

## Dealing with Conflicts in our Meetings

Last year, after reviewing the State of Society reports of all of the Meetings in Canadian Yearly Meeting, Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel compiled a list of six common concerns that many Meetings were facing. Dealing with conflicts in our meetings was one of these concerns.

One would expect Quakers to be effective at resolving conflicts in our Meetings. The peace testimony is one of the defining traits that marks us as a “peculiar people”. Although we spend considerable time and energy pursuing concerns for world peace, we seem to be at as much a loss as any other religious group in coping with conflict in our communities. Early Friends had to balance the tensions between following individual leadings and seeking corporate discernment. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friends in North America went through internal dissensions that split Meetings and Yearly Meetings and left painful divisions that are with us today. Friends are not immune to conflict.

In AVP workshops I identified my own personal reaction in dealing with conflict is a “conflict avoider”. Left to my own devices, my inclination has always been to run in the opposite direction from conflict whenever possible. I suspect that many Friends are similar. However, experience has taught me that ignoring or running from conflict, while it sometimes allows for tempers to cool off, often allows conflict to escalate.

In Fall of 2005, Ministry and Counsel of Vancouver Meeting thought it would be helpful to the Meeting to have written guidelines setting out a process for resolving conflicts. Ironically, further work on this concern was delayed because a serious conflict broke out in the Meeting in December that took much of M&C’s attention for the next few months. This reinforced the need for having guidelines in place and the work was resumed in earnest last spring. It would have been easier dealing the particular conflict if everyone was operating from the same expectations and had a clearly set out process to follow to resolve the conflict. We recognized the development of guidelines was going to be a slow process of discernment and seasoning that M&C could initiate but needed the entire Meeting to be involved with and adopted as its own. It was not practical to expect guidelines could be foisted on the Meeting to resolve the conflicts that we were in the middle of.

Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel and draft our own guidelines from scratch, we looked to see what resources were available. The disciplines of various Yearly Meetings we examined were woefully short on details about resolving conflicts in Meetings. The most detailed guidelines we found were in a protocol from Portland Friends Meeting in Maine. Three Friends from Portland Meeting attended CYM in 2003 and led an instructive workshop on their experience of developing the protocol and presented a mock conflict for resolution following their protocol. This gave Vancouver M&C a clear model to examine. We decided to work with the Portland Protocol and see what changes were needed for our Meeting. Early on we decided to refer to the document we were drafting as “guidelines” rather than the term “protocol” used by Portland Friends as we felt the former term sounded more “friendly” and less legalistic. We circulated copies of

the Protocol through our Meeting and M&C sponsored several sessions to discuss what we wanted to see in our guidelines. M&C then took all of the comments and drafted additional material to include in our guidelines. M&C presented a draft of the guidelines to Monthly Meeting in February 2007 and it was minuted they would be discussed in our May Meeting for Worship for Business.

We grappled with concerns such as:

dealing with persons who have mental health or personality disorders;  
what kinds of decisions are appropriate for M&C what decisions need to be made at Monthly Meeting?;  
what information needs to be confidential and what needs to be public?;  
limiting behaviour that escalates conflict;  
is it ever appropriate to ask someone not to attend Meeting?;  
what to do if the conflict involved a member of M&C or the Clerk of Meeting  
if after M&C takes action, Friends disagree about the actions taken.

One observation was that while the Portland Protocol was useful in dealing with situations of abuse, it did not provide simple, practical steps for the common-garden variety of disputes that occurred in our Meeting. The Portland Protocol broadly defined abuse as, “Abuse occurs when one person has cause to know that certain behaviour is hurtful, threatening, or offensive to another person and yet engages in that behaviour with respect to that person”.

What we drafted for situations not involving abuse was inspired by the practice outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. It emphasizes taking personal responsibility for resolving conflict before asking M&C or the Meeting for help:

For conflict situations that do not involve an issue of abuse:

- a. Prayerfully hold the situation and all of the persons involved in the Light;
- b. Speak directly to the person you are in conflict with;
- c. If that does not work, take the matter to the Clerk of Ministry and Counsel (or another member of Ministry and Counsel if it involves the Clerk of Ministry and Counsel or a family member of the Clerk). Ministry and Counsel will then appoint a Friend to act as a third party between you and the person you are in conflict with;
- d. If that does not work, Ministry and Counsel will bring the matter to Monthly Meeting for consideration;

We are grateful to Portland Friends Meeting for the use of their protocol that served as a template for the drafting of our guidelines. Their experience was as useful in suggesting the process for drafting the guidelines as it was in the substance of the guidelines. We made modifications where necessary, based on our experience, to both. Nothing was omitted from what they had written, but that we added where we felt it was helpful. Hopefully, our experience may be helpful to other Friends Meeting in CYM. While it is

helpful to have a previous written document as a starting point, it is not possible to take shortcuts with the process of adopting your own set of guidelines.

“Our Attitude in Confronting Instances of Conflict or Abuse” was a significant section of the guidelines. The best conflict resolution process in the world will not work if the people involved do not enter the process in an attitude of willingness to resolve the conflict and be open to the Light. We added the following passage to conclude this section as was recommended in the meeting that approved use of the guidelines:

May all who have entered into conflict pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

The guidelines are not carved in stone but are intended to evolve over time to meet changing needs based on our experience. Now that we have adopted the guidelines we face the challenge of familiarizing ourselves with them and seeing they are used. Copies need to be prominently displayed and periodically referred to. New members will be given a copy when they apply for membership. We hope they can be posted on a future Meeting website. As the guidelines note:

We recognize that without such a process at Vancouver Friends Meeting when the next case of conflict or abuse occurs, we are likely to experience avoidance, prejudice, gossip, confusion, distrust, and more conflict.

Finally, with the adoption of these guidelines, we affirm that Friends have conflict resolution processes that are likely to work, and we accept our duty to utilize them, to seek the truth in love, and to address behaviours that do much to rend our community or harm a member and little to further anyone’s life or spiritual well being.

The guidelines close with the following passage from the postscript to an epistle to 'the brethren in the north' issued by a meeting of elders at Balby, 1656 that expresses our intent as to how the guidelines be used:

*Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.*

Rob Hughes, Vancouver Monthly Meeting

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### Some Resources on Conflicts in Meetings

Friends General Conference. *The Wounded Meeting: Dealing with difficult behavior in meeting for worship; meeting the needs of the many while responding to the needs of the few.* Friends General Conference Pamphlet c.1993

Loring, Patricia. *Listening Spirituality (Vol I): Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends* and *Listening Spirituality (Vol.II): Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends*. c.1999. [This includes a chapter of the Portland Friends Meeting Protocol]

*Quakers and Conflict: An Oxymoron*, by Susan Robson, Friends Quarterly, October 2006, pp. 156-163

Vancouver Monthly Meeting Guidelines for Conflict Resolution can be obtained by emailing Rob Hughes at [rhughes@smith-hughes.com](mailto:rhughes@smith-hughes.com).