

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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Disruption or Opening: How Are We Led?

by Jean-Marie Barch

"Freedom of expression and freedom of action have always been hallmarks of Quaker faith and practice. But what happens when this freedom is exercised at the expense of the peace and tranquility of other members of the meeting, or when it seems to be at variance with the spiritual leadings of other Friends?"

Friends Consultation on Eldering

Friends are called to be of mutual support and nurture to one another; therefore, there is great importance to that service which has many names among us, the service of care. Whether we call those Friends who serve "overseers," or "elders," "ministers," "caregivers," or "counselors," or identify them by their committee membership, the accountability, mutual support and nurture for which they share responsibility provide the soil in which our growth in faith and faithfulness can occur.

Many Friends gladly give praise or help but find it uncomfortable to address disruptive behaviors and the persons by whom meetings are disrupted. Various kinds of disruption in meetings not only can dilute our ability to have access to the Spirit, but also can make it more difficult for us to create community among ourselves and to discover what it really means to be Friends.

Meetings vary greatly in their openness to various behaviors from their members and attenders. [Author's note: Hereafter, members and attenders will be referred to as "Friends." This is intended to include all who usually participate in the life of the meeting.] For some, a good meeting for worship is silent; for others, vocal ministry is welcome as long as it does (or doesn't) include particular content or a particular

"feel." For some Friends, their meeting community is a large part of their daily lives, for others just where they worship on First Day. Ministry, vocal or in action, that "fits in" well in one meeting community may be aberrant in another and behaviors which some may find useful in building community and carrying the meeting into the fabric of their daily lives may be intrusive for others. In addition, some disruption can also stem from Friends who are unable to focus their lives sufficiently to follow through on those things they promise.

Some Friends are particularly reluctant to make any sort of judgment about the content of messages in meeting. These Friends lean heavily on the notion that "a message which does not speak to me may be meant for someone else." They believe that any judgment detracts from the respect each Friend deserves as a conduit of the Spirit. Others are uncomfortable offering any comment to Friends who do not follow through on commitments. Again, they feel that they have no right to judge. Reluctance to judge may often be welcome and appropriate, it may also represent an inappropriate shirking of our responsibility. Discernment which leads to appropriate care for a disruptive Friend is an indication of our accepting the primacy of the Spirit and the importance of our corporate discernment, not, as we sometimes fear, an elevating of one Friend above another.

We can nurture and accept each other and still hold each other accountable for disruptive behaviors. These realities dictate that our approach to someone whose behavior is experienced as disruptive must always be made within a context of deep worship, careful discernment, and corporate action.



JEAN-MARIE BARCH

Deep Worship

How do we begin? We must strive first to deepen our worship, both individually and corporately, seeking solid spiritual grounding to become more free to listen for the whisperings of the Spirit and more sensitive to their disruption. If we are ourselves grounded and are attending from this deep place, we will be able to differentiate authentic ministry from that which represents a disruption to it. In the case of vocal ministry, we may not agree with the sentiment expressed (the message may not be for you), but when we listen through the words to the place from which the message comes, we can know if it comes from the Spirit. In the case of inappropriate action or inaction, we may not agree with the behavior but when we look beyond the surface to the motivation, we may find the behavior well-grounded. In either event, when we consider ministry in this way, we will be better able to seek the source of the behavior and understand it appropriately.

John Woolman has told us that the first motion is love, which flows from God. We can tap into that vital motion through prayer and through active seeking. Thus, when we have a concern, we must first take it into prayer, to listen deeply and seek understanding of the source of our discomfort. Where this discomfort comes from vocal ministry, perhaps the discomfort is because the message comes in language with which we are not comfortable. Perhaps the message seems to come from “the head” not from “the Spirit.” We may need to take the words deeper and listen to their underlying theme. Often, we feel the discord in a message not so much in the words expressed, but in the “music” which underlies the words—the manner of expression, the tone of voice—something which signals discord for us.

A similar distinction can be made when bringing the light of discernment to the actions of a Friend or committee. The very same action—involving the young people of the meeting in a community fundraising project, for example—can come from a very disturbed place or a deeply rooted one. This difficulty may also become evident when the disruption is to the business of the meeting. Often Friends may take on more than they can deliver. The recording clerk who does not render clear and timely minutes does a disservice to the community. The treasurer who cannot provide budget information in time for due consideration before the start of the fiscal year disrupts the life of the meeting. We may fear appearing unsympathetic or insensitive to Friends who have difficulty delivering what they have promised. How frequently do we avoid holding these Friends accountable for their inaction, wary of giving offense or

finding Friends unwilling to serve at all? In all these cases, we must pay attention to our discomfort.

Blame and accountability are not the same. If it is clear that the Friend’s behavior is disruptive to you, then it is helpful to come into council with another trusted Friend or two, to examine whether the discord is within you or whether there are others who experienced the same disruption. Then, allow time to pass. It is clear that a single disruption may require nothing more than thought; it is when the disruption becomes more chronic that we must begin to act.

Careful Discernment

The second motion is also love, as we consult with one another to discern the meaning of the discomfort for ourselves and for the meeting. For example, when messages in meeting are consistently disruptive in tone or nature, the meeting must look at how it has supported such messages. Has the community failed to offer adequate adult religious education about Friends’ practices? Corporate worship might profit from deepening, greater attentiveness to the Spirit, or more judicious recognition of sound ministry when it arises. If we avoid such strengthening of our worship community, we are complicit in the development of messages and actions which may lack spiritual depth and may thereby disrupt the connectedness of Friends with each other and with the Spirit of the living God in our midst.

Similarly, if Friends are consistently “dropping the ball” on projects they have promised to do, perhaps this is a signal that our nominations process has drifted from its spiritual mooring. When there is vital community and deep worship, we strengthen our ability to be faithful to our leadings and increase our opportunity to do our work in the world.

Corporate discernment, unique and important for Friends, provides the underpinnings for ministry which casts a clear gaze on the disrupting behavior and honors the needs of both the disruptive individual and the meeting. Sometimes a greater challenge is also to address the needs of individuals in the meeting who may be disrupted by the behavior. One of the important tasks of the care committee is to balance these needs. As we test our response to a message or behavior, first in our own hearts and then among others, it is crucial to remember that we seek not the consensus of minds, but of spirits; it is through our joint creation of connection to the Spirit that such consensus can be achieved.

Ultimately, corporate discernment is far more reliable than the leading of an individual; testing our understanding and being willing to openly acknowledge

that another may have important light to shed on our understanding is at the core of our practice. It is thus that we create a community which is open to the teachings of God.

Corporate Action

The third motion is also love, as we reach out to respond to need. The care committee should support individuals in need, helping them to find balance between their own needs, the needs of others and the needs of the meeting as a community. Often Friends are uncomfortable approaching someone in this situation. Our tendency to avoid what might appear to be “judgment,” our desire to be open to whatever someone might feel moved to say or do, our conviction that open acceptance is what is expected of Friends—all these tendencies make it very difficult for many Quakers in the unprogrammed tradition to question someone when we find their behavior unsettled or unsettling. How ironic it is that many Friends have been deeply disappointed that their meetings left them to remain in their discomfort, and did not reach out when it should have been obvious they were in distress. For many, including members or attenders who are living with diagnosed mental illness, the expectation that meeting community will notice distress and reach out is deeply held. When the meeting holds back, everyone suffers.

At least two Friends under the weight of this concern, and probably no more than three, should approach the Friend, seeking a mutually agreeable time outside of meeting for worship to meet in a suitable private place. It is helpful if at least one of these Friends has an established and comfortable relationship with the individual being approached. The conversation will be most useful if it is framed in worshipful concern, in a search for solutions which will be beneficial to all involved. It is important to note that Friends need to enter into such a meeting with no preconceived notion as to the specific outcome. Mutual respect and openness are necessary. Willingness to seek the guidance of the Spirit in coming to a solution is very important.

It is also best to leave behind any assumptions that the individual has control over or is even aware of the behavior. The concern will be better addressed if stated specifically but with humility and without assumptions. “Friend, thanks for agreeing to meet with us today. We have been concerned about your (insert the specific concern here—for example ‘frequent and lengthy messages in worship just about every week’). You may well not be aware of the discomfort this has been stirring in some of us. I have found myself frequently

experiencing difficulty hearing the message behind your words because of the way in which they are delivered. We hope that by meeting together, we can find a way to help us all deal more effectively with this situation.”

It is important to look together at the purpose the behavior is serving. Any solution that does not take the individual’s need into account as well as the needs of the meeting as a whole is likely to be unsuccessful and unsatisfying. When we invite the Spirit into our deliberations, we may find unexpected solutions for the situation.

Examples and Approaches

One example is provided by a meeting in which one individual speaks quite frequently, and at length. Many meetings have labored with this experience. One meeting, after considerable deliberation with the individual, responded by having someone sit with this individual during meeting (members of the care and counsel committee of that particular meeting rotated this opportunity among them), gently taking her hand when that Friend began to stir. The frequency and quality of the ministry changed in apparent response to this tender attention. In another meeting, when the ministry and care committee conferred with the individual it became evident that the Friend was responding to a sense that the meeting for worship lacked deep vocal ministry. In that case, adult education focused on deepening the spiritual life of meeting members was useful.

Sometimes, reframing the vocal ministry in a way that makes it available to more Friends can help an individual enter into the life of the meeting more effectively. One possibility involves creating a time and place for the individual to experience the supportive listening atmosphere which that Friend may be seeking in meeting for worship. An example is provided by a meeting which became aware that an individual had a great deal of information and opinions about Quakerism to share with the meeting community, but that the need to share was not always under the direct influence of the Spirit at the time of sharing. This individual was offered the opportunity to give several sessions of adult education which were quite helpful to the meeting; the inappropriate sharing decreased dramatically. Meeting newsletters are another useful tool in situations such as these.

When lack of follow-through on needed tasks is creating problems, the meeting needs to be direct in responding. The group which approaches the lapsing Friend can help that Friend explore the reasons for the

lapses and appreciate the impact this has on the meeting. The group can create an appropriate remedy, based on what has created the lapse. Sometimes assistance in organizing the task is what is needed; sometimes a clearness committee can help the lapsing Friend recognize that he or she frequently takes on more than he or she can accomplish. The more direct and matter-of-fact the approach, the easier it is to avoid guilt and blame, and to encourage the disruptive Friend's openness to a more Spirit-led and rightly ordered life.


Resources Beyond the Meeting

But what do we do when the needs of the situation seem greater than the abilities of our care committees? Or, how do we cope when the efforts at dealing with the situation just do not seem to work? Sound discernment forms the foundation, since we must attempt to figure out the problem before we can forge an adequate solution. Some behaviors are clearly beyond the ability of the meeting to address although they can be supportive and encouraging. In these situations they can facilitate Friends seeking professional help.

Some behaviors may tax the meeting overmuch. In those situations where the effects are diffuse and damaging, outside assistance for the meeting as a whole may be valuable. Initiatives such as the Traveling Ministry Program of Friends General Conference can sometimes provide such assistance.

If the disruptive individual is unwilling to engage in seeking a solution, the meeting may need to ask "just how intolerable is the disruption?" Some meetings have found themselves having to exclude particularly disruptive individuals for the overall health of the meeting. This is more likely to occur when the behavior has been overlooked for too long. These most extreme situations may provide a needed wake up call to worshippers who have not been accountable for their disruptive behavior as well as for the meeting. Ultimately, after they have gotten the help they need, they may be able to return to community.

Disruption as Opening

What may appear as disruptive behaviors in the meeting can create openings for deeper community and more profound connection with the Spirit. When we attend carefully to each other and are open to give and receive support, we enrich and enliven our walk in the world. When we accept mutual accountability for all our actions we accompany each other to walk in the Light. 

Jean-Marie Barch travels in the ministry for Friends General Conference (FGC), working to deepen spiritual community and increase our inclusiveness with regard to both race and age. This article is based on her 2002 presentation at the "Nurturing Small Meetings" conference sponsored by FGC's Ministry and Nurture Committee. Jean-Marie is a past clerk of her home meeting, Schuylkill Meeting (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting), and currently attends Valley Friends Meeting (Baltimore Yearly Meeting), where she serves as recording clerk and as a member of the ministry and counsel committee. Jean-Marie is co-clerk of the 2005 FGC Gathering.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the lead article: Jean-Marie Barch urges readers to respond to possible disruptions with deep worship, careful discernment, and corporate action. How do these recommendations relate to the approach of the pastoral care committee in your meeting?

Reflecting on the sidebar (page 6): Recall, if you can, a time when one Friend did something that she or he might describe as leading, witness, or ministry, but which the meeting experienced as ungrounded. How direct and spiritually grounded was the response of the committee responsible for pastoral care? How did the confrontation—or avoidance of confrontation—affect the spiritual growth of the individuals involved?

How can we promote a sense of mutual accountability in our meetings? For example, how can pastoral caregivers encourage Friends to submit their callings to witness to a discernment process of the meeting community before taking action?

RESOURCES

Books and Articles

Wilmer A. Cooper, "A Critique of Quaker Accountability," *Quaker Religious Thought* #61: Winter 1985, Volume 21 #3.

FGC Ministry and Nurture Committee Task Group, *Dealing With Difficult Behavior In Meeting For Worship: Meeting The Needs Of The Many While Responding To The Needs Of The Few*, QuakerBooks of FGC, 2002. (Pamphlet; formerly titled, *The Wounded Meeting*)

Joe Kelly, "Is It the Voice of God, or Just Crazy?" *Quaker Life*, May 2000.

Howard Stone, *The Caring Church*, Fortress Press, 1991.

Articles from Pastoral Care Newsletter

This article draws upon many previous articles in *Pastoral Care Newsletter* which address in various ways the question, "disruption or opening: how are we led?" The following Friends and their work deserve particular mention and I commend them to Friends looking to address concerns in their meeting community.

—*Jean-Marie Barch*

Volume 1, #1: October 1993: "The Ministry of Pastoral Care," by Arlene Kelly.

Volume 2, #1: October 1994: "Dealing with Difficult Situations," by Arlene Kelly.

Volume 4, #2: January 1997: "Pastoral Care for Persons with Mental Illness," by Joseph Rogers and Lee Junker,

Volume 5, #1: September 1997: "Helping Friends Seek Professional Help," by Barbara T. Snipes.

Volume 5, #2: January 1998: "Depression: The Invisible Problem," by Nancy L. Bieber.

Volume 11, #3: March 2004: "Pastoral Care That Is Both Loving and Firm," by Patricia McBee.

Back issues are available for purchase from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting; see box on page 6 for ordering information. Most of these articles also appear in *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting*, the 2002 collection edited by Patricia McBee and published by Quaker Press of Friends General Conference.—*Ed.*

Additional Resources

Friends Consultation on Eldering is a collection of papers from a gathering held at Earlham School of Religion in 1982. Available for borrowing (in person or through the mail) from the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library (215-241-7219 or <http://www.pym.org/pm/lib.php>).

Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings is available on the Internet (<http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/0200.html>) or by contacting Friends General Conference (215-561-1700).

The Web site of the Traveling Ministries Program of Friends General Conference gives information about that program, as well as a variety of readings on related topics: <http://www.fgcquaker.org/traveling/>

Pastoral Care Newsletter Seeks New Editor

Jessica Bucciarelli, who has ably edited *Pastoral Care Newsletter* for the past year, is laying down her freelance publications business in favor of a full-time job. We are happy for her in her new position and are very sad to lose her as the editor of *PCN*. We ask you, the readers of *PCN*, to assist us in finding just the right person to continue this work by making this opening known to Friends who might be good candidates for the position.

The editor will be a Friend (not necessarily in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting), experienced in the Quaker work of pastoral care, with editing and layout skills and the ability to work with novice writers. He/she needs to be organized, attentive to details, and mindful of deadlines and due dates.

The work is part-time, 25 hours per issue for four issues per year. The editor can work from home, must have access to computer, and must be able to work via e-mail and phone.

It is very helpful if the editor has a broad understanding of unprogrammed Friends beyond her/his own meeting, and wide acquaintance with Friends around North America to facilitate identifying topics and writers for *PCN*.

Please send resume and editing samples to:

Search Committee, *PCN*
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
1515 Cherry St.
Philadelphia, PA 19102

or to steveg@pym.org

Applications desired by August 1. Job description available on request.

One Meeting's Experience/One Experience of Disruption: Individual Witness Presented as Corporate Witness

A potential query to consider as you read about this meeting's experience: If this article discussed your meeting's encounters with disruption and opening, what story would it tell?—Ed.

In our attempt to bring seekers into our fellowship, we have sometimes failed to adequately help them understand the ambience of a Quaker community. One Friend (I'll call him Sam), recently accepted into membership, felt moved to act on his deeply-held social convictions by undertaking the production of videos to be shown on public access television.

In his first video Sam interviewed three individuals, part of a group which has been holding a weekly vigil in front of one local synagogue for more than a year. Two of those interviewed are Jewish, and the third is a member of our meeting. The goal of the vigilers is to persuade those "inside" to cease sending money to Israel—money which goes, in part, to support the military and the policies of the Israeli state.

Sam opened and closed the video with photos of our meeting room, and the show was entitled "Quaker Activist." Others in the meeting knew nothing of the video until a meeting member whose spouse is Jewish called members of our Committee on Ministry and Counsel and said, "My wife and her Jewish friends are in an uproar; they saw Sam's video on television and are saying: 'We didn't know the Quakers were anti-Semitic!'" Soon we were hearing similar comments from local rabbis and other members of the Jewish community.

Some Friends in our meeting share the sentiments of the vigilers, and we have a very active Palestine/Israel

Action Group which is focused on ending the occupation, dismantling the wall, and promoting peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Yet we have not, as a meeting, approved a statement of support for the vigil. As clerk, I felt we needed to prevent further distress among our Jewish friends and disruption to our long process of dialogue with them. The tape was due to be shown again and, even before consulting with a committee, I asked Sam to excise the photos of our meetinghouse and to change his title from "Quaker Activist" to some other kind of activist. I also wrote letters of explanation to the three rabbis in town, and shared them with our ministry and counsel committee.

Sam was irate that I, and others in the meeting, should try to intervene with his production, but he eventually changed the video series so it was no longer highlighting his Quaker connections. He continued to feel angry, however, about who defines what a Quaker does or doesn't do in the name of Quakerism.

Sam wrote a set of queries for ministry and counsel, and we agreed to hold a special committee meeting to listen to his concerns and reach a point of understanding. Sam felt we had been far too censorious, and we felt he had not consulted and gained the approval of the meeting to represent Friends on a delicate issue. The main theme of the gathering, however, was on ways to hear one another more clearly and act more lovingly. A useful dialogue about tenderness toward one another and communal action is continuing, both in the committee and individually with Sam.

—Nancy Taylor, *Ann Arbor Meeting, in consultation with Sam and members of the Ministry & Counsel Committee.*

Reminder: It's time to renew your subscription to Pastoral Care Newsletter

Volume 13 begins with the September 2005 issue. Many meetings purchase multiple subscriptions so that copies are available for the meeting library and each member of the pastoral care committee. If you have questions or need an extra copy of your renewal form, contact Steve Gulick at the phone number or e-mail address below.

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Concerns Group on Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members. Annette Benert, clerk. Editorial Committee: Susan Heath, clerk, Suzanne Day, Patricia McBee, Carolyn Terrell. Editor: Jessica Bucciarelli. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick at 215-241-7068 or steveg@pym.org.