

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings

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Pastoral Care That Is Both Loving and Firm

by Patricia McBee

Does your pastoral care committee sometimes get caught up with the question of when—or even whether—it is legitimate for Friends to have expectations and limits for others within the meeting?

Friends generally agree that it is the meeting's role to be loving and supportive of our members. Some question whether setting expectations and limits is consistent with being loving. Others fear that a lack of standards leaves our meetings vulnerable and makes the Society of Friends hopelessly wishy-washy.

Love and firmness can coexist. Throughout Quaker history, dear Friends with loving hearts have been able to help others to lead lives of clarity and faithfulness. We hear that Margaret Fell played such a role among early Friends. Perhaps you can think of a Friend or two you have encountered who helped to draw out the best in you. Perhaps a gentle remonstrance helped you to understand more fully what it means to be a Friend. Or a word of encouragement nudged you forward on your path.

This loving firmness can flourish in our meetings today.

Accountability and Acceptance

This past spring, while preparing a workshop for the Membership Care Committee of my meeting, I got an image of a graph with accountability on one axis and acceptance on the other. (see figure on page 3). When we have *high accountability* and *low acceptance* (the dotted line), we might say to a member, “these are the

rules; follow them or else.” Most of us recoil at such bald authoritarianism, though in some difficult pastoral care matters we may be tempted to draw just such a line. Occasionally it might even be the right thing to do.

On the other hand, we can act with *high acceptance* and *low accountability* (the dashed line). These would be the times when caregivers would say, “whatever you like is okay with us.” While we may not be as put off by this approach as we are by authoritarianism, it also runs the risk of being a cop-out rather than a truly loving response.

The solid line in the middle points toward *high acceptance, high accountability* or loving firmness. When pastoral caregivers practice high accountability with high acceptance we say to a Friend, “let’s talk about this and see if we can come to mutual clarity.” This is the ideal for pastoral care. It is often difficult to achieve.



Patricia McBee

Loving Firmness in the Life of the Meeting

Questions of accountability and acceptance are raised in almost every instance of pastoral care and many other times in the life of the meeting. Worship and Ministry is challenged to set appropriate standards for participation in the meeting for worship. First Day School Committees often find it quite difficult to arrive at and maintain mutually agreed-on standards for children's behavior in the meeting-house.

Loving Firmness in Membership Matters

A frequent conflict in meetings is over how to handle inactive members. The high acceptance/low accountability approach would be to leave them on the rolls indefinitely, even if the meeting hasn't heard from them for years. High accountability/low acceptance would say that we have a checklist of responsibilities of members; failure to fulfill those responsibilities leads directly to release from membership.

Loving firmness calls on us to be clear about the meeting's expectations of members. What standards are held up for applicants for membership? In most instances integrity requires that we hold the same standards for those who are already members.

A pastoral care committee wishing to be both loving and firm would be in personal touch with an inactive member. Perhaps she is not fulfilling her obligations because she has been ill. The contact provides an opportunity for the meeting to offer support in her illness and creates a potential for drawing her back into the life of the meeting. Another member may have been hurt by something that happened in meeting, and the pastoral contact creates an opportunity to begin to heal the hurt, perhaps also drawing the person back into the meeting community.

On the other hand, the pastoral caregiver may find that the person has no current interest in Friends and has begun attending another church. He does not want to resign his membership because "being a Quaker" is part of his family heritage. With this

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Friend the pastoral caregiver might have a conversation about the testimony of integrity and about being honest about where his loyalties lie at this time in his life. Following such a conversation the person may be clear to resign his membership in the meeting.

The loving response is to seek together with inactive members for the right relationship with the meeting. It is a process of looking for an approach that has integrity both for the individuals and for the meeting. Members might reconnect with the meeting in a way that works for them and for the meeting. Or they may acknowledge that they have ceased to

really be a part of the meeting and resign their membership. The hope and goal is that the member and the pastoral care committee come to mutual clarity about the rightly ordered path.

There are some cases in which mutual clarity is not reached. One member may want to hold onto her hurt and not seek reconciliation with the meeting, or another member may wish to be a Friend on paper but not in real life. In these instances, loving firmness may require the meeting to say that it is not a satisfactory outcome for the meeting. We may have to ask the member to consider again how to be in right relationship with the meeting. If there is no mutually agreeable resolution it may be both rightly ordered and loving to release a member even though she or he desires to stay on the rolls.

Friends have a dual obligation—to be compassionate and to set clear and firm limits.

Loving Firmness with Persons who are Disruptive or Abusive

Many meetings have found themselves challenged by members or others who are disruptive in worship or who harm other members of the meeting in some way. High acceptance/low accountability would allow the harmful or disruptive behavior to continue. High accountability/low acceptance would confront the person, draw a line, tell him or her that either the behavior must stop or they must stop coming into the meeting.

We do not want to allow the meeting to be harmed, yet it is enormously difficult to stand firm in holding to limits when a person is defiant or is unable to control her or his behavior. Portland, Maine, Meeting has created a process of loving firmness for cases of conflict or abuse. (PCN January 1999)

Whenever a Friend or Committee is dealing with a conflict between two participants in the meeting, every care should be taken to provide equal support, opportunity for prayer, and chance to use Quaker process to each person in the conflict and notify each that such is being offered to all those involved.

Friends have a dual obligation—to be as compassionate as possible toward all parties and to set very clear and firm limits when they are necessary to protect the safety of a person. Experience shows that many of us have trouble with one or both of these obligations.

Portland Friends came to realize that there are instances when the rightly ordered action might include contacting the police, a government agency, an outside psychotherapist, mediator, lawyer or other professional perhaps because of a legal requirement, a concern for safety, or a felt need for support beyond the resources of the meeting.

Other Pastoral Care Situations

There are many other situations in which pastoral care committees find themselves challenged to be both loving and firm. Clearness for marriage is a time when we best serve the couple by raising rigorous questions and by supporting them as they seek clarity in their relationship. Sometimes loving firmness requires the meeting to ask a couple to wait and grow together for a while longer before marrying.

It is important and challenging to be loving and firm with couples who are having marital difficulties.

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The meeting must be firm in holding both of the partners in love and prayer and in not allowing either

partner to be demonized. And the meeting must be firm in knowing its limits and when to refer the couple for appropriate professional help.

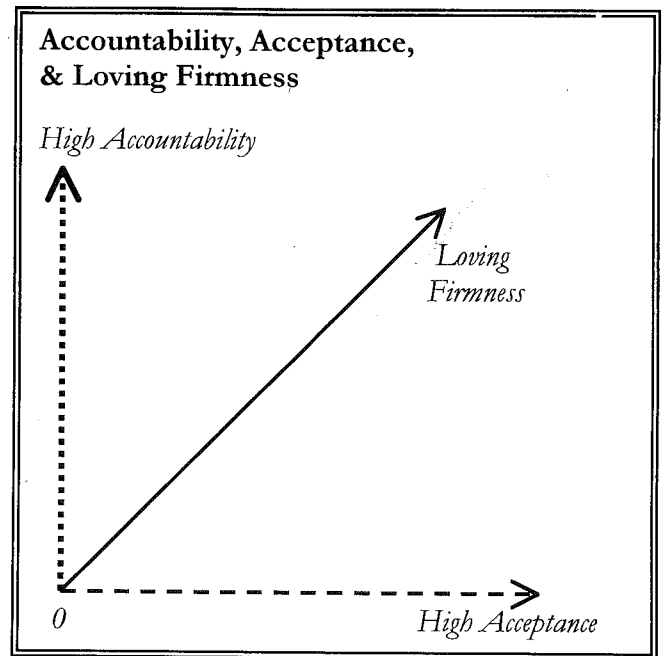
Supporting a member with mental illness or the family of a person dealing with addiction requires clarity and firmness. Caregivers can easily get drawn in beyond their level of skill and understanding. Even cases of caring for the sick can require limit setting lest the meeting be overwhelmed by the needs it is asked to meet.

You probably can identify situations in your meeting when it has been difficult to maintain the delicate balance between accountability and acceptance.

The Challenges of Loving Firmness

Remaining loving and firm is hard spiritual and emotional work.

If we are not clear about or not committed to the testimonies of Friends or not clear about our obligations to one another as members of the meeting community, it is hard to stand up for them. Coming to unity in the meeting about our expectations can be a trying and time consuming task that the members may prefer to avoid. In caring for the meeting community, the pastoral care committee can create



opportunities to consider the standards our testimonies call us to for membership and marriage and caregiving. Meetings that have gone through an exercise of clarifying their expectations of one another find a new sense of energy and unity.

Even when a pastoral caregiver is clear about upholding the commitments of the meeting, there are additional challenges. We have to be willing to listen carefully to the Friend who is pushing the boundaries. We need to look for the points of agreement on which we can base our seeking together, and sometimes they are hard to find. A defensive Friend may accuse the pastoral caregiver of being rigid, rule-bound, even un-Quakerly.

Loving firmness frequently calls us to hold our ground in a conflict situation.

A potential confrontation can bring up internal issues for the pastoral caregiver. It is common to want people to like us. If we hold firm to the meeting's standards we may be criticized or disliked. Many Friends are uneasy in conflict situations and try to avoid them—in fact, the main reason that we fall into rigid accountability or mushy acceptance is that loving firmness frequently calls on us to hold our ground in a situation where there is a conflict of opinion or practice.

Loving firmness can be time consuming. Meeting with a person, listening to concerns and positions, seeking and praying together can take a lot of time. A matter can take several sessions of meeting to-

gether before clarity is reached. Sometimes no clarity is found. Occasionally the situation can seem so vexed that the pastoral caregivers want to throw up their hands in frustration. When the pastoral care committee has many concerns on its agenda, it can reasonably ask whether a given intractable situation is worth the effort, and decide just to let it slide even though that might result in even worse problems in the future.

Finding the Resources for Being Loving and Firm

We have in our tradition some excellent resources to help us be loving and firm. Quaker business process provides a model of sitting together, working together, praying together, being mutually

Friends tradition contains excellent resources to help us be loving and firm.

teachable, and in the end coming to an outcome that feels most in line with the Spirit. It is not faithful for us to give up our concerns and simply cave in to another's point of view. Faithfulness calls for us to put our light together to illuminate the right path forward. Sometimes that light shows a path that no one has yet seen, at other times it shows that one of the proposed paths was the right one all along. Having struggled together we come to a sense of unity and confidence in moving forward together. Once a decision is reached by the meeting, our tradition calls for all members to support that decision, even if it was not their favored course of action.

The clearness committee is another model of loving firmness. When a person enters a clearness process with a question of how to proceed on a life question or on following a leading, the job of the clearness committee is to ask hard questions to help the person become clear about the choice. The process is most useful when it is a rigorous spiritual exercise that shines a light into unexamined areas.

Both meeting for business and clearness processes require certain spiritual practices.

- to be committed to seeking that of God in others and in ourselves;
- to be focused on seeking the guidance of the Spirit, not the opinions or wills of the participants;

- to be teachable and to be open to coming out of the process changed from how we went in;
- to exercise discernment—what is important, what is in keeping with our beliefs, what will bring us most fully to “right order;”
- to stay present without running away from an uncomfortable situation and willing to speak plainly—telling the truth with compassion;
- to submit to the will of the meeting until there is light to lead us on a new course.

In providing firm and loving pastoral care, both the caregivers and those with whom they are laboring, are well served if they enter the process with a commitment to these six practices.

These practices are not easy. We have to work with them and grow to trust them. And Friends have discovered that spiritual practices such as these are easier to maintain when they are grounded in a rich, centered, and prayerful spiritual life.

Support of the Pastoral Care Committee

The most important resource for a caregiver is the support of the pastoral care committee. It is difficult for an individual to maintain loving firmness if there is a fear that the effort won't be supported by others. Thus, the first step is for the committee, and preferably the meeting as a whole, to be clear in advance about the responsibilities of members, or about the process for handling an allegation of abuse or harassment, about questions of marriage and divorce, or about other matters that are likely to arise.

If a matter comes up that the committee does not have clarity

about, it is helpful to talk about it as a committee before caregivers are sent out to meet with a

person. Be clear both about providing loving pastoral care and about what standards are at stake in the interaction with the member. Talk about what course of action seems most rightly ordered. Hold the matter and the persons giving the service in love and prayer, seeking the guidance of the Spirit.

In choosing the committee member to appoint to a particular service, choose someone (or two or three people) with the right mix of acceptance and firmness for the situation. If the member to be met

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with is a timid person, you would want to choose a caregiver who is particularly gentle. On the other hand, if the member to be met with is confrontational, you would want to choose a person who can hold his or her ground in a conversation. In a situation when there is likely to be a confrontation, it may be very useful to send two or more people to meet with the individual.

Don't expect perfection from the those appointed to a service. They may report uncertainty about whether the outcome is the best one. It is very important to affirm one another's efforts rather than second guessing or implying that you could have done a better job. If the matter is unresolved when the caregivers first report back to the committee, other committee members can serve as loving consultants to those carrying the service, helping them go with centered confidence to the next interaction with the person in question.

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Practicing Loving Firmness

Confrontation without support will never be experienced as love. But support without confrontation will always remain an insipid form of love.... Love demands honesty. It confronts illusions and dares to risk temporary discomfort by calling us to the truth.

(David Benner, Sacred Companions, p. 69-74)

At the heart of faithfulness, there is no conflict between being loving and being firm. Firmness is a part of truly loving care of our members. But it is difficult to keep the balance. When caregivers are in an uncentered place, when we are tired or impatient or unclear, we can lapse into rigidity or laxity.

By grounding ourselves in Friends traditions and supporting one another in seeking the guidance of the Spirit, we can help our meetings become strong and safe places to grow in the Spirit.

Experiences from Meetings:

Showing Care by Speaking Truth

One of the most challenging areas for meetings is showing our care for the individual and the community by speaking truth—even when it may be hard to hear or when it might cause conflict.

Members of a suburban meeting took a risk of caring by confronting a member who was abusing alcohol. Several members independently began to be aware that this woman appeared to be having a problem with alcohol. After checking perceptions with each other, three Friends who were close to the woman agreed to sit down with her and address the issue in a straightforward fashion. The conversation was not easy or comfortable. Nevertheless, acknowledgement of the problem slowly came as they held, with love, to what they had observed. The road back was not problem free, but was accomplished with the accompaniment of those who initially had the courage to speak truth to her.

Another example occurred a number of years ago in a large urban meeting. One of the members had a series of hospitalizations with a variety of troubling symptoms, but had been saying little about the nature of his illness. A Friend who cared about him

and was comfortable in asking hard questions agreed to visit him in the hospital on behalf of Ministry and Counsel. Their visit unfolded in a centered way, and even before she put the question he shared that he was suffering from AIDS. He had been longing for an opportunity to talk with his meeting about his illness, but had been unable until someone from the meeting came with an openness to hear his hard truth.

While less dramatic, a third situation also was one which was not initially comfortable. A middle aged couple was seeking clearness for marriage. It was the second marriage for both and the woman had two teenagers who would be part of the household. While the teens were aware of the impending marriage, the clearness committee learned that the mother had not spoken with them about their feelings on the issue. The wisdom and forthrightness of a committee member prevailed. She did not feel that the couple needed the permission of the teens to marry, but she was very clear that it was essential to show respect for how they felt by talking with them. There was a stop for her to clearness until that con-

versation occurred. While the expectation initially felt like an obstacle to the mother, the concerned Friend held firm. The conversation and subsequently the marriage took place. Several months later the teens' mother thanked that member of the clearness committee for her wise counsel.

There is always a risk that a situation will not turn out as well as these, but I do not think that risk is a reason not to reach out. In each of these examples, if the meeting had not reached out someone would have been left alone and without support. When caregivers are met with anger it may be a sign that we've hit a raw nerve rather than that we've done something wrong. Receiving the anger without defensiveness, acknowledging it but not being scared off by it is important. A response such as, "I can see that I've upset you and I'm sorry for that, but I care for you too much to remain silent when I sense that you are struggling with such a significant issue. What is a better way for us to be able to talk about this?" can take the conversation to the next step.

Such interactions are not easy. When we can remember that the first motion is love and we can remain centered in having our actions arise from caring rather than judgment, then we can, indeed, be part of building a strong and loving meeting community.

*Arlene Kelly
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Our Meetings as Faith Communities
a Project of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting*

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Thanks.

Questions for Reflection

1. In providing pastoral care do I tend toward accountability or toward acceptance?
2. Do I work well with those who tend toward the other pole or is this a source of conflict in our committee?
3. What are my personal obstacles to being both loving and firm?
4. How does our caregiving committee help one another to maintain a loving firmness? What could we do to strengthen those committee practices?
5. How does our meeting support one another in deepening the spiritual practices that help us to be loving and firm in our business meetings, clearness committees, First Day School, and elsewhere in the life of the meeting?

RESOURCES

For guidance on dealing lovingly and firmly with members of your meeting, consult your yearly meeting's *Faith and Practice* particularly the queries. The following books and pamphlets can also be helpful.

Dealing with Difficult People in Meeting for Worship by Task Group of FGC Ministry & Nurture Committee. Philadelphia: Quaker Press of FGC, 2002. *#

Conflict in Meetings by Britain Yearly Meeting Committee on Eldership and Oversight. Britain Yearly Meeting, 2000. *#.

The Authority of our Meetings is the Power of God by Paul Lacey. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill. 2003. *#

Clearness Committees and Their Use in Spiritual Discernment by Jan Hoffman. Philadelphia: Quaker Press of FGC, 1996 rev. *#.

Adventures in Listening by Herb Walters. Landenberg, PA: Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 1992. *#

Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings edited by Patricia McBee. Philadelphia: Quaker Press of FGC, 2002. *#

*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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