

Learning Resources 4.1

Discernment in Quaker Spirituality

Discernment: Since Jesus Christ is head of the church and present among us as our Teacher and Guide, we commit ourselves to listening to and obeying Him. In our manner of worship and decision making and in the way we order ourselves as a church, we continue to learn how to better listen to and obey Christ together.

Faith & Practice - Northwest Yearly Meeting

By means of the Inner Light, a person can discern "Truth." Its entirety is more than any one person can know, and human frailties limit and color the measure granted us. A greater understanding of Truth can be attained by sharing discernments with one another, always humbly aware that anyone may be mistaken or may, by God's grace, bring to light the very Truth we seek.

Faith & Practice – Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

What is Discernment?

The discipline of discernment is a practice of sorting and testing things to distinguish between what is true and what is false. In spiritual terms, it is used to determine God's will, by judging whether an idea or motivation is divinely inspired or not. Discernment, therefore, requires Friends to respond to their spiritual experiences by interrogating their emotions and motivations. They might ask themselves:

- What gut reactions and assumptions are driving me?
- Can I become aware of them and where they emerge from?
- To what extent are they rooted in unconscious assumptions?
- Can I set them aside?

Asking these sorts of questions can help people improve their self-awareness so that such unconscious responses don't dominate them when exercising discernment.

Key tests

Although Friends have always emphasised the importance of listening to the Spirit or the voice of God as an inward experience, they have also recognized the contribution that certain external tests can make in ensuring that decision-making is genuinely divinely led. For example:

- The witness of the Bible (especially the teachings of Jesus)
- The discernment and decisions made by Friends in the past
- The ability of the community to come into unity on a matter

More Information About Quaker Discernment

Videos:

What is Discernment?

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/what-is-discernment/>

The Practice of Discernment

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/quaker-practice-discernment/>

Books:

Nancy L. Bieber. *Decision-Making and Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013).

J. Brent Bill. *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).

Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, and Bruce Bishop. *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision-Making* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007).

Online Articles

Discerning the Divine (*Friends Journal*) – Karen Reynolds

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/2003004/>

Careful Discernment or Spiritual Timidity? (*Friends Journal*) – Kat Griffith

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/careful-discernment-or-spiritual-timidity/>

A Community Formed for Faithfulness (*Friends Journal*) – Marcelle Martin

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/marcelle-martin-community/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why might it be dangerous for people to make decisions when they are not fully conscious of their gut emotions and motivations?
2. Why do you think Friends have emphasised the significance of having patience and taking good time in making decisions?
3. Can you think of a time when you made a decision hastily and without proper discernment? What were the implications?
4. Can you think of a time when you made a decision with proper discernment? What difference did this make?

Learning Resources 4.2

Quaker Communal Decision-Making

The Quaker way of making community decisions is quite unique. Friends commit themselves to a communal discipline of discernment within a meeting for worship. In traditional terms, they seek to allow Christ, the head of the church, to rule and make decisions through them. This is how it is described in the book of discipline of an Evangelical Quaker yearly meeting:

It is a Quaker conviction that the Lord of the Church is present in its times of decision making as well as in its times of worship. This conviction in no way lessens the need for clarity of presentation or thoughtful reasoning, but rather reinforces it so that every thought is made captive to Christ, who is present with his people for their corporate as well as individual judgments (see Acts 15).

Faith & Practice - Northwest Yearly Meeting

In Liberal and Pluralist Quaker communities there will be diverse understandings about what it means to seek God's will. Here is a description from a more Liberal Quaker yearly meeting:

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, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God's will can be recognised through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making process from the secular idea of consensus. We have a common purpose in seeking God's will through waiting and listening, believing that every activity of life should be subject to divine guidance.

Faith & Practice 3.02 – Britain Yearly Meeting

Properly understood, this is a practice of seeking unity in the discernment of God's will, rather than a matter of consensus:

...our task is not to find a decision of which we all approve, but the decision which is in unity with the Holy Spirit. We have arrived at the correct decision not when there is consensus or effective unanimity, but when the Spirit within us witnesses that the decision is correct.

Lloyd Lee Wilson

Key Roles in the Process

The Clerk - coordinates the conduct of the business. They take a particular responsibility for discernment, trying to sense how the Spirit is moving among the gathered people, and call individuals who indicate a desire to speak. They also draft written minutes in an attempt to describe where the gathered people have got to in their discernment (reflecting the 'sense of the Meeting').

The Elders – ensure the right holding of the meeting for worship for business and seek to spiritually uphold the clerk and the gathered people.

The Gathered People – accept collective responsibility for the conduct of the meeting and the application of discernment as each matter of business is addressed. They may do this quietly and

prayerfully, but they may also feel called to speak, in which case they will stand and wait to be called by the clerk.

More Information About Quaker Decision-Making

Videos:

Quaker Decision-Making

<https://quakerspeak.com/quaker-decision-making-consensus/>

Clerking a Business Meeting

<https://quakerspeak.com/how-to-clerk-a-quaker-business-meeting/>

Process over Outcome

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/why-quakers-value-process-over-outcome/>

Books:

Robert Halliday. *Mind the Oneness: Foundation of Good Quaker Business Method* (London: Quaker Books, 1991)

Michael J. Sheeran. *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1996).

Jame Mace. *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach* (London: Quaker Books, 2012)

Online Information:

Quaker and Business - <https://qandb.org/the-quaker-business-method/>

Some Dimensions of the Quaker Decision-Making Process (*Friends Journal*) – Douglas V. Steere - <https://www.friendsjournal.org/1982179/>

Looking for the Light to Lead (*Friends Journal*) – J. E. McNeil

www.friendsjournal.org/looking-for-the-light-to-lead/

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Thinking back to the key features of the early Quaker vision (Learning Resources 1.1), why do you think this vision led to the development of a distinctive way of making decisions as a community?
2. What do you see as the main strengths and weaknesses of making decisions in worship, as a practice of spiritual discernment that does not rely on voting?
3. Despite the wide diversity of belief and practice among Friends in the world today, this manner of decision-making has been retained by all the contemporary expressions of the Quaker faith. Why do you think such consistency has been maintained?
4. To what extent do you think this manner of decision-making could be fruitfully applied by other groups in the wider world? What potential benefits and challenges might this present?

Learning Resources 4.3

A Clearness Committee: Trying it Out

In a clearness committee, a small group of Friends meet to prayerfully uphold someone who is trying to discern a personal decision or dilemma. This is a form of worship which should be based in quiet waiting, avoiding discussion and debate. Clearness committees should not be rushed. Typically, they will last between 60 and 90 minutes and may be held on more than one occasion.

Here is an outline of the basic process. Someone needs to act as guide and timekeeper. I have added suggestions for timings to use if you plan to try this out as a small group exercise. This is based on a 30-minute activity.

A Short Clearness Exercise

1. Worshipful preparation (5 minutes)

The clearness committee begins with a short period of waiting in silence and stillness. This helps everyone to be centred and open to the leadings of the Spirit.

2. The Issue is explained (5 minutes)

When they feel ready, the person facing the decision or dilemma shares sufficient information about it so that everyone has a good understanding of the matter.

3. Questions for clarification (5 minutes)

The other members of the committee then have an opportunity to ask questions of clarification. These should be focused on filling any important gaps in understanding. The person seeking clearness should provide answers.

4. Open questions arising from the silence (15 minutes)

During a much longer period of waiting in silence and stillness, the other members of the committee focus on spiritually upholding the person seeking clearness and reflect on the decision or dilemma as they understand it.

Within this worshipful space, open questions* may emerge which can enable the person seeking clearness to think more deeply about the decision or dilemma. These should be spoken but not answered in the meeting. It is helpful if someone can keep a written record of these questions to enable further reflection to take place after the meeting.

5. Finishing off (5 minutes)

When the time feels right, the group may settle again into silence, before the person seeking clearness ends the meeting by sharing a few words with everyone else.

* An open question prompts further reflection rather than a simple 'yes or no' answer. For example, rather than saying "does your partner agree with you about this?" an open

question might be framed something like, “if you chose to do this, what do you think the impact would be on your partner?”

More Information About Clearness Committees

Videos:

How to have a clearness committee

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/quaker-clearness-committee/>

How to serve on a clearness committee

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/serve-quaker-clearness-committee/>

Books:

Patricia Loring. *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305, 1992).

Valerie Brown. *Coming to Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 446, 2017).

Online Articles:

Clearness Committees at the Crossroads of Our Working Lives (*Friends Journal*) – William A. Charland Jr.

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/2008002/>

One Friend’s Experience of Clearness Regarding Childbearing (*Friends Journal*) – Stan Becker.

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/one-friends-experience/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If you were the person bringing the issue or dilemma, what was the experience like for you? Did you find it helpful?
2. If you were supporting the person bringing the issue or dilemma, what was the experience like for you? Did you feel as though you made a helpful contribution?
3. What difference do you think it makes when a clearness committee can give the process more time and perhaps meets more than once?
4. Do you think you might be inclined to use the process again? Why do you feel that way?