

## Notes from Yearly Meeting Faith and Practices regarding interpersonal conflicts in the meeting

1. Notes from search on PYM Faith And Practice website on “conflict”

### Grounding for Transformed Lives

- **Grounding for Transformed Lives: Peace and Alternatives to Violence**

- How do we help each other face conflicts with patience, forbearance and openness to healing?
- To what extent does our meeting ignore differences in order to avoid possible conflicts?
- What are we doing as a Friends meeting within our communities:
  - 1) To recognize and correct the causes of violence?
  - 2) To understand the impact of the global military-industrial complex on all aspects of life?
  - 3) To increase the understanding and use of alternatives to violence?
  - 4) To work toward overcoming separations and restoring wholeness?
  - 5) To support the constructive use of authority?
  - 6) To promote the sustainability of the earth?
- *Do I “live in the virtue [power] of that Life and Spirit that took [takes] away the occasion of all wars”?*
- *How do I maintain Friends’ testimony that participation in war and its preparation is inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus?*
- *Do I treat personal conflict as an opportunity for growth?*
- *How do I face my differences with others and reaffirm in action and attitude my love for those with whom I am in conflict?*

### **🔍 Grounding for Transformed Lives: Equality and Justice**

- How does our meeting benefit from established patterns of prejudice, exploitation and economic convenience? What are we doing to change this?
- How and how often does our meeting engage in a self-examination of its attitudes and actions regarding race, ability, gender, sexual orientation or class?
- What steps are we taking as a meeting to inform ourselves about social injustice and ecological violence embedded in our political and economic systems?
- What steps are we taking as a meeting to assure that our meeting and the committees and institutions under our care are respectful of the earth and its people?

- *Do I regularly examine myself for attitudes and behavior that indicate any hidden prejudice regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, disability or class?*
- *How do my lifestyle choices affect—positively or negatively—the causes of justice and peace in our nation, the community of nations and the whole of creation?*
- *How do I demonstrate in my way of living, and in what I teach my children, that love of God entails acknowledging “that of God in every person”?*

2. New England Yearly Meeting does not directly address conflict, but, like PYM, relies heavily on quotes from various Quakers. This one by Lloyd Wilson addresses the internal challenges of loving those who we perceive as different, even within our community.

Our witness is that the Kingdom of God is among us now, accessible to all who will allow it to re-orient and guide their lives. You and I and any who wish to join us can live in a profoundly different way, and we don't have to wait for permission from some human authority to do so. Our meeting communities are the primary locus for this witness—but only when we learn to love one another. That means loving the Friend who annoys me most, whose spiritual vocabulary sets my teeth on edge, who is most different from me or most challenging to me. That means loving all those who call themselves Friends who have adopted the pastoral system, or call themselves evangelicals, or seem to be stuck in old-fashioned ways of speaking and dressing, or who seem to be more concerned about their political activism than their spiritual health. If we can't love one another, we have no ground on which to stand for witnessing to the rest of the world that they can and should love one another across much more profound divisions.

Lloyd Lee Wilson 2006

In a section about decision-making in Business meeting is the following passage:

It is important that all members of the meeting proceed with the understanding that everyone is acting with sincerity and based on their understanding of the leadings of the spirit. An inability to find a common understanding of God's will can create a rift in the meeting community. In such cases, all members of the meeting must work to repair the wounds of this break—reaching

out to others in love, seeking to rebuild trust one with another.

They end this section on corporate discernment with some advices from John Woolman:

Don't pretend the conflict isn't there.

To see the failings of our friends, and think hard of them, without opening that which we ought to open, and still carry the face of friendship—this tends to undermine the foundation of true unity (p. 112).

Value real community.

Through the strength of that love which is stronger than death, tenderness of heart was often felt amongst us (p. 102).

Corporate Discernment in Meetings for Business<sup>79</sup>

Keep your eye single to righteousness, not self-image or self-righteousness.

I heard that the case was coming to our Yearly Meeting, which brought a weighty exercise upon me, and under a sense of my own infirmities and the great danger I felt of turning aside from perfect purity, my mind was often drawn to retire alone and put up my prayers to the Lord that he would be graciously pleased to strengthen me, that setting aside all views of self-interest and the friendship of this world, I might stand fully resigned to his holy will (pp. 91–92).

Strive to reach the pure witness in others.

And though we meet with opposition from another spirit, yet as there is a dwelling in meekness, feeling our spirits subject and moving only in the gentle, peaceable wisdom, the inward reward of quietness will be greater than our difficulties. Where the pure life is kept to and meetings of discipline are held in the authority of it, we find by experience that they are comfortable and tend to the health of the body (p. 68).

Humility and charity work best.

If such who were at times under sufferings on account of some scruples of conscience kept low and humble, and in their conduct manifested a spirit of true charity, it would be more likely to reach the witness in others, and be of more service in the church, than if their sufferings were attended with a contrary spirit and

conduct (p. 98).

Righteousness and love are inseparable.

And in the heat of zeal, I once made reply to what an ancient Friend said, which when I sat down I saw that my words were not enough seasoned with charity, and after this I spake no more on the subject. ...

3. Baltimore Yearly Meeting does not address interpersonal conflict, but acknowledges a variety of human imperfections in the following section:

#### 7 The Meeting as Caring Community

The guidance of the Inner Light has generally led Friends to common standards of conduct. We believe that a vital faith must apply to daily life. Through sharing personal spiritual experiences with others, our own insights are clarified and our convictions undergirded. Meetings can help each of us to gain spiritual strength for the good ordering of our lives and the right direction of our energies.

We must be concerned about the welfare of every member of the Meeting community. While Friends need to guard against prying or invasion of privacy, it is nevertheless essential that Meetings be aware of the spiritual and material needs of members of the community and express caring concern in appropriate ways. Many Meetings have found that specially formed support or clearness groups, either appointed by the Meeting or informally gathered, are a helpful way to minister to special needs within the Meeting.

While Quakers believe that a seed of God is in every human being, it is sometimes easier to believe this of persons at a distance than it is of those near at hand. This is particularly true when the need arises to address contentious issues. A meeting community should always seek to consider openly matters at issue, seeking a loving resolution of conflict, rather than to preserve a semblance of community by ignoring issues. Even when resolution is not immediate, the Meeting should make room for different expressions of continuing revelation while persisting in earnest search for unity.

At the same time, it is well for Meetings consciously to cultivate fellowship and unity. The goal, in George Fox's words, is to "know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was." Religious education programs for Friends of all ages are a primary bond. In the common experience of worship, we draw together in a most essential way. The discussion of matters of concern, as well as fellowship based on recreation, intellectual pursuits, music, and other aesthetic interests, can help unify the Meeting community. Working together also builds bonds of trust, understanding, and

communication. In all things the principle of simplicity suggests that leisure activities, working, and faith be compatible and complementary.

#### 8. Personal Life

The individual Friend should lead a life rooted in an awareness of God's presence in all times and places. Although special times and locations may provide helpful reminders of the need for spiritual communion, they cannot take the place of turning daily to God for guidance. The foundation for all our personal life and social relations should be the consciousness of the Holy Spirit.

Sincerity, simplicity, and moderation are vital to all the dealings of life. We advise the observance of care in speech and the use of only such statements as convey truth without exaggeration or omission of essential fact. Taking legal oaths implies a double standard of truthfulness and is contrary to the teaching of Jesus.

Self-indulgent habits and luxurious living dull our awareness and make us insensitive to the needs of others and the leading of the Spirit. Ostentation and extravagant expenditure should not be a part of Friends' lives. Friends should be particularly aware of this in planning marriages, funerals, social gatherings, or public occasions. True simplicity does not consist of particular forms or the absence of grace, symmetry, and beauty, but of avoiding over-indulgence, maintaining humility of spirit, and keeping material surroundings in proportion to human needs.

Friends' longstanding testimony against the use, production, or sale of tobacco and alcoholic beverages is not fully accepted by some. For many, however, complete abstinence is the only effective way to avoid the dangers of the use of these materials. Friends are in unity against illegal narcotics and mind-altering substances, now readily available. Use of any of these materials has adverse effects which reach beyond the individual to harm the family and the community; dealing with illegal drugs also supports a criminal underground. Even legitimate prescription drugs can be used inappropriately and excessively. All these usages deaden the individual to life and spiritual values. For those trapped in substance abuse, such advice may seem hollow. Commonalities exist between addictive behaviors with these substances and other compulsive actions, such as in the areas of eating disorders, gambling, overwork, and physical abuse. The causes go deep and may not be fully understood, but the resulting pain, fear, desperation, and denial, damaging the abuser and all those around that person, need to be supportively recognized. A Meeting community should be ready to listen non-judgmentally, offer information about sources of help, refuse to enable people to continue in harmful patterns, and continue to offer an environment free from addictive practices.

We are faced at every hand with enticements to risk money in anticipation of disproportionate gain through gambling. Some governments employ gambling as a means of raising revenue, even presenting it as a civic virtue. The Religious Society of Friends continues to bear testimony against betting, gambling, lotteries, speculation, or any other endeavor to receive material gain without equivalent exchange, believing that we owe an honest return for what we receive. Indulgence in games of chance blunts a proper sense of obligation. How we use our working hours, our leisure, and our resources has direct bearing on our spiritual life. Time for recreation is needed to refresh spirit, mind, and body. Our use of time may determine whether the Divine Spirit grows within us or is crowded out.

We are called upon to be stewards of the rich provisions which God has made for all creation. As Friends we are advised to consider the effects of our charitable gifts and of all our expenditures, in the light of our concern for the right and fair sharing of the world's resources

4. New York Yearly Meeting addresses Conflict and describes some procedures for resolving it:

Friends believe that the gospel calls us to align our lives to the spirit of Christ and to commit ourselves to follow that Spirit. Our practices allow us to wait for the guidance of the Spirit in our corporate life. This right ordering allows us to make corporate decisions according to the sense of the meeting; to test decisions through the process of carefully constructing minutes; and to organize the community into committees entrusted with Defined responsibilities.

If another member of the church sins against you,  
Go and point out the fault when the two of you  
are alone. If the member listens to you, you have  
regained that one. But if you are not listened to,  
take one or two others along with you, so that every  
word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or  
three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to  
them, tell it to the church....

– Matthew 18:15–17 (NRSV)

These words from Jesus help us to respond creatively to conflict. Individuals first meet to air and resolve conflicts. If the first meeting is unsuccessful, they may meet a small group

of Friends, sometimes called a clearness committee, to try again to settle the matter. If there is still no resolution, Friends can bring the issue before the entire meeting for business. Although, in this way Friends first reproved and corrected those who “walked disorderly,” the process gradually came to express the mutual accountability of Friends to one another, and led to the appointment of elders to exercise nurture and disciplinary care for their meetings. The power behind all our communal practice derives from Jesus’s words, also in Matthew 18, that “where two or three come together in my name, there am I also.” We pray that this power will enable us to minimize backbiting, talebearing, and personal misunderstandings, and to provide for the acceptance and resolution of the contrary feelings that are inevitable when Friends work together.

Maintain that charity which suffereth long, and is kind; put the best construction upon the conduct and opinions one of another which circumstances will warrant. Take heed.....that the enemy produce no dissensions among you; that nothing like a party spirit be ever suffered to prevail. Let each be tender of the reputation of his brother; and be earnest to Possess the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. Watch over one another for good, but not for evil; and whilst not blind to the faults or false views of others, be especially careful not to make them a topic of common conversation. And even in cases in which occasion may require that the failings of others should be disclosed, be well satisfied, before they are made the subject of confidential communication, either verbally or by letter, that your own motives are sufficiently pure.

– London Yearly Meeting, 1834

NYYM continues to stress self-examination in its section on Equality

The Holy Spirit, which we all share, makes us equal. We differ in our class backgrounds, intelligence, manners, experiences, talents, skin color, language, gender, sexuality, and customs. These differences can serve to remind us of the infinite number of ways the Spirit presents itself. But our differences can also create barriers because of our inability to interpret accurately the actions, motives, and goals of others. This failure to understand lies at the heart of racial and ethnic prejudice, for when we fear the unfamiliar or unknown we tend to reject and thrust it from us. Our Society has many opportunities to welcome different kinds of people; indeed, we are many different kinds of people. We can reach out to make sure that our meetings cultivate the presence and participation of people of different backgrounds and interests. Our practice today may not be what we hope for. Yet we seek to accept, welcome, enjoy, and nurture each other’s differences. To take on this vision may require changes in us. We would do well to search our own hearts in order to recognize and face the prejudice, criticism, and defamation that may come from each

of us. When we put aside our fears, we can accept human differences. We aim at an international community that embraces us all and whose public and private enterprises make opportunities available equally for schooling, justice, medical care, employment, income, and housing.

## 5. Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association (SAYMA)

From their section on Community

Every community experiences difficulties and it is important to avoid the temptation to “sweep them under the rug.” Open recognition of and respect for differences, forthright sharing, and sincere corporate reflection strengthen meetings and provide ways to resolve conflicts in a direct and loving manner. Conflicts affecting entire meetings may be addressed through threshing sessions or worship sharing. SAYMA’s Ministry and Nurture Committee may be called upon for help.

For conflicts between individual Friends, a Clearness Committee may be helpful.

It is Quaker practice to prefer mediation or negotiation to resolve disputes without litigation. Harmony emerges not merely from coming to understanding and resolution but also from the mutual search for the truth conducted in a spirit of tender listening and care. The unity we seek is not sameness of belief, but the oneness of people drawn together in love and concern for each other, grounded in the Spirit.

We want our meetings to be affirming and nurturing, but if we expect that we will always feel safe and comfortable there, we risk becoming unwilling to welcome Friends different from ourselves. The practice of inclusivity challenges each of us in different ways to reach past our limiting assumptions and fears to find the Light in others. When we do so, we find aspects of the Light we did not expect: the diversity of our community may be greater than we can easily accept. It is valuable, even if painful, to admit that we often fail to live up to our aspirations. Our meetings are often homogeneous – socially, politically, racially, spiritually, intellectually, culturally, and in other respects. The process of inclusion, though it requires adjustments from each of us, gives us all a deeper experience of the Spirit

## 6. Northern Yearly Meeting

From Section on Conduct of Business Meeting

Unity, Sense of the Meeting, and Dealing with Serious Differences

Friends strive to know and follow God's will for our meeting life. They do not vote or use majority rule. Rather they seek the truth and unity of the Spirit. Discerning God's leading is both an individual and a communal process in which the meeting listens to each Friend and each Friend listens to the meeting. They accept a decision when they sense it is the will of God. When they listen to God and to each other, and achieve unity in our sense of God's leading, they are living in the Truth. They call this unity "the sense of the meeting." Unity is found when all or nearly all those present believe that the proposed decision is truly Spirit led. If an objection is raised to a decision supported by most, the person or persons objecting may offer to stand aside to allow the meeting to proceed, sometimes asking to have the objection recorded. If the person or persons objecting do not wish to stand aside, Friends must devote the necessary time to prayerfully, thoughtfully, respectfully, and tenderly consider the objection. A threshing session may be called, or a special meeting with those objecting can be arranged to explore alternatives. Praying privately for guidance from the Spirit may be helpful. The person dissenting carries a special responsibility to listen to the group, to seek divine leading, and to work actively with others to seek alternatives. After further consideration, if the objection remains, the meeting decides whether the weight of the objection will stop approval at this time, or whether the sense of the meeting will allow approval and moving forward despite the objection, or whether there is Faith and Practice another way to proceed. If some members of the meeting are convinced the objection is grounded in a direct perception of God's will, the meeting is warned not to declare a sense of the meeting prematurely. The meeting seeks a balance—respecting the views of the dissenting persons, remembering that the dissenters may have a clearer knowledge of the truth. The meeting considers the weight of the objections and the judgment of the meeting as a whole. It is exceptional for one or a few individuals to block an action agreed upon by most. It is incumbent upon those objecting to listen carefully to the meeting, remembering that it is the leading and discernment of the meeting as a whole, which tests and validates the leading of individuals. Divine love is a binding force, and to experience that love in a meeting for business one must sometimes be willing to be bound by one's community.

On rare occasions, Friends can move forward with decisions which are not unanimous but which still express the sense of the meeting. Major decisions among Friends on issues of abolition of slave holding and women's rights were sometimes minuted despite objection. However, proceeding with a decision over the objection of some risks losing members or even splitting the meeting. Where there is no clear sense of the meeting, the decision can be laid aside or postponed and put on the agenda for another meeting for worship for business. A particular challenge to the meeting community exists when differences exist on an issue where a decision is urgent and cannot be postponed.

## 7. Pacific Yearly Meeting

From its section on Community

Conflict and difference are a part of life, a necessary result of the varying needs, aims, and perspectives of individuals and communities. Bringing them into the open is a necessary step towards empathy, understanding, and healing. Individuals and Meetings need to address conflict promptly in a spirit of goodwill and a desire to maintain loving relationship. When resolution is not immediate, the Meeting waits for way to open, while persisting in an earnest search for unity.

And, in the section on the Testimony of Community

Without mutual regard and concern, without the trust that comes from the observance of mutual expectations developed and sustained over time, without commitment to a collective search for unity around that of the Divine that each of us shares, there is separation, and separation is the root of conflict.

Later in a section titled Procedures when discussing decision-making at Business Meeting, they include the following quote:

in times of difficulty

If it were necessary for every member to feel equally happy about the decisions reached, we should be presuming to be settling matters in an angelic colony and not among flesh and blood members of a local Quaker meeting! From the point of view of myself as a member of a meeting, the kind of unanimity that is referred to is a realization on my part that the matter has been carefully and patiently considered. I have had a chance at different stages of the process of arriving at this decision of making my point of view known to the group, of having it seriously considered and weighed. Even if the decision finally goes against what I initially proposed, I know that my contribution has helped to sift the issue, perhaps to temper it, and I may well have, as the matter has patiently taken its course, come to see it somewhat differently from the point at which I began. ... I have also come to realize that the group as a whole finds this resolution what seems best to them. When this point comes, if I am a seasoned Friend, I no longer oppose it. ... I emerge from the meeting not as a member of a bitter minority who feels he has been outflanked and rejected

but rather as one who has been through the process of the decision and is willing to abide by it even though my accent would not have put it in this form.

douglas steere,

the quaker decision making process