

Extract from Australian Quaker Practice and Procedure Handbook:

10.4 Meetings for Clearness

Quaker tradition has always seen a creative tension between the individual and the Quaker community. Meetings for Clearness may be arranged to help encourage corporate spiritual discernment and the discovery of ways forward or to clarify and perhaps resolve tensions and conflicts between individuals or groups.

In the early years of the Religious Society of Friends, 'Clearness Committees' were appointed by Monthly Meetings primarily to ensure a 'clearness for marriage'. Meetings for Clearness have since come to be used for wider purposes, including the following.

- a) Testing a concern or leading.
- b) Supporting those facing important or difficult decisions and finding a way forward in times of confusion, conflict or crisis for individuals, groups or a Meeting.
- c) Considering decisions about marriage or a close relationship.
- d) Making decisions about membership.

Meeting for Clearness may serve many purposes and may take many forms and it is important not to prescribe or over-structure any particular meeting. A Meeting for Clearness may be open to the Quaker community as a whole, to people or groups in conflict, or to an individual seeking personal clarity. Trusted and wise Friends may be asked to join the meeting.

However constituted, a Meeting for Clearness should be seen as a focussed Meeting for Worship, and will be most successful if there are deep silences, attentive and prayerful listening, a deep discipline of restraint, a non-judgemental and caring environment, and a tangible loving respect and acceptance of the intentions and integrity of everyone in the group. A Meeting for Clearness may be seeking to make a decision. However, it is often appropriate if it is seen as a Meeting for individual reflection and growing corporate clearness, not a time for debating competing ideas, dealing with detail or reaching conclusions.

Rightly used, Meeting for Clearness become a means of revitalising one of the features of the early Religious Society of Friends - the reliance of Quakers on each other and those associated with their Meetings for wisdom and strength in facing and dealing with problems.

ref: Patricia Loring (1992) Spiritual Discernment : the context and goal of clearness meetings. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, USA.

Responding to differences

10.5 When differences arise, Friends are encouraged to use Quaker processes for resolving conflict, and to raise issues constructively.

10.5.1 Friends are urged to:

- a) consider their own views prayerfully;
- b) ask themselves whether they are being fair and reasonable in their attitudes;
- c) explore whether their feelings and thoughts can be seen differently when held in the Light;
- d) listen to the promptings of the Spirit;
- e) contemplate how the others involved may be feeling; and
- f) bring to the Meeting's attention, when necessary, matters with which they feel uncomfortable.

Set out below is a range of processes for responding positively to conflict or differences amongst Friends. These can be seen as moving from relatively informal processes to more formal ones, as necessary. Those involved are encouraged to continue to call upon Quaker processes at any stage.

10.5.2 Quaker Processes

Quakers have evolved a variety of ways of acknowledging, responding to and resolving conflict. At times, conflict may be resolved by people acknowledging their differences and simply agreeing to differ. Exploring issues in the spirit of Meeting for Worship can lead us to find new and unexpected ways forward which are acceptable to all.

Specific processes include the following.

- a) Talking with each other: Wherever possible, first raise the issues directly with the person or group with whom you are in disagreement. Ideally, explore your differences early, before feelings have become entrenched. Think about how to express your views clearly, with respect for the other person's feelings and views. Ask them about their views. Seek to come to an understanding of each other's point of view. This may lead to a positive acceptance of your differences, or to agreement about the way forward.
- b) Talking with a wise and experienced Friend: Consider asking a wise and experienced Friend to help you explore the issues, with or without the differing party. Having another person who can help you prayerfully explore the issues may enable you to reach greater clarity. Elders and Overseers are generally experienced in Friends' ways and likely to be able to help.
- c) Using a support group: You may wish to use a support group of experienced Friends to help you to discern what is important and to see a way forward.
- d) Meetings for Clearness: These can be used to explore differences, and to consider possible options. Like other Meetings, Meetings for Clearness (section 10.4) are held in a spirit of worship. It is highly desirable that a Meeting for Clearness for the present purpose be guided by an experienced facilitator, and that the Meeting record the issues and the decisions made.
- e) Assistance from Regional Meeting: Regional Meeting may be asked to appoint a small group of people to visit and talk with a person or people in conflict to explore issues and seek unity. As with the visit to applicants for membership, whilst respecting confidentiality, the visitors will report to Regional Meeting, and this will be minuted.

10.5.3 Mediation session

Mediation can be particularly useful where people have a sense that the issue or their views are not being dealt with fairly.

With assistance from the Clerk of the Regional Meeting, the parties will choose an independent person to conduct the mediation.

The parties will meet with the mediator and:

- a) meet either according to the professional practices of mediation or less formally, keeping in mind Friends' attitudes to conflict;
- b) record, with the agreement of all present, a minute acknowledging the results of the meeting, which is signed by all present, and which is lodged with the Clerk.

Each party should be encouraged to bring someone with them to the mediation for support, if they wish.

10.5.4 Formal Grievance Process

The following grievance processes should be used only when it has not been possible to manage conflict in any other way. The participants should still endeavour to meet in the spirit of a Meeting for Worship for Business, approaching the meeting prayerfully, seeking the guidance of the Spirit.

So that the grievance processes are fair and trusted, Regional Meetings must ensure that:

- a) the process affords natural justice by making sure that those involved are given adequate information about the facts of the matter, are given adequate time for preparation, have the opportunity to participate in the process, obtain an impartial decision, and are given the reasons for that decision;
- b) the facts, steps and outcomes are recorded at each stage; and
- c) care is taken to protect confidentiality as far as possible.

10.5.4.1 Meeting with a Panel appointed by Regional Meeting

If either or both of the parties wish to pursue the matter further after mediation, and a decision needs to be made, either of the parties may ask the Regional Meeting Clerk in writing to appoint a Panel of three people who are acceptable to all involved. This Panel will:

- a) meet with and listen to all of those involved;
- b) examine all aspects of the dispute, including relevant Minute Books for the periods of the dispute;
- c) document findings about facts and recommendations about how the dispute should be resolved.

The Panel may be from within or outside the Regional Meeting provided that the members of the Panel are independent of the issue. The members of the Panel may also include people in sympathy with, but not connected to, Friends. Confidentiality will be respected. The aggrieved person may wish to be assisted in the process by a support group. The Panel will report its findings, including where agreement has and has not been reached, as well as making any recommendations in writing to the Regional Meeting in a minute agreed by all parties. The Panel's report will be provided to all those involved, who will be asked to accept it and its recommendations. The report will be considered by a Regional Meeting for Business. The Regional Meeting will decide the issue then or at a later meeting on a fixed date.

The appointment of a Panel does not preclude those involved from calling upon Quaker processes or mediation at any time.

10.5.4.2 Meeting with a Panel appointed outside Regional Meeting

If a person or a Meeting continues to feel aggrieved by a decision or by the Meeting's failure to make a decision, the wider Australian family of Friends may be called upon for assistance through the Presiding Clerk.

The Regional Meeting Clerk or the person who continues to feel aggrieved may seek further review by writing to the Presiding Clerk of the Yearly Meeting. The Presiding Clerk will inform the other party, and will appoint three members of the Society to form a Panel.

The members of the Panel, which may include the Presiding Clerk but must not include any member of the Regional Meeting involved, are to:

- a) meet with and listen to all of those involved;
- b) examine all aspects of the dispute, including relevant minute books for the periods of the dispute;
- c) document findings about facts and recommendations about how the dispute should be resolved.

The Panel members must be acceptable to all of the persons involved in the conflict. Confidentiality will be respected. The Panel will make a recommendation on the matters in dispute and report in writing to the Regional Meeting Clerk, who will make a statement in writing to the Regional Meeting and individuals involved. The Regional Meeting for Business will then make a final and binding decision.

The appointment of a Panel does not preclude those involved from calling upon Quaker processes or mediation at any time.