

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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Quaker Records: Witness to Faithfulness

by Christopher Densmore

The Defense of Archives

Why keep records? How do records aid Friends in strengthening Quaker community and spiritual life? Most yearly meetings' books of discipline include statements on the importance of keeping good minutes and membership records, but they rarely address the reasons why Friends should be concerned with archives or how these records may affect the life of the meeting. For example, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* advises that the minutes should be kept on acid-free paper and, when not needed for current business, deposited at either Swarthmore or Haverford, in the historical libraries of these Quaker colleges. Yet the book provides no rationale for recordkeeping.

In a business sense, we could dispense with all but a very small portion of the records. However, it is clear that there is a strong Quaker tradition not only to create records but to save them over time. Records, and I'm using the term broadly, are instructive to the coming generations to explain how we as a society came to be as we are. Records are part of Quaker witness, informing ourselves and others when Friends have lived up to our self-proclaimed testimonies and when we have fallen short.

Quaker record keeping can be seen as a form of spiritual bookkeeping. Just as orderly bookkeeping empowers a meeting to conduct its activities effectively, free of unnecessary financial stress, so orderly recordkeeping protects us from the stress and harm of breaches of confidentiality or panicked searches for missing records.

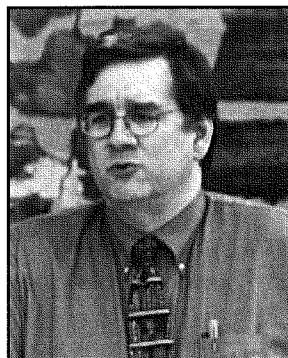
Parallels also exist between record-

keeping disciplines and the tradition of the religious journal. George Fox' journal begins with an explanation that he writes so that "...all may know the dealings of the Lord with me..." Similarly, the journal of John Woolman opens with the statement, "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God...." Today—as we generate, maintain and retain records in our meetings—how sensitive are we to that "motion of love" which might animate our recordkeeping responsibilities?

Conservatism

Religious organizations, at least those with which I am acquainted, tend toward structural conservatism. I suspect if a member of Flushing Monthly Meeting in Long Island were transported back in time 250 years, not only would she find herself in the same building, but she would be quite familiar with the forms and structures of the meeting for business as well as of the meeting for worship. However, would this modern Friend find herself in unity with the religious outlook, values and priorities of the mid-1700s?

Institutions that have managed to survive beyond a generation or two have an air of stability. If the structures and buildings have remained the same, we may miss the fact that our institutions have changed. The point of records is not, as in some traditions, in saying that what was once done is what always should be done, but to provide benchmarks so that we know when we are changing, and therefore



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do so with deliberation and due discernment rather than merely drift.

Recording Actions

Records record actions, decisions and policies. They should be written clearly and plainly so that those not present can easily understand what actions were taken and what individual and corporate responsibilities arise from those decisions. Meetings should not have to revisit decisions that have been made because of confusion over the wording of a minute, or need to puzzle what was intended in a minute written ten, thirty or three hundred years ago.

In the past few months, I have worked with one meeting about the purpose of a scholarship and loan fund set up in the 1970s, with another about the transfer of a burial ground in the 1960s, and a third about the ownership of property originally purchased by the meeting in the 1690s. All of these questions involved meeting stewardship of resources. Could the scholarship fund be used to send a young member to Friends General Conference? Who actually owns the burial ground, inactive for a century, now endangered by proposed construction? Could the meeting seeking funding for repairs to their historic meeting house prove to a funding agency that it in fact owned the building it has occupied for three centuries? As these cases illustrate, creating and preserving good records may offer very practical benefits to the meeting.

Preservation and Archival Storage of Meeting Records

To care for members, now and in the future, meetings must provide for the permanent preservation of basic and vital records. Do you know which individuals are responsible for keeping records? Do you know where your older records are housed? Is there a designated archival repository for permanent records no longer needed for day-to-day meeting business? I am aware of at least three meetinghouse fires in the past two years that have either destroyed or at least endangered records. Does your meeting have a fire-proof safe or other provision for preservation of records in case of fire, flood or other natural disaster?

There is no safe or software that can protect against the most common threat to meeting records: gaps in responsibility. Records are often lost when a clerk, archivist or otherwise-involved Friend dies or moves, or loses interest—and no committee (nominations,

archives, pastoral care, etc.) responds to this gap. I am familiar with a meeting whose members, as they prepared to write the meeting's history, discovered that they had loaned most of their older records to a local historian several years previously, a person unknown to the current members of the meeting.

In some cases these strayed records will ultimately be found and recovered, but too often important records are destroyed through neglect and inattention to good record-keeping practices. Helpful guides to the best record keeping practices can be found in the resource list that accompanies this article.

Archival and Non-Archival Records

Archives are selective. No organization or individual could possibly preserve or effectively manage all of the information, textual and pictorial, paper-based or computer-based, that is received from day to day. Attempting to preserve everything would result in being buried under piles of receipts for refreshments, utility bills, and announcements from various Quaker and non-Quaker organizations.

An efficient record keeping system should distinguish at the time of creation or receipt which records are to be kept permanently and which need only be kept for a relatively brief period of time. Minutes of monthly meetings, records of membership and marriage, and certain types of vital records concerning property and other legal responsibilities clearly fall into the permanent or at least long-term retention category. Other records are expendable. Does your meeting need to have a century of bills from the gas company, particularly if the cost of heating the meetinghouse is also recorded in the annual treasurer's report? When you decide to preserve a record, are you benefiting your successors in the meeting, or merely deferring a little housecleaning?

Record Types: Membership Records

Quakers have traditionally kept good records of meeting membership: births and deaths, requests for membership, transfers in and out of the meeting, marriages and disownments. Keeping accurate records of each member is a large pastoral function of keeping track of the meeting community. What has happened to the Friend who has stopped coming to meeting? These records also benefit quarterly and yearly meetings, which often rely on them for statistical reporting or the assessment of financial support from monthly meetings.

Records of non-members are important as well. The meeting community also consists of attenders and others who have expressed an interest in or concern for the life of the meeting. Meetings frequently maintain databases for mailing lists and other purposes. These databases can be used for understanding the current and long-term health of the meeting. Does the formal membership list reflect active members or does it contain many names of people who are no longer in the region or apparently no longer interested in the meeting? What is the responsibility of the meeting for distant and perhaps isolated members? Do children of members remain Friends? Do those who join by request remain?

Recently a number of British Friends meetings have used twentieth century historical data on membership to ask very basic questions about the future of Quakerism, such as: When and why does a meeting grow? When and why does a meeting decline? What have Friends done, or can Friends do, to strengthen and expand meeting membership and meeting communities? Such analysis requires not only good record keeping of current membership, but archival records showing previous membership.

Computerized databases are very useful for creating mailing lists and contact lists, and generating statistical information for reports and analysis. However, computer files, unlike paper-based records, are impermanent media. Does the meeting still have a computer that would read old floppy discs created a decade ago? Even if a meeting's directory information is fully digital and on-line today, you might still want to preserve historical information by periodic printing of a hard copy for the records.

Special Issues:

Counseling and Confidentiality

Cleaness committees, committees of ministry and counsel, and similar bodies may frequently be concerned with highly personal and sensitive matters concerning individuals in the meeting. A meeting may also have employees or run a school, and have personnel records, student files and official health records. Most, if not all of these records are confidential by law for the life of the individual involved. Even if this were not the case, Friends must be sensitive to information shared in private.

Consider what is in the minutes of the committees and whether to share the information. Who has access and who has "need to know" about such matters?

Confidential records should be clearly distinguished from meeting minutes and membership records. Meetings should have a clear understanding of who has access to these records. These records should not become publicly available during the lifetime of the individual(s) involved. Some records may be closed, except for legitimate meeting business, for a specified length of time. Closing certain types of records for a period of seventy-five years from date of creation may be the best solution.

Meetings might also determine that some types of records need not be kept permanently. I know of a meeting, for example, which destroys the minutes of its oversight committee at the end of each year. While this approach may not be the correct one for your meeting—and may cause archivally-minded Friends some pain—it at least reflects a conscious and decisive approach to concerns of confidentiality.

Computers, Digitization and New Technologies

A century ago, it was clear what constituted the official minutes: a hand or type-written minute book. Making copies was a laborious business. With the advent of the mimeograph machine, the photocopier, and the computer, it has become possible to make and distribute multiple copies of minutes and other

continued on page five

Caring for Friends at End-of-Life



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Friends Counseling Service of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

The Friends Counseling Service is composed of a number of experienced, professionally-trained psychotherapists who are geographically dispersed throughout the yearly meeting area. All counselors are active Friends whose spiritual lives are integral to their approach to therapy. Confidential services are provided to individuals, couples, and families, according to the client's ability to pay. Service is never denied because of a person's lack of means.

Anyone interested in counseling may either call a counselor directly for an appointment or call Deborah Cooper, the Counseling Service Coordinator, at 215-248-0489, to discuss counseling in general or to obtain an appropriate referral.

In choosing a counselor, you should consider several factors. Most important, the person seeking counseling should feel that there is a basis for a good working relationship. Geographical location, areas of interest or experience, or other factors may also help determine the choice. We encourage asking the potential counselor for any information which would be useful in making a decision. Counselors are open to this process.

Contact a counselor directly or call 215-248-0489.

Marcia Angermann, LCSW	New Hope, PA	215-862-5103
Danielle Beauvais, PsyD	Ambler, PA	215-300-6306
Henry Beck, Ph.D.....	North Wales, PA.....	215-353-2530
Terence Carroll, LCSW	Philadelphia, PA.....	215-829-5525
Deborah Cooper, M.Ed.....	Philadelphia, PA.....	215-248-0489
Theodore Fallon, MD, MPH.....	Chester Springs, PA	610-827-7436
Teresa Glatthorn, PsyD	Hatboro & Doylestown, PA	215-672-6627
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Harriet Heath, Ph.D.....	Haverford, PA.....	610-649-7037
<i>(specializes in parents' & children's issues)</i>		
Gary M. Johnson, Ph.D.....	Wilmington, DE	302-656-1295
Karin M. Sannwald, ACSW, LCSW.....	Lumberton, NJ.....	609-518-1057
James J. Saxon, Ph.D	Swarthmore, PA.....	610-544-7583
John Scardina, Ed.M.	West Chester, PA	610-696-2153
Diane C. Stowe, LCSW-BCD	Lansdowne, PA.....	267-253-8308
Fran Van Allen, M.A.	Media, PA	610-358-3212
Lindley M. Winston, M.D.....	West Chester, PA	610-431-3955
Elaine P. Zickler, MSW, LCSW	Moorestown & Phila.....	856-234-9117

For more information on any of the services listed, call or write:

Steve Gulick, Project Coordinator
 Care & Counsel for Meetings & Members
 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102
 phone: 215-241-7068
 fax: 215-567-2096
 e-mail: steveg@pym.org

documents. This has a great advantage of allowing members to know what has been decided, and to make corrections. Online records can be searched more efficiently than hard copy.

Computers, the internet, and e-mail are marvelous ways to produce and disseminate information. Friends should be cautioned, however, that there remain many people who, for whatever reasons, do not use, and may not have ready access to, these tools and are best served by traditional paper documents.

The ease of copying records also raises questions about long term survival. Do you have an archival set of minutes, clearly identified as such, that will be preserved permanently? Changes in technology or personnel can put records at risk. A clerk that inherits a box of computer disks containing minutes from the 1980s may be unable to find a computer that can read those files. A meeting may develop a wonderful Web site, but be unable to update it if the webmaster takes on different responsibilities or leaves the meeting entirely.

Archivists think of the long-term retention of records. Friends Historical Library has meeting minutes from the 1660s which can be easily read once one becomes familiar with seventeenth century handwriting. When possible, we have made microfilm copies of those minutes and the microfilm is expected to last five hundred years without any visible deterioration of image. We currently have no guarantee that the technology to read computer files created in the 1990s will still be readily available five or ten years from now. Use computers to create and disseminate records, but for those records that are to be preserved for coming generations, hard copy is still the most efficient "storage medium" for archives.

The Rest of the Story

In the 1840s, Quaker back-bencher William Allen conscientiously attended Green Street Meeting in Philadelphia. We know this because he kept a journal, and in his journal he wrote down the names of the people who spoke in meeting, often with a comment or two about the subject of their discourses. For the most

part, Friend Allen was edified by the spoken ministry: one Friend was described as "lively and zealous in the right course," another gave a "remarkably searching testimony" and others "were favored to set truth over the meeting." But another Friend's messages were described as "long" and "tedious" and her ministry as unsettling to the life of the meeting. Allen's personal, and judgmental, observations provide a glimpse into Green Street beyond what would be found in the meeting minutes. Minutes record agreement and sometimes the only clue that an issue before a meeting was troublesome is the fact of its being carried over from month to month, sometimes for years, without resolution. How do we tell the story of the inner life of the meeting, both in its highs and in its lows?

Some meetings have conducted oral histories as a way to record what the minutes may not fully reveal. These oral histories may also serve a pastoral function of allowing older members to reflect and pass on their wisdom, and younger members to gain a longer perspective on meeting life. If conducting oral history projects, ask both the interviewer and interviewee to sign a release form that will allow the meeting to reproduce or quote from the interview. Typed transcriptions of interviews are also important, as few people will have the patience to listen to a lengthy tape. The preservation of visual media is also an issue. Forms of tape recordings or photographs have become obsolete over time. Black and white photographs, like acid-free paper are relatively stable, but remember to clearly label them with names, dates and occasion.

Archives: Gather the Fragments

The motto of the Friends Historical Association is taken from the Bible: "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost." (John 6:12). The reference is to the Biblical story of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, where five barley loaves fed five thousand people. There were enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. Here we are today, as archivists, gathering up those fragments of past miracles and disasters and of daily life. Those fragments are the tangible evidence of what has been done in past times.

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However, the practical point of preserving leftovers is to use them to feed people. There is no point to keeping archives, unless they will be used.

Our records are not just for ourselves. This week I've had a researcher at Friends Historical Library from Alaska, documenting Quaker involvement with Inuit communities in that region, beginning in the 1880s and continuing until today. Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of "Brown vs. the Board of Education" and the records of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Race Relations Committee for the 1920s and 1930s, have some absolutely stunning documentation about laying the ground work for the attack on legal segregation. There is a wealth of Native American and African-American history, not to mention women's history, to be found in Quaker records. Future historians may be very interested in how late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century Friends dealt with issues of same-sex marriage and union.

Some Quaker testimonies, once peculiar and distinctive, have been incorporated into the wider society. The equality of women, the rejection of human slavery, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, whether among neighbors or among nations, however imperfectly realized in the day-to-day life of three hundred and fifty years of Friends, have nonetheless served as a witness to the world. Records are witnesses to Quaker faithfulness to the light received, "Wherefore seeing we also are encompassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

Christopher Densmore is Curator of Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

Questions for Reflection

This "annual or biennial checklist" is adapted from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*. The questions may help pastoral caregivers in your meeting discern opportunities to promote healthy record-keeping practices.

- Are official membership records in the hands of a competent recorder?
- Are they reviewed at least annually by a committee with similar pastoral care responsibilities?
- Are informal records of members and attenders kept in a computer data base or data bases, from which can be drawn useful information for building the Meeting community, such as newsletter mailing labels, lists of children by age group, and telephone numbers?
- If the Meeting is incorporated, are its records maintained and its corporate procedures conducted in accordance with good practice and legal requirements?
- Are minutes of the monthly meeting and of significant committees accurately and neatly kept on acid-free paper and retired from time to time to a designated depository?

RESOURCES

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Committee on Records. *Handbook on Records: Their Care, Maintenance and Preservation in the Meeting*. Sandy Spring, Maryland: Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 1996.

Britain Yearly Meeting Library Committee. *Your Meeting's Records: A Handbook for Clerks and Custodians of Records*. 2nd Ed. Quaker Books, 2004.

Damon D. Hickey, *Unforseen Joy: Serving a Friends Meeting as Recording Clerk*. Greensboro, North Carolina: North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1987.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Records Services Committee. Web site <http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/friends/rsg/>

Keith Redfern, *Before the Meeting: A Handbook for Clerks*. London: Quaker Home Service, 1994.

Cecil W. Sharman, *Servant of the Meeting: Quaker Business Meetings and Their Clerks*. London: Quaker Home Service, 1983.

William B. Watson, *Before Business Begins: Notes for Friends Meeting Recording Clerks and Recorders*. Mosher Book and Tract Committee of New England Yearly Meeting, 1996.

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