

New England Yearly Meeting
***Faith and Practice* Revision Committee**

**Chapter 3: Corporate Discernment
in Meetings for Business**

Submitted for Preliminary Approval July 2011

To be printed in the revised *Faith and Practice*, a chapter must be approved at two NEYM Sessions in different years. The first Session gives *preliminary approval* and the second gives *final approval*.

A text given preliminary approval is substantially acceptable to Friends for inclusion in the printed book. Meetings and committees are encouraged to start using it, to see how it works in practice, and to send comments to the *Faith and Practice* Revision Committee.

The Committee may do further minor editing for style and clarity before presenting it for final approval, although major revision would require another preliminary approval.

The time period between preliminary and final approval will likely be more than one year. This will allow both the Committee and the Yearly Meeting to have larger sections in front of them before giving final approval to any, knowing that the precise formatting of a given section will be influenced by what comes before and after.

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Draft Table of Contents for revision of the 1985 NEYM *Faith and Practice* with some possible topics listed — for information only

We offer this working draft of a table of contents to put draft texts for the revised book in the context of the overall document. In chapters two through seven, we expect to include theology, history, past NEYM minutes, process and procedure, and advices and queries relating to the chapter topic. In chapters five, six and seven, we have listed some of the topics we expect to include in these chapters. It is not a complete list of topics, nor have they been placed in any particular order. Some of these topics will be treated more than once, depending on the perspective. For example, in chapter five, marriage would be treated from a meeting perspective while in chapter six it would be treated from an individual perspective.

Preface. Received preliminary approval at NEYM 2005 sessions

1. **Illustrative experiences of Friends**
A draft of a working paper distributed at NEYM 2010 Sessions
2. **Worship.** *Given preliminary approval at NEYM 2007 Sessions.*
3. **Corporate Discernment in Meetings for Business**
Draft for preliminary approval distributed July 2011
4. **Integration of faith and life: the meaning, understanding and use of testimonies**
A draft of a working paper presented at NEYM 2008 Sessions
5. **Living our faith in the meeting community**
gospel order; responding to conflict; recognition of gifts and leadings; pastoral care; death and dying; religious education (both adult and child); finance/stewardship; membership; marriage; civil unions; separation and divorce; conscientious objection and the draft; meetinghouses; burial grounds
6. **Living our faith in Personal Lives**
membership
life transitions: adolescence; conscientious objection and the draft; job change; retirement; marriage; new babies; separation and divorce; aging; death and dying; grief and loss; divorce
family life: finance/stewardship; marriage; civil unions; children; parenting; responding to conflict; religious education; separation and divorce
7. **Living our faith in the world beyond the Meeting**
ecumenical and interfaith relations; economic justice; gender justice; racial justice; restorative justice; right relationship with the earth; stewardship/ right sharing of world resources; civic and community responsibilities; conscientious objection and the draft; pacifism; responding to conflict; outreach; evangelism; Friends understanding of mission.
8. **Organization**
Monthly Meetings
Quarterly Meetings
The Yearly Meeting, including NEYM connection to FGC, FUM, FWCC
9. ***A Brief History of Friends in New England***
Given preliminary approval at NEYM 2008 Sessions.
10. ***Revisions to this Faith and Practice*** *Given preliminary approval at NEYM 2006 Sessions.*
11. **General Advices and Queries** *A draft of a working paper distributed in March 2009*

Glossary

Appendices *distributed in May 2011*

Acknowledgements

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NEYM *Faith and Practice* Revision Committee
Chapter 3: Corporate Discernment in Meetings for Business
text submitted for preliminary approval to the 2011 NEYM Sessions
approved by the Committee 6/26/2011

[Note to readers of this draft: paragraph numbers will not appear in the printed book.]

- 1 Inward yielding and waiting for a sense of unity to grow among all present are characteristics of the way Friends conduct their business. The spiritual disciplines of corporate discernment are grounded in the faith that we can perceive and affirm God's guidance for the gathered community. Our experience of worship undergirds our understanding of reaching unity in the Spirit, a sense of the meeting that sometimes comes as an unexpected blessing when we have labored hard to discern our way. As we listen to each other and seek together for Divine guidance, we can affirm the unity that enables us to respond faithfully.
- 2 Our business meetings begin and end with silent worship, framing the work at hand with centered awareness in the divine presence. Although the business to be addressed requires attention to facts, details, and varying options, we seek to remain spiritually grounded throughout the discernment process. Our decisions do not rely on majority rule, but rather on a unity found through calm attention to the Light Within. The Spirit may speak through anyone present and it is our task to listen and speak with humility and to trust in the Spirit's guidance.
- 3 The heart of Friends' business process is the emergence of the sense of the meeting. At times, this may be unanimous agreement that a proposed action should be carried out. However, when those gathered are not in simple agreement, careful consideration will be given to each speaker, and silent worship may be asked for. If all in attendance draw on their disciplines of worship and stay mindful that the purpose is to seek the will of God for the gathered body, unity can be found and acted upon. Sense of the meeting is the understanding of where the gathered body is led and does not mean that every individual present is completely satisfied or in total agreement. Contrasting views and perceptions may be expressed and some disagreements may remain. The sense of the meeting emerges from the committed efforts of a loving community and strengthens its bonds.

The Meeting for Business

- 4 Prior to the meeting for business, the clerk prepares the agenda, with input from the appropriate committees and individuals. Notice of complicated or controversial issues should be given to members in advance to allow Friends to come more fully informed and inwardly prepared for the discipline of the meeting. Those reporting to the meeting for business should provide written materials as needed to facilitate the knowledgeable conduct of business. In most meetings, the clerk and recording clerk will sit at a table facing the group and the meeting will begin with a period of silent worship. In some meetings, a few Friends are appointed to hold the meeting in prayer throughout.
- 5 The clerk sets the pace of the meeting, as Friends who signal their desire to speak wait to be recognized. Allowing time to reflect between each contribution and addressing the clerk rather than the previous speaker help maintain an atmosphere of prayerful corporate seeking. Part of the discipline of the process is to refrain from stating concerns or ideas that

have already been expressed. While it may be helpful to the clerk to say, “That Friend speaks my mind” when we agree with a previous speaker, care should be taken that this does not become a veiled means of voting.

- 6 Sometimes it is the task of a committee to present the necessary background information and bring suggestions for possible courses of action. With a difficult issue, a preliminary threshing session may be arranged to allow members an opportunity to express their views and listen to others without the expectation that a decision will be reached at that time. A threshing session is a time of worshipful listening that allows Friends to gather information; to express their thoughts, questions, and concerns; and to hear one another.
- 7 Working through the agenda, the clerk or recording clerk will attempt to articulate the sense of the meeting by proposing a minute. Once sense of the meeting has been reached, it should be promptly recorded as a minute and read back to the meeting for its approval. Any member may offer a substitute for the clerk’s minute, and the meeting may approve, modify, or reject it, in exactly the same manner as a minute proposed by the clerk. Friends have not completed their action until they have approved the minute, and no body of Friends will be better prepared to give or withhold its approval than the one that has just reached unity. Since the group is seeking divine guidance together as a faith community, only those present can experience the movement of the Spirit within the group. In some meetings it is accepted practice for a Friend unable to attend the business meeting to give the clerk a written statement of his or her thoughts beforehand, understanding that those present will hold this concern in the Light as they move toward unity.
- 8 Often all minutes will be approved at the same meeting for business, although some meetings only read back and approve minutes on complex or sensitive matters. The reading back of the minute tests that the minute captures the unity which has been found. If all are clear, Friends approve the minute, thus completing their action on this item of business. In some cases, when Friends are not clear, the sense of the meeting can best be expressed in a minute of exercise, which states the various perceptions in the meeting on a given matter. This is a helpful tool in recognizing where the meeting is on a given concern.
- 9 At times, individuals may feel uncomfortable with an action the rest of the body appears ready to approve. It is important that these concerns are heard and carefully considered. Expediency, time constraints, and impatience to move on are frequent stumbling blocks to deep and careful discernment of God’s will. The clerk may find it useful to call Friends into silent worship to calm heightened emotions and seek divine guidance for a way forward. Faithfulness to the truth given, no matter how inconvenient or incomplete, is essential for the spiritual health of the meeting.
- 10 It is the clerk’s task to support the body in discerning where it is being led and whether additional time is needed to clarify the group’s understanding of divine guidance. Passionate devotion to a cause can lead Friends to speak from their own desires rather than from a deeper place of shared spiritual discernment. It is a tender and difficult balance to listen with love to all concerns, while recognizing that the body may be led in a direction with which some individuals are not comfortable. Friends who have strong reservations about the action the group seems ready to take should examine their motivations to determine if the Spirit is calling on them to speak, or if stubbornness or personal preference is motivating their discomfort.
- 11 Sometimes after this examination and patient listening to the meeting, a Friend may express misgivings about an action the body seems ready to approve. The clerk must be

open both to the meeting's readiness to act and to any Friend's sense of discomfort with that action. The group may need to remain undecided for a while longer, holding the possibility that a previously unrealized way may open. It is also possible that the Friend will express willingness to "stand aside" from the proposed action, recognizing that the meeting has reached unity. The act of "standing aside" is an expression of community with the meeting as it seeks God's will in the matter. It is an acknowledgement that the action being taken is how the meeting is led at this time. The clerk may then propose a minute expressing the sense of the meeting; while the concern with the action may be recorded, it is not appropriate to record the name(s) of those holding it. The unity we seek is unity in the Spirit, not unanimity. This spiritual unity is able to encompass discomfort with the approved action.

- 12 On rare occasions, after spiritual searching to ascertain that personal feelings are not blocking divine guidance, a Friend may be unable either to unite with or stand aside from the decision the body is ready to make. The person with the conviction presents his or her concerns, gives the reasons, and asks the group not to proceed. The meeting must discern whether the objection has enough spiritual weight to require waiting for further light. The phrase "standing in the way" has been used to describe this request not to proceed, but an **individual** never has the power to prevent the meeting from acting. A **concern**, however, may have enough weight to cause the meeting either to hold the matter over for further discernment or to abandon the action entirely.
- 13 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.
- 14 If the meeting decides to proceed when one or more Friends are unable to stand aside, the resulting minute will be very similar to a minute written when someone does stand aside, except for recording that a Friend(s) is unable to unite. Again, it is not appropriate to record name(s). In this case particularly, the meeting should humbly consider the possibility that minuting a careful and detailed record of the concern might be of use to the meeting in the future.
- 15 Corporate discernment requires practice and the discipline and faith of all Friends present. We must take care to build a loving community, with trust among members and trust in the spirit-led process to which we commit ourselves. We labor together in love and humility, with openness to divine guidance, seeking the will of God.

Advices on Corporate Discernment

- 16 Being orderly come together [you are] not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God, not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and overreach one another in discourse as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, not deciding affairs by the greater vote. But in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of truth and

righteousness, all things [are] to be carried on; by hearing, and determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity.

Edward Burrough, "A testimony concerning the beginning of the work of the Lord" (1662), printed in Abram Rawlinson Barclay, ed., *Letters, etc, of early Friends*, 1841, p. 305.

- 17 Remember that we are only able to act according to our present sense and judgment, in the faith that the light we are given is enough for our needs today. Let us be humble both with one another, and in anticipating that there may be more and different steps to take tomorrow.
- 18 Think it possible that you may be mistaken.
- 19 In searching together for the will of God in matters before the meeting, Friends are seeking the truth, so that all may join in its affirmation. We are not engaging in debate, or trying to win an argument. Know that working together as a community of spiritual seeking is often more important than simply getting things done.
- 20 On entering the meeting, avoid falling into conversation. Take your seat quietly, entering into a receptive silence. As the meeting moves forward, listen carefully to what others say, that you not burden the meeting by repetition. Allow time for quiet reflection after each speaker so that their words may sink in and receive due consideration. Should you disagree with what has been said, show respect for those who have spoken by offering another viewpoint in a humble spirit.
- 21 Address the clerk rather than another individual and speak only to the matter under consideration. Do not attempt to speak for Friends who are absent as they are not present to sense the movement of the Spirit in the gathered group.
- 22 Hold the clerks and the whole group in prayer, especially when difficult matters are being considered.
- 23 **Advices for Clerks**
 - Prepare an agenda in advance to balance the flow of business in a thoughtful way, listing committees which are to report.
 - Remember to keep in mind the relationship of each agenda item to the larger life of the meeting.
 - Announce difficult matters in time to allow Friends to come prepared.
 - Open the meeting with worship.
 - Recall that your role is as servant to the meeting rather than participant in discussion. Employ listening more than speaking.
 - Remind Friends to address the clerk when speaking, rather than responding directly to other speakers.
 - Remember that silent worship during the meeting can keep Friends gathered in the Spirit.
 - Allow time as needed between agenda items for the recording clerk to compose minutes.
 - Some Friends speak easily and often. Take care they do not prevent quieter, more hesitant Friends from participating.
 - Conclude with worship.

24 Advices for Recording Clerks

- Pre-write standard minutes (opening and closing, committee reports, outstanding business, etc.) but remain open to the possibility that the Spirit will lead the meeting elsewhere.
- Expect to compose substantive minutes to be read back to the meeting for approval at the time.
- You may ask the clerk and the gathered body to hold you in prayer when working on a difficult minute; remember it is the meeting's minute, not your own.
- Primarily minute actions and decisions. At times, additional context may be provided for clarity. "Less is more" is a good rule.
- Minutes should reflect the sense of the meeting rather than a list of individual comments or perspectives.
- If no decision is reached, a minute of exercise can capture where the meeting is in its discernment at that moment in time.
- Names are not recorded unless the action pertains directly to specific person(s): marriage, traveling minutes, memorials, membership, etc.

Queries on Corporate Discernment

Although Queries may often be answered with a simple affirmative or negative, it is vital to ask corollary questions such as "why," "how," or "when." A qualified answer arising from introspection is more meaningful and constructive than an uncritical "yes" or "no."

North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) *Faith and Practice/Book of Discipline*, 1983

- 25 Do you seek the leadings of the Light in meeting for business as you do in worship?
- 26 How do you prepare your heart and mind for meeting for business?
- 27 Do you come prepared for the business at hand, having read relevant material or with committee reports ready for distribution?
- 28 Do you make an effort to maintain your awareness that God is with us as we work?
- 29 Do you proceed in a peaceable spirit with forbearance and warm affection for each other?
- 30 Do you trust that the Spirit has guided those involved with the process which has brought the group to its current place and do you respect the decisions that have already been made?
- 31 Do you attend to the clerk, speaking only when acknowledged and refraining from conversations back and forth across the room?
- 32 As a member of a spiritual community, do you acknowledge differences and seek to settle conflicts promptly in a manner free from resentment and all forms of inward violence?
- 33 Do you take care to consider, in a patient, loving and prayerful spirit, the perspective of those with whom you disagree?
- 34 Have you considered whether God's will for you as an individual may differ from God's will for the meeting?
- 35 When a decision is being reached with which you disagree, do you accept your responsibility to speak at that time?

- 36 When the meeting comes to a decision, do you accept it as “our” decision rather than “theirs”?
- 37 Are we willing to recognize when we are in a place where we should not act, but wait patiently for further guidance to come?

Extracts on Corporate Discernment

- 3.1 Central to Quaker process is the understanding that our task is not so much to figure out what to do as to understand what the Spirit is asking of us as a corporate body. When we come to business meeting, committee meetings, or smaller meetings of individuals with this perspective, the focus shifts away from outcomes and towards community. Our task is to seek together, the same way we seek in meeting for worship, the experience of God in our midst.

“An Introduction to ‘Quaker Process,’”
Westport Monthly Meeting newsletter, October 2006

- 3.2 George Fox: Epistle 418: To the Six Weeks Meeting in London. (*The six weeks meeting was a group of Friends from different London Meetings who were particularly concerned with financial affairs.*)

The Six Weeks Meeting is for to see that all their meetings are preserved by the wisdom of God in the unity of the spirit, the bond of peace, and in the fellowship of the holy ghost... . And that all may be careful to speak short and pertinent to matters in a Christian spirit, and dispatch business quickly, and keep out of long debate and heats; and with the spirit of God keep that down, which is doting about questions and strife of words, that tend to parties and contention: which in the church of God there is no such custom to be allowed. And likewise not to speak more than one at a time; nor any in a fierce way; for that is not to be allowed in any society, neither natural nor spiritual; but as the apostle saith, “Be swift to hear, and slow to speak;” and let it be in the grace, which seasons all words...

Kingston upon Thames, the 5th of the 3d month, 1690.
The Works of George Fox Vol. 8, Epistles II, New Foundation Publication,
A Reprint of the 1831 Edition, M.T.C. Gould, Philadelphia.

- 3.3 “Consensus” is a word sometimes used to describe a Quaker-like process. Yet Quakers would insist that this is not the most suitable term. Consensus (or unanimous consent, or general agreement) are based on the work of human wisdom and reason, whereas “the Sense of the Meeting” is based on the prompting of the Spirit. Consensus is commonly understood to require mutual compromise—shaving away at positions until we find a core which is objectionable to none. The Quaker approach tries instead to reach toward a higher and greater Truth that speaks to all concerns in ways that could not have been foreseen. We discover what God wants for us, as opposed to what we thought we wanted. “Consensus is the product of an intellectual process. Sense of the Meeting is a commitment of faith...” .

Most Friends are painfully aware of how our humanness falls short of the spiritual ideal, and of how fragile our process can seem. Corporate discernment of the will of God is a risky and imperfect proposition. In relying so extensively on the Holy Spirit, we make ourselves vulnerable to pitfalls and failures. However, far from being a weakness, such vulnerability is central to our understanding of the power of worship (and business) “in spirit and in truth.” To fall into the hands of the living God requires leaping, laying

ourselves open to risk. Our commitment to this process, and our assurance of its outcomes, can only be proven [at the end of time], but still we give testimony to the truth we have been given, and are able to say that we have tested this method and found it that it does indeed bring us into Unity with the will of God.

Eden Grace, "An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice,"
essay written for the World Council of Churches, 2000
<http://www.edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html>

3.4 The danger in Society doth not lie so much in that some few may have a differing apprehension in some things from the general sense, as it doth in this, namely, when such that do so differ so suffer themselves to be led out of the bond of charity, and shall labour to impose their private sense upon the rest of their brethren, and to be offended and angry if it be not received. This is the seed of sedition and strife, that hath grown up in too many to their hurt.

Stephen Crisp, *Works* (1694), p. 352

3.5 *In 1757, John Woolman attended Virginia Yearly Meeting. A committee of that Yearly Meeting had examined the Pennsylvania queries and brought them forward for consideration with some alterations. One change troubled him. A Pennsylvania query, "Are there any concerned in the importation of negroes, or in buying them after imported?" had been revised to "Are there any concerned in the importation of Negroes or buying them to trade in?" Woolman had been pleased that the Pennsylvania queries found both importing slaves and buying any to be unacceptable. He was troubled at Virginia's change, which implied that while importing slaves was unacceptable, buying them was acceptable as long as they were not bought for resale. Woolman expressed his unease with the alteration.*

Friends appeared attentive to what was said; some expressed a care and concern about their Negroes; none made any objection by way of reply to what I said. But the query was admitted as they had altered it.

As some of their members have heretofore traded in Negroes as in other merchandise, this query being admitted will be one step further than they have hitherto gone, and I did not see it my duty to press for an alteration, but felt easy to leave it all to him who alone is able to turn the hearts of the mighty and make way for the spreading of Truth in the earth by means agreeable to his infinite wisdom.

John Woolman, *Journal and Major Essays*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton,
New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 66.

3.6 [It is] our concern that Friends should work with one another in a humble and loving spirit, each giving to others credit for purity of motive, notwithstanding differences of opinion, and being ready to accept the decision of the meeting even when it may not accord with his [or her] own judgment. The mutual forbearance and understanding which are produced by a constant dwelling under the power and control of Christ do much to prevent jealousies, misunderstandings, or any breach of love.

1931 London Yearly Meeting *Christian Faith and Practice* #351

3.7 *In Mount Toby (MA) Meeting, the clerk poses a question after the opening worship of meeting for business. A period of worship-sharing follows and the recording clerk crafts a minute expressing a corporate response.*

The clerk invites Friends to reflect on the questions, “In Friends’ decision making, what is unity? What is my role and responsibility in reaching unity?”

Friends express the importance of being patient, being willing to hear each other fully and openly. When we take into account our knowledge of one another in community, when we ask ourselves to listen deeply, to release our own individual opinion and surrender our individual will, we find profound connection with others and with the divine. We are all separate ingredients in a pot, each carrying our individual flavors, but simmering together until we create a flavorful soup. This unified creation can be a difficult but amazing process. It brings us closer to one another and to God.

Minute 2 of Mt. Toby Monthly Meeting, Leverett, MA, 10/12/08

- 3.8** *Bill Taber, earlier in the excerpted article, describes the Mind of Christ as that state of consciousness where we feel we are “dwelling timelessly in the light... At this point there may be no words, only a sense of unity, unity, unity.”*

Spiritual discernment seems to flourish best from this contemplative, reflective, nonlinear state of mind, which is a wide, non-judgmental, almost non-attached but very alert attentiveness. Being in the Mind of Christ, however, does not mean being “spaced out,” for the analytic faculties are not suppressed; they are cushioned by a more vast mind which takes all things into account. Indeed, our analytical faculties are at least as sharp, if not sharper, in the Mind of Christ than they are at other times; the difference is that here we know that we are not just our surface mind, as we Westerners tend to assume, and the difference is that this surface mind is no longer the master, but the tool, of the more integrated person we become in the Mind of Christ.

Bill Taber, “The Friends Discernment Process: One View of Gospel Order,”
1985 *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, Richmond, Indiana, p. 37.

- 3.9** The sense of the meeting is not unanimity—everyone present need not agree with the action being taken. I have had the experience of concurring in a sense of meeting with which I disagreed, knowing it was the sense of the meeting. I have wept, wishing the meeting could go further than it was ready to go, but clearly it was not ready to do so.

When I am disappointed with a sense of the meeting, I try not to give much attention to why we didn’t do more, but to focus on openness to the next step, based on the experience that will follow carrying out the clarity we did reach. I also try and listen to the love within me that accepts people in my faith community for what they are, and pray that God will use and transform us all. Let me also say how much I appreciate the further light we get from each other along the way from monthly meetings to quarterly meetings to Yearly Meeting—we learn and are challenged by concerns beyond our local community of faith.

As I see it, there is only one necessary query: Is the Spirit present? Is new experience teaching me that it is present in places I have previously thought it couldn’t be? If so, maybe I need to change.

Jan Hoffman, “Spiritual Community: Bringing Love Into Practice”
a talk to South Central Yearly Meeting, Easter weekend 1988.

- 3.10** After due consideration has been given to all points of view expressed in the meeting, it is the duty of the clerk to weigh carefully the various expressions and to state what he or she believes to be the sense of the meeting, not alone according to numbers but also according

to the recognized experience and spiritual insight of the members. This matter of weighing the individual utterances in arriving at the sense of the meeting is quite fundamental to the Quaker method. Several Friends may quite sincerely speak in one direction, and then one Friend may express an insight which carries weight and conviction in the meeting in a different sense. This one acceptable communication may outweigh in significance several more superficial ones.

George A. Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*,
Friends United Press, 1986, p. 8.

- 3.11** We reminded ourselves of the traditional practice of minutes of exercise—which we also called “process minutes”—to affirm where the meeting is at a given moment when there is as yet no clarity to act. These minutes simply state the various perceptions in the meeting on a given matter at that moment, and can be helpful in building a sense of the meeting. Often if we can clearly affirm where we are, it frees us to perceive new light. We heard that reading such minutes in North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) gives a clear sense of the steps in growth toward unity in opposition to slavery.

We contrasted these minutes of exercise with minutes which polarize. If a minute is proposed to the meeting by a committee with the implication that the acceptance of the minute is the goal, then Friends are seen as either “for” or “against” the minute.

This polarization does not contribute to the sense of unity in seeking God’s will which is essential to our business process. A minute of exercise might state the proposed minute, but then describe fully the range of responses to it in neutral terms, waiting for the Spirit of God to open a way forward from there. We need to remember that we are always resting in the unity of God and are held there despite our differences on a given question.

“Report of Interest Group 2 on Topic #7: Meeting for Worship for the purpose of business,”
Friends Consultation on Worship, Richmond, Indiana: December 7–10, 1989.

- 3.12.** *An ad hoc Web Committee brought a minute on electronic decision-making to the New England Yearly Meeting Permanent Board concluding with a paragraph “urging Friends to consider decisions reached via electronic communication to be provisional until the body has gathered and affirmed their decision.” Here is a minute of exercise on the matter.*

While we affirm the essential value of face-to-face meetings in discerning God’s will in Quaker business, and hold serious reservations about the use of electronic decision-making as a routine practice, we were unable to reach unity on a proscriptive policy at this time, as Friends continue to wrestle with the use and misuse of new technologies.

We are called to be agents of the spirit and should aspire to allow the spirit its fullest functioning. Toward that end we desire to achieve unity. Finding the tools that work best in achieving unity should be our concern. We are at a point of evolving clarity and are not ready to accept absolute statements. This is a creative time of exploring how our core faith and our evolving experience of technology come together in a place of greatest integrity.

New England Yearly Meeting Permanent Board, February 28, 2004,
Minute 04-19, Electronic Decision-Making.

- 3.13** As we close these sessions I would like to reflect a minute on what took place here all week and especially last night. What we said was that we did not find unity, which is not exactly right. We did not find clarity to change our policy on tax withholding. But there

was a deep unity, which I suspect had something to do with the spiritual faithfulness of many Friends... Those who had come into the meeting sure that they could not support the proposal found a willingness to stand aside. And then, instead of accepting that gracious offer, those who had come in fervently hoping we could move forward were led to let go of that, unwilling to move while any were reluctant, willing to wait God's guidance and God's timing.

Minute 68, *Minutes of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends 1992*, p. 50.

Advices from John Woolman (to be set off as a unit by some graphic design means)

Words in bold are advices articulated by Michael Birkel in his article "Some Advice from John Woolman on Meeting for Business," in Friends Journal, January 1995. For some of them he included actual quotations from Woolman. The Faith and Practice Revision Committee has added quotations for advices where he did not do so.

All quotations are from John Woolman, The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman, edited by Phillips P. Moulton, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Know whereof you speak, and speak from the center rather than from preconceived notions.

I had occasion to consider that it is a weighty thing to speak much in large meetings for business. First, except our minds are rightly prepared and we clearly understand the case we speak to, instead of forwarding, we hinder business and make more labor for those on whom the burden of the work is laid. (p. 95)

Speak with economy, attending more to the matter at hand than to yourself as speaker.

If selfish views or a partial spirit have any room in our minds, we are unfit for the Lord's work. If we have a clear prospect of the business and proper weight on our minds to speak, it behooves us to avoid useless apologies and repetitions. (p. 95)

Imagine how it feels to others.

Where people are gathered from afar, and adjourning a meeting of business attended with great difficulty, it behooves us all to be cautious how they detain a meeting, especially when they have sat six or seven hours and a good way to ride home. In three hundred minutes are five hours, and he that improperly detains three hundred people one minute, besides other evils that attend it, does an injury like that of imprisoning one man five hours without cause. (p. 95)

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.

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

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 clarity 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. ...

And then after some close exercise and hearty repentance for that I had not attended closely to the safe guide, I stood up, and, reciting the passage, acquainted Friends that though I dare not go from what I had said as to the matter, yet I was uneasy with the manner of my speaking, as believing milder language would have been better. (pp. 110–111)