, Dorothy Vaughn, Barbara Esther (clerk), and Steve Livingston (recording clerk).

Clerk Barbara Esther opened the meeting with a quotation from Howard Brinton's Friends for 300 years (page 108, chapter 6, "Reaching Decisions"), noting that this is the only reference to "clerking" in the entire book:

The clerk is theoretically a recording officer, but in practice he must frequently assume the duties of a presiding officer. He must be sensitive to all trends of opinion, including those not well expressed. When two or more persons rise at once, he must recognize one as having the floor. He must determine the appropriate amount of time to be devoted to each item on the agenda in view of the total business before the meeting. He must decide on how much expression he can safely base his minute. He is responsible for keeping one subject at a time before the meeting. He may request talkative members to limit their remarks and silent members to express themselves. All this appears to lay a heavy burden upon the clerk, but in any contingency, he may derive help from any member. Theoretically, it is the meeting as a whole, rather than the clerk, that exercises authority, but the clerk may occasionally find himself in a position in which some exercise of authority is unavoidable.

The clerk read the queries offered by Ministry and Counsel: "What do we expect our clerk to be? What do we expect our clerk to do? How does the absence of a clerk affect the operation of our meeting - can we maintain our continuity and accountability? How can committees nurture the meeting for business?" To these, Barbara added the query "What will make us a more vital meeting?" She asked Friends to offer any other queries that seemed appropriate. A Friend offered "What can the Meeting do to support the clerk?"

The clerk suggested that we examine the queries in a worshipful way addressing them one by one, but without obstructing anyone's leading to address them out of order. The following account is arranged by the topics of the separate queries rather than the chronological order of Friends' offerings.

A Friend recounted the definition of a clerk offered by Henry Weitzer, who suggested that the business of the clerk was to "take care of the business of the meeting between business meetings". He suggested that rather than taking on all the work personally, the clerk should be more of a facilitator and delegator. The Friend observed that our overblown expectations of the clerk make the position seem too daunting. Looking at the verb "to delegate" reveals its roots "de-legate", meaning to untie or untangle. A former clerk related the experience that it sometimes requires more effort to "delegate" than to perform a task oneself, thus making delegating just another burden on the clerk.

A Friend offered observations about the clerk's role of managing the business meeting, suggesting that business meeting has not been fully successful, in the sense that there is not always a perfect balance of businesslike and spirit-filled atmosphere. In this Friend's view, our past clerk was adept at combining pastoral care with strongly spirit-led conduct in business meeting, aided by extensive training and background in Quaker process. Potential candidates for the clerking role may be somewhat awed by the size of the shoes our outgoing clerk left to fill, this Friend pointed out, but as each of us acquires more experience and knowledge individually about conducting business after the manner of Friends, the shepherding role of the clerk gives way to our enhanced ability to move ourselves along.

Two former clerks recalled their experience of filling big shoes - their apprehensions and feelings of inadequacy at the outset of their term giving way to a sense of support from the community and their own skills improving as they served. Each found she was able to set aside her concern for measuring up to the past example and appreciate her own growth in concert with the community.

Our outgoing clerk described her own experience that the community's expectations seemed overwhelming, especially when the prospect of a co-clerk did not materialize. She felt a definite calling to clerk the Meeting, and prepared for the role before taking it on. Nevertheless, the volume of work was overwhelming: pastoral care, correspondence, following up on newcomers, breaking meeting each week, preparing for and facilitating business meetings. She observed that part of the solution would be to "spin closer" as a Meeting, to be more aware of the work individuals and committees are doing or are capable of doing, to help alleviate our focus on one individual in a leadership role. She observed that the leadership of the

many could be enhanced with mentoring - in Quaker process, the practices of seasoning, and the skills of writing and presenting good reports.

There was a strong sense that the leadership of our outgoing clerk would have to be parceled out among the several in our community, so that our expectations of a new clerk would not be unduly high. How can our community accomplish that? A Friend suggested the value in discerning what we are willing to delegate to others identified as leaders, so that we would see a greatly diminished burden on the clerk. Specific tasks to be done are more readily answered with service than a general appeal to help.

A Friend related experience in other meetings, where it was not expected of the clerk to break meeting every week, nor to prepare the annual State of the Society report. A Friend suggested the practice of holding a monthly meeting of committee clerks with the Meeting clerk, for the purpose of setting the agenda for business meeting.

A self-described “non-joiner” offered perceptions and experience as a former “spouse of clerk”, taking responsibility for some of the mundane tasks such as responding to phone messages, filling in forms, and handling routine correspondence. While valuing the wisdom of not having a paid minister, this Friend advised that we might better hold on to our testimony of simplicity by careful prioritizing, and recognition of the limits of our abilities and energy. Our shared purpose, this Friend observed, is in serving and loving “GOD”, people, and planet.

We find ourselves in the position of not having a clerk, another Friend observed. What can we learn from that fact? What does that say about our community?

A Friend suggested that in the absence of an individual identified as a clerk, it might be reasonable to rotate the role. Another Friend suggested that the absence of a clerk did not imply that we had to lay down the Meeting. Several Friends returned to these points, and supported the sense that we benefit as a Meeting by delegating the leadership among many. Another Friend pointed out the danger of losing efficiency and a sense of continuity in the absence of a specific clerk of meeting.

What does the clerk provide beyond continuity and efficiency? A Friend offered that the clerk holds the “reins of the team” and sees “the big picture” of the meeting, but that strong committees and committee clerks can maintain other aspects of leadership and accountability in the absence of a clerk of meeting. Our outgoing clerk pointed out from her clerking experience that holding the meeting in the light is another very nurturing, transformative aspect of stewardship, one that can be shared by all in the community. A Friend offered that each clerk brings his/her own, unique gifts to the role. It is up to the community to let each clerk be what he or she is, and to embrace and support him/her at whatever level of ability.

A Friend pointed out that the adage “we Quakers are all ministers” is not quite that simple. Each of us brings different gifts to the Meeting, and one can only discover how those gifts serve the Meeting by serving the Meeting. But we are all ministers in the sense that we all have an obligation to do something for the community beyond simply participating in the weekly hour of worship. Many things are left undone because no one comes forward to do them. Our relationship to the Meeting is illuminated by the questions: Are you a part of this Meeting? Where is your ministry?

A Friend spoke of her experience of growing into Quakerism over the past several years. She expressed gratitude for the Quakerism 101 series having helped her see how easily she fit in among Quakers, and showing her what is expected in a Quaker Meeting for Business. She felt accepted by the community for the person she is, with both her gifts and her shortcomings. She expressed her frustration when the community gets too tied up in what Quakers traditionally have done, losing sight of what we as a community really seek: Spirit-led action.

Clerk Barbara Esther offered the expression “free range Quakers”, giving the example of children whose lives are not strictly regimented at every moment developing new ideas and new skills as they are guided. We Quakers often find so many things competing for our time that we are unable to follow our deeper leadings. A Friend observed that our demographics as a Meeting have changed dramatically, from a preponderance of well-seasoned Friends of retirement age to a much younger group with full-time jobs, children, and other priorities that require a great deal of energy that might otherwise be given to their faith community. Another Friend offered that over many years of sporadic attendance he had also observed a dramatic change in our Meeting’s makeup. He added that the Meeting’s consistent openness and support has led him to decide recently to contribute more to the life of the community, despite his inherent resistance to “joining” things.

There is no question that our community has the leadership necessary to take us where we need to go, observed another Friend. There are so many of us who care. A Friend reminded us that Quakers did not abolish the clergy, they abolished the laity.

Friends were encouraged to know of opportunities for all of us to learn more clerking skills. There is a clerking workshop

coming up at Pendle Hill. Our guest facilitator at our Fall retreat is a deeply experienced clerk and leader of clerking workshops. Friend Mary Ann Downey of nearby Atlanta Friends Meeting, whom many of us also know from her work with SAYMA and the Friends Journal, facilitates clerking workshops. Much of the available training offered draws on the work of Art Larrabee, the facilitator of the Pendle Hill workshop.

In closing, we were reminded that we are a faith community, a family of fellow seekers, a “living loving laboratory”. Why do we come to Meeting? asked one Friend. Perhaps for the opportunity to provide our children with the benefit of a faith community, perhaps to nurture and maintain personal relationships with like-minded people, perhaps to maintain a piece of property. The Friend suggested that at the root of our motivations is the desire to worship “GOD” together. We were reminded above all our difficulties and burdens, to be tender with one another. Barbara offered to clerk the business meeting next month, but hoped that after that, we would have a clerk to approve for continuous service for a full term.

Our guests from Franklin, Don and Mary Teslow, informed us of their leading to begin a worship group there, indicating their openness to being under our Meeting’s care. They offered thanks for the food for thought that the threshing session had provided, which they intend to take back to their community. They asked to hear again Henry Weitzer’s description of “clerk of meeting”.

Account of Threshing Session respectfully submitted by  
Steve Livingston