

Making Decisions in a Spirit of Worship

At business meetings Friends tend to adopt certain customs or modes of behavior. The following are perhaps the most important in shaping form and atmosphere of a business meeting although not all will be present in every business meeting.

- ☒ Everything from the initial silence to the final handshake is to be regarded as worship.
- ☒ We observe silence between individuals' contributions. These silences are crucial, not only for the period of reflection they provide; but also because they enable a meeting to proceed as a gathered body. They act as a brake against one or more individuals seizing control of the meeting through rhetorical display, appeal to emotions or other means.
- ☒ We try to come to meeting in a prayerful, open state of mind, so that we may be open to the Spirit. In the meeting, we strive to lay ourselves open to others' arguments: no matter how much we may think truth is on our side we must consider the possibility that we may be mistaken. The true spirit of the business method is thus one of attentive listening.
- ☒ We should not speak until called upon to do so by the Clerk. The usual way to indicate that we wish to speak is to stand up. In particular we do not attempt to speak while the Clerk is trying to draft a minute.
- ☒ We normally speak once only on a subject unless responding to a direct question or giving factual information. (We may speak on another subject if we want, however.) We speak plainly. We do not speechify, hector or attempt to filibuster. It is appropriate to speak with conviction or with passion, but not with prejudice.
- ☒ We may express contradictory views, but do not argue with one another in meeting. We state what we want to say frankly and briefly without belittling each others' points. The meeting thus should never become a debating club; nor should the situation ever arise where we try to interrupt or shout down another's contribution. Having spoken once to the issue, we must trust that if further valid points occur to us, others will raise them.

Questions you might want to ask

Can I come to a business meeting if I am not a Member?

Yes. You are welcome to attend. Indeed attenders who apply for membership are usually asked if they have experience of business meetings.

Will I have to do anything if I attend?

No. As with any Meeting for Worship you are under no obligation to do anything other than to support the work going forward by your presence at a gathered thoughtful meeting.

Can I take an active part in the discussion of the issue?

If you believe you have something to contribute to a discussion stand and remain silent until asked to speak. In a very small meeting catch the eye of the Clerk and he or she may ask you to speak. If another Friend is called, or the Clerk stands, then you should sit down again. It is customary to allow a brief silence between contributions.

Is there anything special I should do when I am speaking?

Speak clearly. Stick to the point. Be brief. Don't read extracts from reports or lists of figures. If you feel they are important ask the meeting if it wants to hear them. It is not necessary to speak merely to reinforce what someone else has said.

How often may I speak?

It is normal practice to speak only once on a subject. There may be exceptions in the case of a Friend who is making a report on behalf of a committee or has specialist knowledge on a specific topic required by the meeting. You can speak on different topics during the meeting but Friends who find that they are speaking on everything should carefully consider whether so many contributions are appropriate.

How do I express disagreement with what others have said?

Business meetings are not debates; no Friend has a monopoly of the truth or is certain to be proposing the best action. Each Friend who feels led to speak should, concisely and clearly, give his or her view. It does not matter if this is a different view from what everyone else has said. It is not good practice however to argue with a particular Friend or snipe at others' suggestions.

If feelings are running high on a subject the Clerk might stand, in which case anyone speaking should stop. The Clerk, or any Friend for that matter, might call for a period of reflective silence.

What happens if I don't like the Minute drawn up by the Clerk?

Once the Clerk has read a draft minute, any Friend can suggest modifications—but not introduce new business. The Clerk will note what is being said and continue to modify the minute until all Friends can unite with it.

A Friend who is seriously at odds with the Minute on an important topic may say that he or she cannot unite with it. The Clerk will ask if that Friend is willing to let the business proceed nevertheless. The Friend can agree to this, or agree but have the dissent minuted, or continue to oppose the Minute. The Clerk may in this last case conclude that 'We are not of one mind' and the business may be carried forward uncompleted.

What if Friends who are not present do not agree with the Minute?

Friends recognise that the decision has been taken in the spirit by those Friends who were able to attend and chose to be there. A properly gathered meeting has taken and minuted the decision and this the Friends who were not present will accept, however surprised or disappointed they might be.

The Clerk

The Clerk is the servant of the meeting. He or she is a Friend appointed to this task but is otherwise without special status. When an issue has been clearly outlined the Clerk may say that it is now 'before the meeting'. It is then open to any Friend to speak to it.

The Clerk* is a recorder of the minute of the meeting, one who helps those present discern the will of God within the meeting. The Clerk prepares the agenda and may also introduce an item on the agenda by summarising it. An assistant clerk† sits at the table to help to read out relevant information. In these activities the clerks wield considerable power to influence the way issues are presented to the meeting. Although the Clerk faces the meeting physically, he or she certainly does not either lead the meeting as a convenor or chairperson may, nor express a view. In discussion, the Clerk can pull together and summarise feelings which are being expressed in the meeting. He or she can act as shapers of debate, encouraging silent or reluctant Friends to participate in it. The Clerk can also remind Friends when they are speaking at too great length.

In these activities, clerks require paradoxical gifts of restraint and fluency, discipline and sensitivity. But perhaps the greatest test of a clerk's ability to read the collective mind of the meeting lies in the ability to draw up, at an appropriate time, the minute which will express the sense of the meeting to those present and to others beyond the meeting. Sometimes a meeting cannot come to a decision on an issue; sometimes the feeling may be strong that a decision must be reached, but the meeting may be perplexed as to what the decision may be. In these as in many like situations, the Clerk needs to discern the true sense of God's will.

* The Clerk may be assisted by a Recording Clerk.

† The assisting clerk may be the Recording Clerk.

The Minutes

A minute is composed by the Clerk* during the meeting, and the final version is written by the Clerk in the meeting where the members present can ensure the veracity and accuracy of the minute. A draft minute may be prepared in advance for routine matters. The agreed minute is never made or altered after the meeting has finished.

The minute records the decision of the meeting on a given topic. If it is more than simply a factual recording, the minute will also indicate the context and reason underlying the decision.

While the Clerk reflects on what has been said by those present and is composing the minute, the rest of the meeting remains silent. It requires sensitivity on the part of the Clerk to discern when it is appropriate to begin to write a minute. Similarly, we should be sensitive as to when the Clerk wants to begin writing the minute.

When the minute is drafted, the Clerk reads it out to the meeting, after which those present can begin 'speaking to the minute'. They might want to question its wording, or perhaps the way it reflects accurately one contribution but distorts another. If necessary, the minute is then rewritten by the Clerk and re-presented to the meeting. The agreed item is not generally opened up for further discussion.

In all cases, the meeting must unite in agreement on the minute, for the minute should be an accurate recording not only of the decision reached, but of the collective spirit of the meeting.

* The Recording Clerk may also perform the tasks described in this section.

Quaker Business Meetings

How Friends Make Decisions

This brochure is an extract of a slightly longer document composed by some Friends and Attenders from Glasgow Meeting, Scotland, who came together in an informal group in 1995 to explore their experience of business methods in the Society of Friends.

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