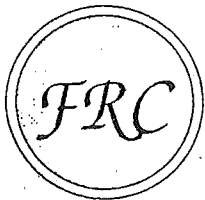


# PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER



PUBLISHED BY THE FAMILY RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
OF PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

*For Overseers, Members of Ministry and Counsel, and others involved  
in pastoral care and counseling*

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## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

by Arlene Kelly

*Situation A: I don't know what we're going to do with Friend A. It happened again this Sunday when she got so angry at Karen during social hour because Karen used the table cloth we usually save for special occasions. She acts like as through she owns the kitchen. People get offended, but nobody has the courage to stand up to her.*

*Situation B. I'm concerned about our meeting for worship. There's so much tension, and it all seems to focus on Friend B, whose messages upset people.*

*Situation C. Our First Day School Committee is falling apart. Nominating Committee told me that everyone they've asked to serve has said, "no," and several regular committee members aren't coming to the meetings. People are really turned off by the way Friend C goes off on her own tangents, dominating the time with concerns that are not shared by others. If we don't re-appoint her to the committee, after all of these years of faithful service I know she would be deeply hurt, particularly with the other changes she is going through in her life.*

Do these anecdotes have a familiar ring? While none of them is intended to describe a specific person, they do represent recurring

themes. The main goal of this article is to offer suggestions for responding in a constructive and caring way to situations such as those described above.

Because of space constraints and because they require a different strategy, two types of situations are not considered in this article: 1) situations of significant mental illness in which the person is out of touch with reality, and 2) situations in which the person's behavior verges on, if not crosses over into, criminal behavior, i.e., sexual harassment, child molestation, embezzlement of funds, etc. These topics will be discussed in future issues of the Newsletter if there is a sense that they are of concern to meetings.

### Understanding the Problem

Although it may be tempting to try to formulate an immediate response, it is much better to take time for a process of understanding and discernment in order to pinpoint the nature of the challenge. Of course every situation is unique, but one common characteristic of these situations is that they elicit strong emotions. These are situations in which a person's behavior is contrary to the expectations of the community. We know intuitively that there is the possibility of disagreement or conflict. Depending on how we

deal with conflict we are likely to find ourselves frustrated, angry, confused, scared, upset and/or uncomfortable. A few of us are energized and ready to do battle.

To operate from a place of centeredness, to open ourselves deeply to the leading of the Spirit, to truly witness to our belief that God can be present in this moment as we seek a solution -- this is what we are reaching toward. Experience has taught me, however, that before this can happen we must be clear about the feelings that have been elicited by the troublesome behavior. If we do not sort through and take responsibility for the emotions which have been stirred up, then it is likely that the issue is being clouded by another motivation -- the desire to reduce our own level of discomfort. Let's be honest. People who exhibit behavior which we describe as "difficult" make us uncomfortable, and it is a very normal human response to want a lessening of discomfort. But as a faith community that should not be the main motive impelling us to action.

Our discomfort is useful in letting us know that something is wrong, that something needs attention -- but what?

- Is the person identified as "difficult" bringing a message that we need to hear, but don't want to listen to?
- Is it what the person is saying which is troubling to us, or is it the manner in which it is being said? Is there a message (in words or actions), or is the behavior irrational and not rooted in the reality in which most of us are grounded?
- Individually and collectively, how might we be causing, or at the very least contributing to, the behavior we find unacceptable?
- Are we giving a consistent message to the person whose behavior is troubling that we find the behavior unacceptable, or do some of us directly or indirectly affirm the behavior?

These questions, and others that you could add to the list, can help us to begin the process of hopefully finding common ground which

can serve as a meeting place with the person whose behavior is troubling us.

I lift up the importance of starting with our own response to and participation in the behavior because of knowing my own shortcomings and because of my experience in talking with people in a number of meetings as they wrestle with these issues. We need, I think, to recognize our own propensity for turning a deaf ear to a message which is legitimate, but which makes us uncomfortable. We need to recognize how our avoiding of people with unrealistic expectations for emotional support, rather than finding a way to let them know of our limits, exacerbates their behavior. And yes, we need to recognize how we take advantage of qualities which make a person well suited to a committee assignment, such as being meticulous in the care of property, and then become impatient with them when they carry that to an extreme. I am not saying that we cause difficult behavior, but I am clear that there are ways in which we inadvertently intensify it.

#### Seeking a Constructive Solution

If we are to be faithful as Overseers to our commitment to address problems in our community, and to face honestly and openly differences which exist, then I think we need to be clear about what our expectations are for the outcome. Ideally, of course, we hope that the person whose behavior is causing difficulty will receive us openly when we go to talk, that the person will share with us his or her perspective, and that behavior will change in a positive direction, thereby reducing the tension between us.

Sometimes, however, even though we approach a difficult situation in a centered and skilled way, the person becomes angry with us for daring to open the subject, and we are

This Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Trish Walat, clerk. Comments and suggestions are always welcome. Please do not duplicate. To obtain additional copies, contact Helene Pollock, Editor, at (215) 988-0140.

## Services Offered by the Family Relations Committee

### Coming Events

Retreat for Men on Healing, November 5-7 in Cape May, NJ, led by Brad Sheeks. 215-349-6959.

### Ongoing Opportunities

Workshops are available at the meeting as a whole, or for meeting committees, on such concerns as strengthening the meeting as a caring community, creative listening, dealing with anger and conflict, clearness for marriage and the meaning of membership.

Counseling Services are available for individuals, couples and families through the Friends Counseling Service. Counselors, who are geographically dispersed throughout PYM, are active Friends whose spiritual lives are integral to their approach to counseling. Sliding fee scale; service is never denied to an eligible person due to lack of means.

### Publications of the Family Relations Committee

In the Presence of God . . . A Quaker Marriage. Simple but specific procedures for both clearness and oversight of a Quaker marriage. Helpful queries for couple and committees.

Marriage in the Light: Reflections on Commitment and the Clearness Process. by Elizabeth Watson. Recent revision of an earlier publication.

Resource Guide to Be Used by a Same-Sex Couple and Their Monthly Meeting's Committee on Clearness. While recognizing that not all meetings are in unity about taking marriages of same gender couples under their care, the resource guide provides advice, queries and bibliography for those who so choose.

A Quaker Look at Living with Death and Dying, by Phyllis Taylor. Looks at both expected and unexpected death and the challenge to families and meetings as these are encountered. Contains helpful specifics. A section on AIDS has been added to the revised edition.

Sexuality: A Part of Wholeness, by Elizabeth Watson. Focuses on both individuals and meetings. Includes brief analysis of religious and biblical views and the myths they have generated.

*For single copies, \$2.75 each, plus \$1.00 postage and handling, from Family Relations Committee.*

### Resources for Dealing with Difficult Situations

Consultation Services. The Family Relations Committee assists meetings within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in developing a creative, caring response to difficult situations. Consultation, which is provided by Friends experienced in the issue being addressed, can provide a sounding board for a variety of ideas, an outside perspective, and an assessment of the skills needed to address the problem. Strict confidentiality is maintained. For further information, contact Steve Gulick at 215-988-0140.

#### Printed Material.

--"The Wounded Meeting," which focuses on difficult behavior in meeting for worship. A 32-page pamphlet with a wealth of helpful anecdotal information. For sale for \$5.00 from Friends General Conference Book Service 215-561-1700 or 800-966-4556.

--Proceedings of the 1982 Friends Consultation on Eldering published by Quaker Hill Conference Center. \$7.50 plus \$2.00 postage and handling. 317-962-7575 or 800-537-8838.

--"I am a Quaker and I am an Alcoholic," in the August 1989 issue of Friends Journal.

## One Meeting's Response to a Difficult Situation

*This summary of an actual situation was written by an Overseer who was centrally involved. For reasons of confidentiality, details which might serve to identify the meeting have been deleted.*

"John" (not his real name), a long-time member of our meeting, is very brusque -- harshly spoken. His negativity has gradually gotten worse over the years, to the point where the whole meeting has been upset with him. John is very involved with a particular Quaker concern, and if the meeting doesn't support that concern in exactly the way he sees fit, he takes it personally and becomes very hostile. He says things like "I have five organizations supporting me on this issue, but nobody in the meeting is doing anything." In our committee life as a meeting, John is very very critical if something doesn't go exactly the way he wants it to go, and he is verbally abusive at times. Much of John's problem is not a problem to him. He sees it as people being antagonistic to him. He doesn't stop to think why. His negativity goes far back into his childhood; I don't think it will ever change.

The reaction of meeting members has been to stay away from John. His anger and judgmentalism frighten people. We can't absorb all of his negativity. We're a small meeting, and we only have so much energy. Fortunately there are a few people who care about John, and I think that's very important. Somehow I've been able to maintain a positive relationship with him, because I've been able to talk straight to him, suggesting reasons why some of the things that annoy him are happening. I also try to help John with his personal problems.

Ministry and Counsel has discussed the problems with John. Virtually nothing has come of those discussions, except a sense of clarity on the need to try to maintain some kind of friendly connection with him. We will never desert him. On one occasion, Ministry and Counsel set up a meeting with John. We named a small, a carefully chosen group that we felt could talk to him on friendly terms. It was at a time when he was very very angry with the meeting. Before we went I wrote him a letter explaining that we wanted to understand him and work with him. But when the meeting took place, he was like a school child being taken before the principal. He just said "yes yes yes" to everything. I think he blocked things out because of embarrassment or anger. Through that experience we learned not to expect too much. Since then, our strategy has been for me to reach out on a one-on-one basis. This has worked well because I can be perfectly frank with John, and he knows I'll be there next time for him. And now I think he knows deep down that the meeting is there for him, even though it's hard for him to accept the caring.

My advice to other meetings would be to always see the other person as a human being. You can never force anything on a person. The interaction has to be grounded in the person's feeling of respect for you, and your respect for the person. Greet the person with friendliness. Respect the fact that there are always two sides to every conflict. Try to discover whether or not the person is aware of the conflict. (In this situation, if John was aware, he covered it up). Try to understand the person's reasons for the stance that he takes. (In this case, we needed to ask the question: "Why does he feel so negative about us?") Remember that difficult behavior in an adult is almost always part of a long-standing behavioral pattern. It is never easy to change, but we must try, giving the person ample opportunity to get angry or even hurt, working through the feelings in positive ways of working together.

Remind the person that the group is a community, extending its warmth and love to all members. Because Quakers see love as an inclusive thing, he, too, is part of that caring. There is that of God in every person. At the same time there are expectations. No member or attender is given the freedom to disrupt the circle of love.

unable to move the exchange beyond that level of defensiveness and anger. Have we failed in that instance? Surely we have failed in terms of finding a mutually satisfactory solution. Should we have avoided the meeting in the first place? I don't think so.

There are two things which are within our control as we enter a situation: 1) The spirit that guides our actions. Are we centered? Have we been open to considering what might be our part in the problem? 2) Our sense of clarity in communicating a clear definition of the limits regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our meeting. Then the other person has control over the way in which he or she will receive our concerns, and whether or not to join with us in seeking a mutual solution.

In addition to preparing inwardly for the visit and going in a prayerful spirit, what else can we do to help create a climate of trust and mutual searching? The following occur to me. What others would you add?

Assembling the visiting team. Try to have the visit carried out by people with whom the person causing the difficulty already has some relationship of trust and affection. Pay attention to the balance of energy in the group. If the person being visited is assertive and even controlling it is important to have folks who can meet that energy and not be overwhelmed by it. Conversely, if the person being visited is quieter or meeker, it is important that that person not be overwhelmed.

Fostering trust. We need to trust that, despite how difficult their behavior is, it is not the person's intention to be causing distress. (If we can't trust that, and sometimes it's appropriate that we can't, then we need to wrestle with the implications of that lack of trust).

Honoring the Other's Light. Try to find ways to discover how the person is experiencing the tension with the meeting. Let them know that their perspective matters to us,

that we care and that we want, with them, to seek a solution that will work for all parties.

If I were part of a visiting team, I think that I would try to describe my distress with the way in which my relationship with the person had gotten off track. For example, "I've been feeling really troubled about the way in which our interactions in the First Day School Committee have gone recently. I've come to realize that there are times when I've been very troubled by some of your participation, and I think that I've handled my feelings in a way which is very unfair to you. I'm sorry for that. It's not helpful to you that I and others on the committee just tune you out. I want to find a better way for us to deal with this. Does what I'm saying make any sense, when I talk about things being off track?" Then try to truly remain open and non-defensive in listening to the person.

Honoring BOTH the other's perspective AND your perspective. It's quite likely that you and the person being visited have different perceptions. There is nothing to be gained from debating whose perception is right. If you do that it is guaranteed that you'll each go away with the experience of not feeling heard by the other. This is not to say you need to agree with the person, or pretend that there isn't a difference. It means really trying to discover why it feels the way it does to them., and then trying to get them to hear how things are feeling to you.

For example, suppose our Friend who blew up on Sunday morning at social hour because the table cloth was used says, "Nobody cares about the meeting house any more. Everybody is so busy running around with their own life. They know how to get table clothes dirty, but they don't seem to know how to wash them," we can try to get them to sympathize with the busier schedules of young families (which is true), we can try to point out that meeting members really do care about the meeting house (which is true in varying degrees) etc. etc. OR, we can say something like this: "Wow, it sounds as if you're feeling that a lot of the care for the

meeting house is falling to you, and that others don't care about that, or are not respectful of all that you're doing. Is that how it seems?" My speculation would be that in one measure or another the Friend in question would say, "Yes," and we could even add, "I'd be upset too if I felt I was being taken for granted".

Now that the Friend has truly been heard, perhaps she is ready to hear our perspective. We could describe how her anger scares us, makes us steer clear of property issues since we aren't sure we can meet her standards, and we realize that a situation has developed (not that she has caused it) which is very counter-productive for both of us. She is feeling put upon, which we don't want; and we are feeling we can't do things well enough to suit her, which is, hopefully, a situation she doesn't want. What can we do together to plan for future situations to help things be different?

Taking practical steps. Develop, in collaboration with the person, specific ways of dealing with the problem, trying to avert its recurrence. For example, a cabinet could be labeled "supplies reserved for special occasions." Think about how the problem can be addressed in a more caring manner by both sides when it does recur in some fashion.

Keeping at it. Deeply entrenched behavior patterns are not going to change overnight, even if the parties involved truly are trying to do things differently. Once there is an acknowledgment with the person that all parties want to find better ways of addressing the problem, a good question to raise is: What would be supportive to all parties as they try to develop different behavior? Suggest that people check in with each other in a few months to get a sense of how things are feeling to all the parties involved.

If, after all your efforts, there's no progress, then I think that the meeting has to decide what best serves the needs of the community. In following through on that it is important to be direct, caring and respectful in letting

the person involved know of the decision, and to let them know of continued openness, if it is there, to seeking a mutual solution. "Nominating Committee will not be including your name on the slate for First Day School for next year. We truly value what you have to offer, but the difficulties we mentioned about your dominating the meeting are a real problem. We're not saying that the problem is all you, but your refusal to look at it with us creates a real dilemma."

In summary, our prayer should be for humility, which allows us to look at our possible contribution to the problem, and for simplicity, to speak the truth in gentle and straightforward ways. We can pray for a rootedness which will allow us to be mindful of the values binding us together as a community, and for patience, remembering that things will not change overnight. And always, we need a sense of humor.

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#### Questions for Reflection

1. In caring for the life of our community, are we, as Overseers, attentive to situations which may be causing tension among our members and attenders?
2. When the actions of a person in meeting are causing difficulty, do we find caring and constructive ways to address the situation? What are the things, if any, which would help us to be more effective in carrying this aspect of our committee's responsibilities?
3. What do I, as an individual Overseer, experience to be the gifts that I bring to the situation of dealing with a person causing difficulty? What are the areas of growth which I would like to achieve relative to this type of situation?