Quaker Decision Making and Discernment
Guidance for Online & Blended Meeting for Worship for Business

Introduction

> In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God's will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other.
> *Quaker faith & practice* 3.02 (part).

Regardless of the setting, what is at the heart of Quaker decision making remains the same. As long as we are engaged in the exercise of waiting on God's guidance and are able to share the insights we have been given, discernment can happen.

However, it is important to recognise the differences and that Meeting for Worship for Business online or blended (where some people join the meeting online and others gather in person) requires a different approach. As well as obvious things like the setting and practicalities, there are also differences in how we engage and behave, in particular it can be harder to pick up visual cues and read body language. Things can be slower and we need to have more patience than usual with technology and with each other.

This guidance is intended to give an introduction and some key things to think about. There are also links to further guidance gathered from the experience of Friends around the world.

Discernment and Community

It is important for Quaker communities to meet to make decisions. If you have not been having Meeting for Worship for Business, then it will be important for you as a community to find ways of making decisions that give as many members of the community as possible the opportunity to participate. Using technology can exclude some Friends, as not everyone finds it a helpful way to connect and not all Friends have access to wi-fi or other equipment. Other Friends, such as those who are living at a distance or are less mobile, may find it more accessible.

Given the current situation, it is likely that many meetings will need to make a number of significant decisions in the months to come. However, we need to be both

realistic about what is manageable and kind to ourselves and our community and those with particular roles and responsibilities.

Things to think about

Before

- Plan **the Agenda** for shorter meetings than you might have in person, even if this means meeting more often. If this isn't possible, then allow for either short stretch/comfort breaks or longer breaks, and think about how you can hold the worship during these breaks. Having a break after about an hour, and not meeting for more than two hours overall is a good guide.
- **Think carefully about the business** to be taken; consider starting with some routine items.
- Give space for some **social time** either before or after the meeting to give people the chance to share news and chat.
- Think about **how people will be joining.** Who will be on Zoom or joining by phone? If it is a blended meeting, who will be gathered in person? Consider the possibility of computer buddies to help Friends who are without a computer or who feel less computer-happy, this could be before or during the meeting.
- What **technical set up** do you need? It is important that people can see and hear each other. Having the camera showing everyone in the room, and clerks in particular, becomes more important during a business meeting, as does having a screen or projector showing those who are joining online. It might be simplest to use the same technology for online meetings for worship for business that your community uses for your online meetings for worship, if you are holding them. The clerk (s) may need multiple screens/devices (e.g. one for looking at participants and one for looking at draft minutes/documents).
- Think about **the roles** you need and how these will work together. Different roles that might be needed include:
  - Introducing agenda items
  - Looking for Friends wishing to speak and calling on them
  - Drafting minutes
  - Technical hosting/support
  - Upholding the discipline amongst Friends

  Think about how best to share these roles out, drawing on people's strengths and asking others in the meeting (such as elders) to support various elements of this. With a blended meeting having some of these roles sitting in both the online and physical spaces increases everyone's awareness, and acts as a backup if there is a technical issue.
- Think about **how those with roles can confer during the meeting**, if you are not physically in the same place. You could use something like WhatsApp, Google Chat or Slack – or you might just use regular phones.
- Think about **how items will be presented** – consider using papers in advance or presenting with, for example, PowerPoint slides and screenshare – particularly if you can use something similar with people gathered in a

meeting house. Remember that people using telephones to dial in to an internet-based meeting will not be able to see presentations or participants.

- Be clear about **how people will indicate they that they wish to speak.** Friends will not be able to stand up and wait for the clerk to call on them. With a blended meeting there might need to be different ways for those online and in person. Some possibilities include — raising their hand physically, using the 'thumbs up' Zoom reaction button, using the 'raise hands' function on Zoom (this feature can also be used by people joining Zoom on the telephone),. Once the clerk has called someone then people should lower their electronic hands, alternatively the technical host might do this.

- Consider whether you will use **draft minutes.** It can be helpful for routine/regular items, circulating them in advance to give people the chance to comment, or ask that the item is brought before the meeting fully. The meeting might want to agree what sorts of things can be taken on draft minute (for example receipt of reports, dates of future meetings). It is important **they must still be agreed by the gathered meeting.** Draft minutes that are circulated are different from the notes that clerks may prepare as potential wording for part of a minute (for example factual information, references to earlier relevant minutes, introductory paragraph(s) outlining the issue).

- Instead of draft minutes, some meetings use a **consent agenda** for more routine and procedural business items, in an effort to release time for items that might require more discernment. These items have usually been previously considered by a committee and the clerks, and are felt to be straightforward, for example nominations, requests for release from service, committees reporting back on previously agreed actions, and other specific items proposed for action without discussion.

- If Clerks are not in the same place you might want to have drafts of **minutes held online with shared access** such as GoogleDocs, and for the Clerk and Assistant Clerk to have access to amend them in line with the feeling of the Meeting. This requires all those involved to be familiar with, and have practice in, the format in which minutes will be kept. These working arrangements should also be tested to see if they meet everyone's needs within the clerking team; it is likely that there will be people within the team with different levels of comfort about using different platforms and combining different methods (e.g. laptop/tablet).

- Have a **back-up plan**, including named backup people for the various roles in case someone is prevented from being present or has technical difficulties.

During

- **Open the online room** before the meeting to give Friends a chance to arrive on time (somewhere between 15 and 30 minutes before is ideal).
- Make sure that you **give 'host' or 'co-host' privileges to all those who need** them. This might not just be the clerk and assistant but might also include elders and others supporting the meeting. However, remember that co-hosts in Zoom cannot then raise an electronic hand themselves, so may need to raise a physical hand or speak.

- **Start and end with open worship**. Just like in a meeting where we are all physically present together this centres Friends.
- Take time to **explain how the meeting will run**, and any conventions being used. You might choose to do this before settling in to worship.
- If you are using electronic raised hands or similar then **give people time to discover and practice** this method, rather than in the meeting itself. Explain the roles of people in the meeting. It can help if the host explains some technical aspects, as this also introduces them.
- It is still **important for Friends to say their names** (and if appropriate which meeting they are from), when they speak. You might want to suggest that Friends rename themselves at the start to indicate which meeting they are from. however those in the physical part of a blended meeting will not be able to read the names.
- Make sure that **only the clerks are unmuted**, with everyone else muted unless they wish to speak. In a blended meeting you may want to keep the physical space unmuted.
- Bear in mind that the **chat function** can be very useful for people with a hearing impairment, if a precis is typed. It can also allow contributions from those with communication difficulties. An elder may read out ministry given in the chat. If you are doing this it is helpful to let Friends know at the beginning whether there is an intention to read out written ministry. You might want to give particular opportunities for those using the chat to offer contributions or ask people to indicate before writing their full message so that messages don't appear in the middle of someone else's ministry and distract people. However, using the chat function for asides or private chat, whether spoken or written, is not helpful in online meetings for worship for business and should be avoided. They are not good discipline anyway!
- Clerks and elders need to **keep aware of everyone in the meeting**, and not allow either the physical or online space to dominate. It may help to check in with each space from time to time to see if anyone wishes to contribute.
- Think about how you can **make sure people are visible to others.** Within Zoom, the host can 'spotlight' a speaker, so they appear large for all online, and also large for those in the physical meeting room. This can work better than 'speaker view', which may be affected by sounds from other participants. Online participants may choose to 'pin' a speaker and have them appear large on their own screen.
- Clerks should think about how they usually receive prompts and sense **the 'feeling of the meeting'**. They may need to pay new attention to these and ask Friends to do things to help. This might include being more demonstrative with their actions or using the Zoom 'reactions' buttons. One large meeting used a colour system and asked people to have objects handy in several colours to show when appropriate (White – I have a question for clarification; Black - I can clarify; Red – I have doubts/concerns, Green – I am supportive/ready to move ahead, Yellow - other comment). The clerks found this helped to discern who to call on and who could help the group move forward. But it is important not to make processes too complicated or give Friends too many new things to get used to.

- When considering minutes, everyone in the meeting should ask themselves, **is the minute good enough**? Does it contain the correct decision? Don't worry about the grammar. (You might want to appoint a small group of people to check things like grammar and correct any slight inaccuracies. If any substantial alterations appear to be required they should be brought back to the meeting at a future time).
- When asked **if the minute is acceptable,** having lots of people unmuting to say "hope so" can be unhelpful and complicated, some clerks are asking Friends to show their thumbs up (either physical or electronic) if they agree and, if not, have some other way of indicating (such as raising an electronic hand) that they wish to speak. and only unmute and speak if they disagree
- It can help to have an online breakout room for the clerks to **confer on minute writing** if needed. Elders could enable a silent shuffle break while clerks are in the breakout room, or ask Friends to uphold the clerks. It is important to ensure that good discipline is held here.
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- When doing **nominations,** you can set up a breakout room for people to go into accompanied by an elder – as their names are considered. Remember, only a host can assign someone to a breakout room, and co-hosts cannot.

After:

- After the formal business **leave the space open for a more informal time of sharing** to help build community and connect people. For the online space you might want to have a five minute break and encourage people to go and make a drink before coming back. Those gathered in person should make sure they comply with any guidance or legislation in relation to gathering in groups whether indoors or outside., and reflection
- As there may be people who could not join the meeting **circulate the minutes** soon after the meeting and think about how you will report back to the meeting (or to local meetings if it is an area meeting).
- Take time to **reflect on how it went** as a clerking team and ask the meeting for their reflections and feedback.
- Recognise that **you won't get it right first time**, but that we can learn from our experiences, think about other ways of doing things and again recognise what is and is not possible.

Resources/Further information

General advice for clerks
www.quaker.org.uk/clerks

Guidance for Area Meeting trustees
https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/quaker-roles/trustees

Virtual Clerking by Emily Provance
https://quakeremily.wordpress.com/2019/08/23/virtual-clerking/

Virtual Clerking and Discernment – New England Yearly Meeting
https://neym.org/virtual-clerking-and-discernment

Holding Quaker meeting for worship for business by telephone conference
http://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/telephone-conferencing-092012

Planning online annual sessions - FWCC Section of the Americas
https://fwccamericas.org/_wp/2020/05/08/planning-online-annual-sessions/

New York Yearly Meeting – Consent Agenda Procedure
https://quaker.org/legacy/15stfriends/consent_agenda_procedure.pdf

Advice on Blended worship
https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/thoughts-on-blended-worship

Meetings examples of blended worship and equipment
https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/sharing-our-stories-and-equipment-for-blended-worship

Questions and comments

If you have further questions, or have tips to share on the right holding of online meetings for worship for business, please send them to supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk. This email address is monitored and emails are passed to the most appropriate staff member for a response.

Recording Clerk's Office, Quaker Life and Woodbrooke, 27 October 2020