

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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From Burden to Joy: Sharing the Work of the Meeting

by Kate deRiel and Judy Owens

'The Society of Friends is not a 'do-it-yourself' religion; it is a 'do-it-ourselves' religion.'

This statement points to one of the underlying concepts of our faith: sharing the work of our meeting among ourselves instead of employing clergy reflects our belief that Divine Light shines in each of us. Completing tasks together is an integral part of how we build and reflect our covenant communities. Many members of our meetings recall that they "finally" felt a part of the meeting when they had a job to do or joined a committee.

In contemporary Quaker communities, some are finding fewer hands to share the work. Recruiting a meeting clerk can become a monumental task; scheduling a mutual meeting time for committee members often seems onerous; a few Friends often feel over-burdened and under-appreciated.

We all may have voiced these concerns ourselves or have overheard others speaking more about burdens than satisfactions. Yet often we see others filled with excitement and joy as they make plans for an activity or committee meeting.

What makes the difference in attitude and emotion? What contributes to Friends feeling a sense of creativity and potential in their work for their meeting community? And how can we enable all to see their work as Spirit-led?

We, the authors, work with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Center for Deepening and Strengthening Our Meetings (Center). Our goal is to help monthly meetings assess needs and create goals as they strive to

fulfill the spiritual needs of members and attenders.

Early in the process, we ask each person in the community to respond to an extensive questionnaire designed to elicit perceptions about the meeting. Some items get at the question of how the work of the meeting gets done. This has generated many positive responses such as:

"There is a spirit of joy, rather than a sense of burden, as members carry out the work of the meeting in its many different forms."

"There is a balanced sharing of the work of the meeting among all its members, according to the life circumstances of each person."

In contrast, the discussions that follow our assessment phase sometimes reveal a depth of anger, frustration, and disillusionment with the process of "sharing the work." Yet, meetings' efforts also have produced many spirit-led, creative solutions. This article is an effort to share our findings in the hopes of offering support to other monthly meetings struggling to find answers to this dilemma.

Where Did All This Work Come From?

Many meetings find comfort in knowing that they are not alone. In small and large, urban, suburban, and rural monthly meetings, Friends can feel overwhelmed and exhausted in the face of keeping a meeting running: religious education, spiritual nurture, member care, property upkeep, the library, community outreach, newsletter, social concerns, nominating process, children's needs and hospitality—we have so

much to do! How did being a Quaker get to be such a lot of work? Obviously, we do not have clergy to do the visiting, the problem solving, the mundane tasks, the fund-raising that need to be done by most Quaker meetings. We do it ourselves.

And then there are the many activities we feel we need to undertake to solve the immense problems around the world and in our own urban and rural communities. But Friends might want to consider these questions:

How many committees do we really need in our meeting?

How much of the work should we undertake ourselves and how much could the Quarters take on instead, sharing the work among many?

Do we have more meetings and committees than we need or have people for?

What is our meeting's response to these questions: What is essential for who we are and who we want to be as a meeting? Can we let the rest go?

Where Have the Willing Hands Gone?

Part of the problem is that society has changed over time. Many families have two parents working outside the home. Their evenings and weekends are spent caring for children, meals, chores, errands, and hopefully catching up on some needed rest and relaxation.

Older Friends may be limited in mobility and energy. Many Friends don't live near to where they attend meeting. And perhaps most importantly, our culture puts less emphasis on faith communities as central aspects in our lives.

Meeting for Worship, First Day School, committee participation and other meeting events compete with job duties, children's activities, and many other important, distracting obligations. Many other groups besides "church" are meeting social needs.

The Center has found that many present-day Friends joined the Society as adults. They may have experienced a faith community that included a minister, priest, or rabbi, or they may never have belonged to a church or synagogue. Newer Friends may take a while to learn that satisfaction in a monthly meeting usually means active committee participation.

What Newcomers Need to Know

An important finding of the Center is that we need to be very explicit about the importance of active participation in the meeting as we welcome newcomers into our communities. Many Friends, when asked to name their most satisfying experiences, speak of their sense of community. They find a sense of the Spirit while participating in a potluck, peace vigil or clean-up. That these "jobs" can bring joy and refreshment rather than burden may not be clear to seekers who already have too much to do.

The deep significance of active participation brings us to the most important finding of the Center. As monthly meetings get more in touch with Friends' longing for a deepening of their spiritual life, a transformative shift begins to occur. Priorities change. Energy and moods lift. Work becomes joyful. Not all at once and not in all cases, but many times meetings report a sense of Spirit-led excitement that lifts the work of the meeting out of drudgery and into a place of deep satisfaction.

"Well, that's just fine," you might be saying. "I'll just hang tight until my meeting is transformed." Luckily, we have encountered many ideas that meetings can utilize while they are in the process of transformation.

Some Practical Experiments

For some meetings, a "*Sabbath Year*" has clarified what work is truly essential. During this year, all but the most pressing work and committees are laid down. The focus becomes members' spiritual lives. Actions and causes that emerge as necessary to the well being of the meeting are evaluated and picked up at the end of the year.

Filling the most labor-intensive positions, such as clerk of meeting, is an ordeal in many meetings. At Lake Erie Yearly Meeting a rotating system that builds in mentorship has been a helpful solution. Shirley Bechill, current clerk at LEYM, comments that she has benefited from this practice. In year one, a person serves as assistant clerk. In year two, he or she clerks the meeting with the previous clerk as assistant. In year three, he or she clerks again, with a new assistant clerk, and in year four, our subject serves as assistant

to a new clerk. A similar method of incorporating mentors can be an important way to support other labor-intensive positions such as newsletter editor, religious education coordinator, or clerks of busy committees.

One meeting we are currently working with has looked long and hard at the need for more support for its overworked clerks. Meeting members as a whole are asked to hold the clerk of the meeting in the Light, especially as a meeting for worship for business approaches.

A member of the Worship and Care Committee has offered to be the clerk's particular *support person* and is available for spiritual nurture as well as for practical help to prioritize issues or set an agenda. Requests periodically come from other clerks and committees within the meeting for supportive prayer as well.

Support for members may also come from *regular check-ins* from Care Committees or Nominating Committees. Contact is made once or twice a year to see how those serving the meeting are getting along in their roles. Active members and office holders know they are appreciated and information is fed back about what abilities each job entails. Such calls also identify people who need to be relieved from some duties, either short-term or long-term, and perhaps find alternates who would be pleased to step in.

Younger members may have been overlooked, or two people may choose to share a role. In some cases, check-ins may reveal that a favorite project may no longer be possible because of dwindling membership or interest.

Creating term limits may seem obvious to meetings already practicing this discipline. For meetings yet to consider this idea, limiting each person's participation on a committee to one or two three-year terms can be a way of making the acceptance of a job more reasonable; taking on a job doesn't mean a "life sentence."

Committee members are generally organized into panels to ensure the presence of experienced hands as well as newcomers. Getting organized in this way may be useful to meetings in the throes of growing from a smaller to a mid-size community.

Creating Enthusiasm

Many meetings have become creative about

developing interest and enthusiasm for the work of the meeting. A "Gifts Walk" begins with clerks describing the committees' functions and the qualities needed. One-time projects may also be included. The descriptions are posted on the walls of the meeting room so participants can walk around and read them. As someone feels their interest and skills match a committee's needs, they sign the sheet. If someone doesn't find a match, they may also list their gifts on a separate page. Nominating committee members will take the information under consideration.

Scheduling an *annual discussion* of the roles and work of committees, perhaps at meeting for worship for business, also keeps the needs of the meeting before the membership. Special projects and functions may be included, such as the annual bazaar, a fundraiser or community outreach effort, the newsletter editor, or the representatives to the wider Quaker world. This discussion also can provide an opportunity to express gratitude to those who serve the meeting.

We know the importance of active participation: it brings transformation for each meeting. As our Quaker communities become more aware of Friends' longing for a deepening of their spiritual life and as they strive to become communities of faith primarily, the practical work can be seen as inclusive and joyful and satisfying.

Each individual can come to feel useful and needed. In addition, he or she can observe a personal transformation over time as new talents and strengths emerge while doing meeting work. While the ideas in this article may not perfectly fit your meeting's situation, we hope they may be inspirations for you to come up with your own solutions to the modern-day dilemma of "too much to do," and to move your meeting through a Spirit-led transformation from burden to joy.

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Kate deRiel (right) is an elementary school teacher. She is happy to find herself on numerous committees of the Haverford Monthly Meeting, Haverford, PA, where she and her family are members. Judy Owens (left) is a long-time member of Haddonfield Monthly Meeting, Haddonfield, NJ, and a marriage and family therapist. Both Kate and Judy are facilitators with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Center for Deepening and Strengthening our Meetings.

Two Meetings' Experiences

Harrisburg MM Works to Create a Spirit-led System

When Harrisburg Monthly Meeting's nominating committee geared up to "fill in the slots" for our two-year cycle in early 2005, we paused to examine the number of "active" Friends and attenders vis-à-vis the number of slots to fill. We have over 200 names on our mailing list, but on any given First Day we have attendance between 30 and 40 and have, perhaps 80 "active" members and attenders.

Data do not lie. The truth is we had 14 standing or ad hoc committees and at least ten other positions called "director of ___" or "liaison to ___". Most committees had four to six named members. You can do the math.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does sharing work within our meeting transform us?
2. How can our meeting show that projects are not just a committee's responsibility, but are a way to build community?
3. What needs to change within our meeting to enable members to participate more fully and joyfully?
4. What work is our meeting most proud of and why?
5. What does the meeting do to discern members' hidden talents and interests?
6. How does our meeting thoughtfully use qualities and skills of our members?
7. How do newcomers to our meeting learn about the need for and the joys of active participation?
8. How can our meeting show that when tasks are Spirit-led both the task itself and the community benefit?
9. Has our meeting looked at our list of committees and tasks and thoughtfully considered which might be put down?
10. Would our meeting have the courage to consider a "Sabbath Year?"

We had many more slots to fill than we had active Friends. Needless to say many Friends were named to serve on more than one committee. Some committees operated in name only, and rarely met. Some business was done over the phone between two Friends. It was not unusual for only two or three to attend any given committee meeting. At least once, the clerk of the committee was the only one to attend!

Our meeting asked us (1) to consider a new structure, (2) to bring back a recommendation for a new way to fill the slots, and (3) to develop a mission statement that would guide us. We embarked on a very Spirit-led and Spirit-fed process and eventually came to unity on a new structure and much more. The meeting first approved "Rooted in Faithfulness and Living into Integrity" as the mission statement.

We devised a survey instrument and called those 80 "active" folks. What we discovered, among many other things, was how many people did not like serving on a typical committee. Why? We had a variety of answers, such as: "No time." "Waste of time." "Dislike group decision-making process." "Lack of clerking skills by (one or two) clerks of committees."

We agreed to have five Standing Committees, following the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting structure. They are: (1) Worship and Spiritual Growth (2) Stewardship (3) Connecting to the Wider World (4) Caring for Each Other, and (5) Communications.

Meeting agreed to approve only co-clerks for the five committees and *not* to name any one else to any committee. To use a decidedly un-Quaker-like analogy, we adopted an "All Volunteer Army" mantra. Anyone could volunteer to help a committee or a working group with its work. As we reviewed all of the functions of our meeting community, we were faithful to identify every task and tradition, and include each function under the oversight of one of the standing committees.

Rather than the time-honored process of discerning and naming clerks and officers, we asked everyone to tell us what leadership position(s) they had a leading to fill. If no one volunteered, we used the Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting's process to help us discern whom we might ask to serve.

Strawberry Creek MM uses a four-step process.

(1) Out of silent worship each member names one Friend to serve as a clerk or officer. (2) Someone records those names and reads them out loud and then Friends return to the silence, *without any conversation about whether the Friends named have the skill sets, the time or the interest.* (3) Friends call out one of the named persons from the first round, and inevitably some names from the first round disappear. (4) The remaining names are then discussed until Friends unite on one name.

We had to use the Strawberry Creek process only twice, since well-qualified Friends were not shy in naming their leadings and expressing a desire to fill a leadership position

We were still haunted by the issue of how do we accomplish "everything" we have traditionally accomplished under the new structure? We "solved" that conundrum by deciding if something were worth doing someone would be led to do it. *If no one volunteered, then presumably a "traditional event" was no longer worth doing.*

One such function where this played out every month was our traditional second Sunday potluck

luncheon. A few Friends suggested that we should assign each of the five standing committees two months out of the year, to insure the luncheon would not get laid down by default. But we did not. Some months our volunteer(s) for a potluck working group did not surface until a week before the second Sunday. But, we never missed a month and we had many Friends involved in organizing and serving the meal, regardless of whether they were on a committee or not.

Was it a perfect structure and process? No. But it was successful enough that the structure was approved again for 2007 – 2009. Friends urged the nominating committee to strike a better balance between relying entirely on volunteers and the tradition of discerning and naming/asking Friends to serve. We are doing so, using an improved survey instrument and making phone calls again as we continue our new Spirit-led and Spirit-fed process.

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Westtown MM Senses a Leading to Begin Anew

We needed not just to begin again; we needed to begin anew.

The Westtown Meeting that most of us had joined years or decades ago was a vibrant, well-led community committed to the Quaker faith and practices. But in 2006, we found the numbers of active, weight-bearing members dwindling, our inherited committee structure weighing more heavily than we needed, and our First Day School classes being taught by only a few. We found fewer people coming to the business meetings, and those who came either taking on too many tasks or feeling guilty about saying no.

We also knew, however, that we still had a large membership of much beloved, less active members who cared deeply for our meeting and who dependably helped when asked, though they did not or could not carry regular responsibilities here.

We were delighted that several families of attenders had begun bringing their children weekly, adding them to a now growing First Day School. And, in February, as we focused on defining our essential work, needs and blessings as a meeting, we knew that the many small jobs in a meeting's life were all-powerful forms of ministry.

If a core fifth of meeting members carried the rest,

then we would work to support that core rather than to enlarge it. We needed to reorient our way of working. Our calling required three standing committees: Pastoral Care and Concerns, Worship and Ministry, and Peace and Social Justice. *All* members, active and inactive, would join one of these three; all other committees would be laid down.

Monthly business meetings would wrestle with more issues directly and implement action through ad hoc committees if those issues did not immediately fall within the charge of one of the standing committees.

We also needed to rebuild our First Day School on rock, so for each third of the school year, one of the three committees would plan and teach all classes, with the work of that committee inspiring the content. We would create a one-room schoolhouse, and would plan and teach in teams. And we would feel free to call occasionally on loyal but less active local members to help out.

As March led on to August and clarifications led to nuts-and-bolts planning by a small working group, we tweaked the plan. Our Nominating Committee would continue its work, and would provide workers for some

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jobs from outside the three teaching committees. And one expert First Day School teacher volunteered to provide continuity by teaching every fourth Sunday, and by communicating regularly with First Day School families in our meeting.

In July our newsletter explained the plan to the whole membership, and in August the clerk wrote a letter to all members, calling them to identify themselves with one of the three committees. In September, the new expanded Worship and Ministry Committee began its teaching, and we followed our new map throughout the year.

Our two May 2007 surveys, of First Day School parents and of members, showed that most people were happy with our first year under this new structure, but we all know that it is still a work-in-progress. We are now working to grease cogs that are creaking, and we have more evaluating to do, but we are also at this point thankful about where we have been led.

For a more detailed version of this report, go to our website: <http://www.westtownmonthlymeeting.org/>.

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Upcoming Topics in PCN

- Integrating children and families into the life of the meeting,
- nurturing the spiritual life of members,
- “coming out” to the meeting as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transexual.

To receive these articles and more, renew your subscription. Call or email today (see contact below).

Resources

Fostering Vital Friends Meetings: A Handbook for working with Quaker Meetings, by Marty Walton and Jan Greene, Quaker Press of FGC 1999.

Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings, a compilation of materials, is available online at <http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/>

Below is a sampling of relevant articles found in *Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings*:

Nominating Committee Process begun at Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting (CA) with Eleanor Warnock

The Use of Queries In One's Work by Meryl Reis Louis, New England Yearly Meeting.

Strengthening Our Meetings as Caring Communities by Arlene Kelly, article first appeared Friends Journal October 1, 1984.

Our Long Night of Preparation: Leadership Among Unprogrammed Friends in North America by Anne Thomas, Canadian Yearly Meeting, 1991.

Plan of Organization, Moorestown Monthly Meeting, download from website: www.moorestownfriendsmeeting.org or www.moorestownquakers.org.

Editor's note: The Moorestown Meeting web site describes the above resource as follows: "The plan of organization is a living document which describes the responsibilities of the individuals and groups charged with making Moorestown Monthly Meeting of Friends an effective organization. It also serves as a guide for the committees and the Nominating Committee as size, length of terms, reporting procedures, current meeting times, etc. are included."

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