

Are minor matters dealt with differently from main items?

Some matters may be complex or controversial, and a wide range of views will need to be expressed. It may take more than one meeting to find unity; a rushed decision driven by the clock may well turn out to be unsatisfactory. Other matters will be routine or minor or relatively straightforward, so that they can be swiftly dealt with. Though the process remains the same, it is not necessary to consider every item at great length or in deep solemnity. That said, a matter that looks routine beforehand sometimes turns out to raise unforeseen controversy!

What if I don't agree with the minute?

If you feel the minute doesn't reflect the sense of the meeting, or is badly worded, there will be an opportunity to comment after the draft minute is presented. If you don't agree with the decision reached, try to set aside your disappointment and accept that the decision has nevertheless been reached collectively through the discipline of waiting together in the Light, in a sincere search for love and truth. The right decision is important, but no more so than reaching it by the right process – a process in which you played your full part. Remember that unity is not the same as unanimity. You may need to continue reflecting on the matter and talking it over with other Friends. Sometimes, at a subsequent meeting, it becomes clear to the meeting that a new direction is needed.

'The right decision is important, but no more so than reaching it by the right process – a process in which you played your full part.'

Isn't all this asking too much of people?

The discipline we have laid upon ourselves is a demanding one. Quakers are human, not saints. A more experienced or self-confident Friend may drown out a quieter voice that the meeting needed to hear. Strong feelings on an issue may make some Friends intolerant or even aggressive. But it is worth struggling with the challenge, for when the process works, the reward is a powerful sense of rightness and unity.

FURTHER READING:

Quaker Faith and Practice, 3rd edn, 2005, Britain Yearly Meeting.
Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting, B. Morley, 1993, Pendle Hill.
Listening Spirituality Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends, P. Loring, 1999, Opening Press, Washington, DC.
Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends, M.J. Sheeran, 1983, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

PUBLISHED BY

Australia Yearly Meeting (2009) Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia Inc.
119 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010
Email: secretary@quakersaustralia.info
Web site: www.quakersaustralia.org.au

Content reproduced with permission of British Yearly Meeting.



How Quaker meetings take decisions



What's special about a Quaker business meeting?

A Quaker business meeting is essentially a meeting for worship, except that it has a pre-arranged agenda. Whether it be a working party, a committee, or a local, regional or national meeting, the process is the same: Friends coming together in silence in order to draw closer to God and each other, and to seek the guidance of the Inward Light.

What's going on in the meeting?

A meeting starts with a period of quiet worship. The clerk then opens the business part of the meeting. As in a secular meeting, someone presents an item, and answers questions of clarification. But rather than debating the matter, the gathering then tries to discern, in an atmosphere of worship, what love requires of us. Spoken contributions are offered as ministry and are wrapped in silence. If things seem to be getting heated, the clerk or another Friend may ask for a period of silence. A touch of humour often helps the process. No vote is taken, as we are not trying to reach consensus or establish the will of the majority, but to work in harmony with the Spirit. This approach can be very liberating, because it ensures that minority views are not dismissed or suppressed. A minute is drafted by the clerk and presented to the meeting; it is for all those present to agree to the record of their deliberations.

Can I come to a business meeting if I am not a member of the Religious Society of Friends?

Yes – attenders are usually welcome to attend open business meetings. You will need to let the clerk know in advance that you would like to come. You may be asked to withdraw for certain agenda items.

What is my role in the meeting?

As in any meeting for worship, your primary role is to listen respectfully to others and to 'the promptings of love and truth in your heart'. Even if you disagree strongly with another contribution, listen patiently to each to learn what you can, trusting that you will be heard in the same spirit. It is helpful if you prepare beforehand, read the papers and reflect prayerfully on the business, but remember that responsibility for the outcome belongs to the meeting as a whole, not to any individual. Come to the meeting with heart and mind prepared – not heart and mind made up.



What is the clerk doing?

The clerk is rather like a cross between a chair and a secretary. Clerks prepare the agenda, do the necessary administration and guide the meeting through the items of business. The clerk has to try and discern the outcome of each item (often called 'the sense of the meeting'), and to prepare a draft minute to lay before the gathering. Although it is the meeting that is really in charge, clerks carry a lot of responsibility. We need to support them and do all we can to avoid making their job more difficult by holding private conversations while a minute is being drafted, for instance, or by quibbling over a good enough minute.

Who can speak, and how often?

Once an item on the agenda has been introduced to the meeting anyone may speak, but remember, this is a meeting for worship. If you feel led to minister, test your prompting first. Equally, don't let shyness or a sense of unworthiness hold you back – you have a responsibility to help the meeting by sharing any relevant insight or information you may have. In formal meetings it is the practice to stand and wait to be called by the clerk; if another Friend is called or the clerk stands, you should sit down again. There is no need to repeat a point which has already been made, or to speak twice to the same matter unless asked to do so. Try to resist the temptation to be argumentative. The point is not to win an argument but to uphold our community as we work together for a better world.