

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel, and others
who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

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How Are We Called?

by Christopher Sammond

Discerning the calling of a community—be it a committee, monthly meeting, or yearly meeting—is discerning what our work is in the world. It is discerning what might be rightly ordered in terms of broader visions, priorities, and general directions. It deals with questions such as: How do we set priorities for our spending? or, How do we respond faithfully to the events of September 11? It addresses questions that can only be answered by first coming to terms with deeper questions of who are we and what are we about, and how does the Divine relate to all that?

Many unprogrammed Friends might find themselves reluctant to look at questions of who we are and what we are about in relation to the Divine. For some, their experience of the Divine doesn't include an entity that might "call" us. Other Friends don't believe that it is possible to use our discernment process to look at such broad and general questions. Yet, I have seen that it not only is possible, but doing so deepens and unites a community. I have at times been deeply moved to witness how the Spirit has moved among us as infinite, overwhelming, and sometimes conflicting possibilities have somehow melted into a clarity that was sure and steady. There have been times when the depth of connection between those present and the open-hearted communal seeking have left me with a palpable sense of being filled and nourished. At times like that I have felt deeply blessed to be among Friends.

One of those occasions was when the eight Friends on the Friends General Conference (FGC) Committee for Ministry on Racism were seeking to discern a vision for God's leading in our work. We began in worship sharing over how we experienced God working within ourselves relative to our own racism. As each person shared her or his truth, the sense of openness and connection grew deeper and deeper. The growing sense of emotional and spiritual safety helped us to listen each person's story out of them. We ended the evening with deeply-grounded worship. After a night's sleep, we moved rather effortlessly from individual sharing to a sense of God's leading for our collective work. It was as surprising to us as it felt deeply clear and right.

*Conflicting possibilities
have melted into clarity.*

I believe that many Friends have had this kind of experience to varying degrees, although we might use different language to describe it. I would call it discerning a sense of God's will for the group. Others may say that we have found a way of being in harmony with the universe. It is important as we reflect on discerning calling that we not get hung up on language but pay attention to our common *experience*. Most Friends, I believe, would agree that as a Religious Society we have found in our business practice a way of moving with the flow of something universal and ineffable that has a sense of direction to it, and that we do better when we are moving with that



Christopher Sammond

flow rather than against it. As you read along you may find that my language of God and Spirit is more reflective of my experience than of yours. At those times, know that I am referring to the flow of ineffable unity and rightness that we have experienced among us.

Beginning with the individual

In discerning the calling of the group, one starts with the individual. Many Friends have a clear vision of who the community is and what it should be doing based upon their personal experience of the group and the Divine. Often they will generalize from their own experience and conclude that their vision for the group is *the* vision of the group. Individuals within

our meetings often operate from competing unconscious visions which serve as the root of much conflict. Bringing our disparate visions out into the open helps us to see how each vision is a part of some-thing larger.

The Divine is already active in any community, in the lives of individuals and in the work of groups within the meeting. There are often similarities and patterns to the way God is acting in the lives of individuals in a community. Call it the signs of the times or the effects of the planets or the flow of the Universe. Frequently those in tune with that flow are feeling pulled in a similar direction.

We are better able to recognize the patterns of how God might be pulling us as a group, when we discover how God is pulling us as individuals.

One Meeting's Experience:

On Being a Member of Central Philadelphia Meeting

A few years back, the Membership Care Committee of Central Philadelphia Meeting found itself facing one question after another about the meaning of membership. A distant, inactive member asked for a letter of introduction for travel in Great Britain. What could we say about someone we did not know? In a year with the death of many members, Worship and Ministry found themselves taxed by a request for a memorial from someone unknown to any active member. The clerks of the Finance Committee and the Nominating Committee were asking Membership Care to clarify how to respond to members who did not fulfill their responsibilities to support the meeting financially and through committee service. And members of Membership Care itself observed that there was inconsistency in the clearness processes for membership. We had to face the fact that we did not have clarity or unity on what it means to be a member of our meeting and that this lack of clarity was hindering the life of the meeting.

Membership Care Committee worked for over a year to craft a statement on membership in our meeting. Each draft brought out more questions and more differences among the members—how specific should we be about expectations of members? Are there concerns related to membership in our meeting that are different from the meaning of membership in the Religious Society of Friends in general? We certainly found, as Christopher Sammond suggests, that

individuals generalized that their *personal* beliefs and opinions are or should be the position of the meeting.

Midway through Membership Care's process there was a special evening meeting to elicit the thoughts and concerns of the wider membership. After a shared supper we broke into small groups to explore questions of "How would you express what are the shared beliefs that are essential to becoming and remaining a member of Central Philadelphia Meeting?" and "What led you to apply for membership in the meeting?" or for attenders "What has led you not to apply for membership?" We gathered at the end of the evening and drew together guidance to Membership Care's process.

When Membership Care finally brought a draft to meeting for business for approval it was clear that the meeting was not prepared to "rush to finalization of the document," as the minutes of that meeting read. As it turned out, final approval came thirteen months later.

The intervening months saw discussions in regular meetings for business and two specially called meetings for business focused solely on the statement. While some Friends found the extended process difficult, the process became as important as the product as we came to more deeply know the bonds that held us together as a meeting.

Not surprisingly a big sticking point was the language used to talk about our relationship with the Divine. Very specific language was smoothed down to

Individual discernment is fostered by depth of community. In my experience we can only access that place of deep self from which careful discernment arises in the context of considerable emotional and spiritual safety. The level of community needed for deep discernment is deeper than the consistent, healthy fellowship of even a vibrant meeting. An analogy I would make would be the difference between fellowship time and a deeply gathered meeting for worship. This is not a depth at which we would want to operate all the time, but one that is necessary for deeper discernment.

Early Friends called this condition “gathered,” “covered,” or “crossing the threshold.” It is characterized by mutual trust of each other and openness to the Spirit. The pastoral care committee can help create that space where the Spirit can act.

something neutral and inoffensive. We looked again at that section at the following meeting and noted that “we are hungry for language that is stronger and clearer.” The clerk invited us to speak of “what excites and empowers us.” From that we found language—not in a sentence, but a paragraph—that was vital and inclusive. We affirmed that “the vitality of our community is enhanced when we seek together for the revelation of the Spirit in our hearts and in our lives.” It was one of several occasions when thorny differences dissolved into deep unity.

Now with the statement approved, we continue to live into its meaning for our community. Applicants for membership receive a copy and it becomes a focus of the discussion in clearness committees. In letters asking for financial support we remind one another of our call to “generosity of spirit” and ask each one to consider her/his rightly ordered gift to the meeting. Membership Care is currently exploring how to reach out with love and clarity to inactive members to explore whether that person’s path is leading away from membership in Central Philadelphia. We still have much to learn but are strengthened by our work together to come to clarity on “On Being a Member of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.”

*Based on interviews with
Mona Cardell and Arlene Kelly*

Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

Copies of the statement are available from cpmm@afsc.org

There are a myriad of ways to reach the communion in the Spirit that allows us to do deep corporate discernment. Early Friends would worship for two or three hours, waiting until they had “crossed the threshold” as a group before engaging in the process of seeking the sense of the meeting. Most modern Friends would consider that impractical, so we need to find other ways to help Friends access these deep waters.

Here are some ways that I have found important:

Allow a spaciousness of time. Creating the depth of community I am talking about takes significant blocks of time. Some meetings may hold a series of half-day gatherings over several months. Others schedule one or more weekend retreats. The more you can maintain a consistent core group of people throughout the process, the better. The more people who have been part of the process previously the more easily the community can reclaim the level of trust and openness achieved in the previous sessions.

Start with the bar low and raise it only as quickly as the group can manage. In groups where there isn’t yet significant depth of trust, it is best to start with questions such as “Why did you come to attend this event?” that are non-threatening and that do not demand a high degree of vulnerability. As the process goes along you can make the questions more and more inviting of self disclosure and more closely tied to the issue at hand. With each stage you continue building greater trust and openness.

Start small and work larger. Start with Friends in pairs sharing on a question related to the issue the larger group is working toward. Once you have a sense of the group being in an open or “covered” state, combine the groups or form new groups of larger and larger sizes. I would suggest an upper limit of about thirty for hearing directly from each other, depending upon time available and the capacity of the group to stay focused. When working with groups larger than thirty, you may need to do this type of sharing in sub-groups.

Follow your discernment of how the Spirit is moving in the group. The facilitator for a discernment session must follow her or his feeling for how well the group is settling and, thus, how rapidly to move to deeper questions or to larger subgroups. Trust your sense of movement of the Spirit. Be ready to throw away these guidelines or any

other preconceived notions you might have if you are clear the situation warrants it. And don't be so attached to your agenda for the group that you miss openings into new insights or new levels of clarity.

Allow the discoveries to emerge. One cannot make this level of community happen; it is a gift. As Friends begin to share at depth and find that it is received with interest and respect they become more and more ready to trust one another. In moving through this process, Friends hear from each other how they experience the Divine moving in their lives, and how God is moving in others on the issue at hand. This begins to give a sense of the breadth of the movement of the Spirit and lays the groundwork for discerning larger patterns.

Moving from the Individual to the Corporate

The critical juncture in approaching corporate discernment in this way is the movement from the individual to the corporate. I have experienced this happening in a wide variety of settings. In all cases, it is the work of the Spirit much more than skillful facilitation that makes the leap from the individual to the corporate possible. The task of those guiding this process is to create the container in which Spirit can work. In this way we aid Friends in uncovering and bringing forth their individual Light so that the group can witness it, take it in, and allow it to blossom into a corporate vision.

At this point in the process Friends often struggle to retain the faith that Spirit will indeed move and where those facilitating most want to intervene somehow, when allowing spaciousness is

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really what is called for. In a committee of forty discerning the theme for the '98 FGC Gathering, we labored in worshipful discernment for six or eight hours, spread out over a twenty-four hour period, to arrive at a theme that we were clear about. As co-clerk of that process, I began to panic when hour after hour went by, and it seemed that we were getting nowhere. In retrospect, I realized that as my panic increased, I became more controlling of the process, and we became more and more stuck as a group. It was only when I let go completely and the group surrendered to the possibility that perhaps we

Time to Renew

A renewal form is enclosed with this issue. Subscribe now for Volume 10 of *Pastoral Care Newsletter*. We are at work now with Friends experienced in pastoral care in their meetings to bring you insights on our common tasks.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

Look for an issue devoted to *listening*. Many issues of *PCN* remind us that listening skills are key to our work in pastoral care. Patricia Brown of Abington Meeting in Pennsylvania will bring her years of caregiving experience to this issue.

Recognizing that strong community ties lightens our work as caregivers, we also look forward bringing you an article on *retreats as a tool for deepening the meeting community*. And in these troubled times nationally and internationally, we are working on an article on *engaging with the peace testimony and helping members become clear on militarism and the draft*.

A WORD ABOUT PHOTOCOPYING PCN

In each issue we remind you please not to photocopy your copies of *PCN* but to order additional copies. We ask this so that the editorial and production costs can be equitably shared by all the readers of *PCN*. We try to keep the costs affordable for meetings of all sizes. In this way you can help us to manage these costs. Thanks.

would not arrive at clarity that it finally arose. While I still struggle to know how to be an effective midwife of this stage in the process, I can offer some general advice based on my experience.

Trust the Spirit. If you create the space and don't get in the way, Spirit will indeed come through.

Trust the group. Give them plenty of room to move, to cover a broad range of territory. Where they go may be a dead end, but it also may be the path out of the forest. Trust participants to be able to hear the truth in each other and to be faithful agents of Truth.

Trust your discernment. When you begin to "hear between the lines" of what is being said and discern a theme or even a small thread, name it and follow it.

Allow a great deal of time. You cannot rush this process. Trying to do so will shut down the sense of community or "gatheredness" that makes it possible.

Discerning Direction in Northern Yearly Meeting

The process Northern Yearly Meeting (NYM) used in 1998 illustrates the above guidelines and offers one possibility for how to make the discerning leap from God's movement within all the individuals and God's calling for the group. In struggling to come to unity on budget priorities Friends in NYM found that we could not come to clarity as a group. We did not have sufficient corporate clarity on who we were and what we were being called to do as a

Depth of discernment and depth of community are manifestations of the Spirit.

yearly meeting to be able to set budgetary priorities.

We did this work at a

yearly meeting session, where there routinely is a relatively high level of community. We devoted two mornings to the process. After worship in the full group we broke up into pairs which later joined with other pairs to form quads, and so on, until we were groups of sixteen. Friends of all ages were included in this process. We labored with the following queries: What is God calling us to be and do as a yearly meeting? How does NYM enrich your experience of your home meeting? What is it like for you to be a Quaker? How does God want you to live in this world? How can NYM help you answer God's call? What does the world need that we can work on together in our yearly meeting?

Times of structured sharing were punctuated by times of worship. "Thread weavers" circulated through the groups, listening to their process and then meeting with the planning committee to share what they were hearing and to plan a second set of queries for the next day. These were: What are God's priorities for NYM? How do we free Friends to focus on these priorities? What are our stumbling blocks? In what ways are we called to witness? How do we balance between self care and world care?

The "thread weavers" listened to the sharings of Friends and then spent some time naming common themes that they were hearing. These were brought to business meeting. Out of these themes and through discernment in worship-sharing groups [not the sixteens of before and not intergenerational] arose a list of concrete recommendations, priorities, and statements of self awareness as to who we are as a yearly meeting at this point in the life of our community.

While some of what we became clear on was obvious and predictable, much that arose surprised many of us. We adjusted some of our priorities and formed several ad hoc committees to work out how to implement recommendations on our living out a more faithful response to God's calling to us as a yearly meeting.

Summary

Depth of discernment and depth of community are deeply related; both are manifestations of the Spirit. Discerning its calling gives a meeting practice at accessing these depths, and the experience of spiritual riches available as a result. When we have taken the risks of seeking together for the calling of our meeting, we can deepen community, develop corporate discernment skills, deepen individuals' experience of corporate leading, and heighten the sense of movement and purpose of the community as a whole. It is well worth the effort.

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Christopher Sammond has a passion for exploring how to make Divine leading more of a lived reality for individuals and communities. He is a member of Twin Cities Friends Meeting and is currently serving as clerk of Northern Yearly Meeting.

Questions for Reflection

1. Does our meeting enjoy the depth of community that allows us to search together in spiritual and emotional safety?
2. What steps has our meeting taken to help members come to a clear, unified view of our meeting's reason for being?
3. Looking back at difficult issues that have come up in the meeting in recent years, in what ways were they affected by competing visions of who we are as a meeting?
4. How might we as the caregiving committee help our meeting grow in depth of community and depth of discernment? What groundwork can we lay to draw our meeting to deeper unity and faithfulness?
5. How could our meeting work with a process such as the one outlined in this issue of PCN? What questions would it be useful for us to address in this manner?

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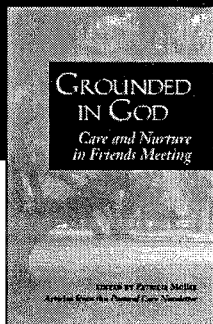
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**Grounded in God:
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This complete collection of back issues of *Pastoral Care Newsletter* will soon be available in one volume from Friends General Conference. *Grounded in God* includes all of the articles you have valued in the past along with an updated list of resources and an introduction by PCN editor, Patricia McBee. The collection covers both the timeless and repeating cycles within the life of a meeting as well as the particular problems of our times.

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QP of FGC, 2002, 328 pp., 6" x 9", paperback \$17.50

RESOURCES ON CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

Support for Discernment in Your Meeting

The Traveling Ministries Program of Friends General Conference can assist meetings in considering when an outside facilitator would be useful and assists in finding seasoned Friends for to facilitate retreats or to facilitate a process of discernment in the meeting. Contact Deborah Fisch at 515-277-2189 or deborahf@fgcquaker.org.

The Deepening and Strengthening Our Meetings as Faith Communities Project provides facilitators to meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to look at their spiritual grounding, the business of the meeting, and the meeting community. Contact Arlene Kelly, 215-241-7018 or arlenekel@aol.com.

Books and Pamphlets

Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting by Barry Morley. Pendle Hill, 1996. *#

Building the Life of the Meeting by William and Frances Taber. South Eastern Yearly Meeting, 1994. *#

Commands & Invitations: Sharing Our Experiences of Hearing, Responding to and Living Out God's Call. London by Lynne-Marie Tromans. Quaker Home Service and Woodbrooke College, 1995.

Deepening the Spiritual Life of the Meeting by Edward Hoare, Friends General Conference. 1995.*#

Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order by Lloyd Lee Wilson, FGC 2001.*#

Fostering Vital Friends Meetings: Part Two Resources for Working with Quaker Meetings compiled by Jan Greene and Marty Walton. Particularly note articles in the sections "Concerns of Ministry and Counsel" and "Workshops, Programs, and Activities. Friends General Conference, 1999. *#

From the Center Out. A curriculum on discernment for K through eight grade. Philadelphia : Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Religious Education Concerns Group, 1999.#

Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community by Sandra Cronk. Pendle Hill, 1991.*#

Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations by Suzanne Farnham, et al. Morehouse: 1996. *#

Listening to God by John Ackerman, Alban Institute, 2001.

Listening Spirituality, Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practice among Friends by Patricia Loring. Openings, 1999

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Letters on Christian Unity by Brian Drayton. New England Yearly Meeting, 1995.*#

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

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