

Responses from the Jewels of Quakerism Internet Survey

7-20-09 to 7-24-09

How would you describe the Meeting for Business to people who are religious but not Friends?

A collaborative effort to discern the Will of God for this group of people at this time, characterized by a focus on listening and hearing rather than speaking.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

The underlying assumption is that God, Creator of the Universe, and knower of all things has a highest plan for each of us individually and corporately, so we come to place of listening for that and doing our best to articulate/support that when it comes together.

Ideally, we lay down our own agendas and pre-conceived ideas as we tune in for the "still, small voice."

Anonymous, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM)

The idea is to have the meeting be a process of discovering what God wants. The attitude should be worshipful, and group clearness should be sought (which is somehow different than consensus). In practice this means that there is supposed to be a lot of silence, and each person is only supposed to speak once. When it is not working, people don't always observe this and things can get incredibly annoying, as seemingly trivial concerns block seemingly obvious action. When it works well, there is a sense that there is great strength in the determination of the decision.

An Anonymous Attender

I would say that instead of arguing, discussing, and voting to find a most popular outcome, meeting for business seeks the will of God (or a Spirit led outcome.) It may be different from any of the options or opinions originally brought to the meeting.

Liz, Savannah Friends Meeting

It's where we listen to determine in what direction God wants us to go. A lot of times God seems to be saying, Use the common sense that I gave you.

At other times, it's the opposite: Suspend your common sense and step forward in faith.

Anonymous, Brooklyn Meeting

It is a place of spiritual discernment around issues concerning the business of the community.

P.W. - FGC QUAKER from Madison WI

Friends believe that God cares about our corporate and individual decisions and that for many questions --- and all important questions --- that there is God's solution and there are our solutions. The structures of Meeting for Business --- silence, consensus, "sense of the Meeting" --- are all instruments for a Meeting to move towards God's solution both corporately and individually. Ideally, and I would argue typically (but miraculously!), Friends enter Meeting for Business with an understanding that their answers or understandings are imperfect and that Meeting for Business is an opportunity to listen for the perfect Will of God.

Ken Haase, Beacon Hill Meeting, NEYM

The Meeting for Business is a complex spiritual discipline designed to teach us patience, tolerance, humour, humility, and the utter futility of trying to do anything radical, decisive, or counter-cultural within our Friends meetings, which might upset our comfort and complacency. Predicated on the notion that the leadings of Spirit can bring us to unity, most Meetings for Business have not faced real world problems with real world consequences for years. In Pacific Yearly Meeting, where much of annual sessions is taken up with trying to find the 'sense of the meeting' on various topics, the simple question of where to have next year's sessions is decided in the relatively small Site Committee, and their recommendation is "Accepted" rather than "Approved" by the larger meeting because as soon as our process has to decide whether or not folks will have their own bathroom connected to their room, or if they will have to walk down the hall to a shared bathroom, it all falls apart. Must eat vegetarian? Puh-LEASE!!! Meeting for Business is a good idea, and it ought to be tried some time.

Carl Magruder, Pacific Yearly Meeting

At its best, collective prayer for Divine guidance, sometimes blessed with sudden clarification and unity. Can fall away from the ideal when Friends enter with closed hearts.

Anonymous, Cambridge Meeting

As non-programmed Friends, we do not have a professional who ministers to the meeting, and so we all become ministers. We minister to each other, and we minister to the meeting. We take responsibility for handling the regular business of running an organization, as well as doing witness work, together. The basis of Quakerism, for me, is the search for spiritual union. We seek to handle business from a place of awareness, respect and union.

Donna Beckwith - Perry City Friends

MFB, A place where Friends come together and listen to one another. A place of worship where we seek an inner united calling, which empowers us to move forward on issues and concerns under Divine Guidance.

Anonymous, New Bedford Monthly Meeting

Meeting for Worship for Business is a time when Friends, together with God, do the business of the monthly meeting or Friends Church. When Friends need to make a decision they come together with God's help to unity. This unity is a spirit-led togetherness, not consensus which is more secular.

In all honesty, I think we sometimes forget the God part, but do believe that God is with us and will help us if we only ask.

Nancy McLauchlan, Bridge City Meeting, North Pacific Yearly Meeting

Friends aspire to spend the time to come to a sense of the meeting about an issue; a point of aaahhh yesssss that is shared. I believe this is sometimes described as gathered. It avoids a battle over details and intentions later, which voting does not.

Unfortunately, in practice Friends can feel pressed for time and the agenda gets to be long and putting things off til next time only feeds a sense of taking forever to come to a decision which drives a lot of folks nuts when they think an issue is urgent.

Which can lead to a sort of qualified unity that assumes I can buy into it as long as I don't have to act on the decision personally.

Which can lead to a hollow declaration that ultimately doesn't get acted on except for a few passionate individuals who get fried for lack of support from the community.

Which is all to say that the original aspiration is really the way to go.

Anonymous

Meeting for business is similar to the secular consensus process, except that in meeting for business, the gathered people attempt to unite in the awareness of the presence of the Divine, and to discern the Divine will in any given matter. Participants listen deeply to each spoken message, and enough silence is observed between messages for the message to sink in and be truly heard.

Gail Eastwood, Southern Humboldt Worship Group

What are spiritual practices? What are some that Friends use?

Spiritual practices are regular activities that an individual or group undertakes because they are good in themselves and because they contribute to the individual's growth in communion with God. Corporate, written responses to Queries corporately, and regular lectio divina or examen, are examples of practices commonly used by Friends in North Carolina Conservative.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

A regular devotional practice during the week--between meetings--is helpful for me, and common in my branch of Friends. This may be corporate or individual.

A popular devotional series I find in many meetings is reading something like "the Upper Room." (www.upperroom.org/devotional) This has scripture, thoughtful text, and prayer suggestions.

I think the purpose is to get to know giantic God better through scripture, prayer, and the stories of others. For me, it makes me more grounded as I trudge through the day, striving to uncover the Light in myself and in others.

I also am very interested in fasting right now, which I know some Friends do.

Anonymous, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM)

Practices that maintain a sense that there is more than just the material world and immediate time. Going slow and having silence. Being patient.

An Anonymous Attender

Spiritual practices are anything that allows a person to be in touch with that which is eternal. Friends use silence, but not just being quiet. Calming your body and your mind allows a greater awareness of the spiritual. [other Friends use LOTS of other things as spiritual practices. I hope they answer the question, too.]

Liz, Savannah Friends Meeting

Gym workouts for your soul muscles.

Reading the Bible or other inspirational books. Meditating alone. Periods of prayer or seeking to pray without ceasing.

Anonymous, Brooklyn Meeting

Some friends use vocal prayer, others use silent worship (Meditation or some other form). The goal of spiritual practices are to gain insight and/or a sense of spiritual grounding.

P.W. - FGC QUAKER from Madison WI

Spiritual practices are ways of bringing our whole selves -- head, heart, body, spirit --- closer to a God which is both beyond and within all these things. Spiritual practices involve letting go of ego and circumstance together with expectant waiting for spiritual surprise. The "letting go" piece can take many forms and Friends draw on a range of traditions --- silence, meditation, sacred reading, poetry, music, art, chants -- but generally recognize that the "letting go" is not an end in itself but an opportunity for the Spirit to settle and surprise.

Ken Haase, Beacon Hill Meeting, NEYM

All kinds of stuff can be a spiritual practice. There is much to be said for discipline, however, the root of discipleship. To discipline oneself to carry through with a spiritual practice even if it is not cool, fun or convenient all the time can yield serious results.

One good spiritual practice is that of daily sabbath. Quakers have eschewed the Sabbath practice as one day out of the week on the grounds that all times and places are holy. (Based on the theology that the Second Coming as come, and is in-breaking in the world in all times and places since the crucifixion.) But the Sabbath is about down time, connection, appreciation of gifts, forgiveness of debts, reconciliation of conflict, allowing the Earth to rest, etc. How might we live in a Sabbath way at all times, even during "work"?

Orthodox Jews are enjoined to have 'marital relations' on the Sabbath. This might be a good start to a daily practice of Sabbath. Do we experience sexual expression as a sacrament, as communion? Do we do so on a regular basis, perhaps twice daily, as a spiritual discipline, whether it is cool, fun, convenient, or not? How might we order our lives around this practice, and encourage others to do likewise?

Carl Magruder, Pacific Yearly Meeting

Discernment, including in Meeting for Business, is certainly one -- waiting for, trusting in the presence of Spirit, the availability of real help. Patience when the answer doesn't come right away. Recourse to collective prayer and seeking, when individual clarity is needed and seems unavailable. Acceptance of guidance when it is clear, even if it leads in a direction that the worldly mind would not indicate. Silencing of inner chatter in all of these -- that's really hard! and cannot be achieved by straining.

Anonymous, Cambridge Meeting

Spiritual practices are the techniques we use to seek, find and abide in the Spirit. I was raised as a Catholic, and reciting the rosary was a spiritual practice. As a Friend, regular attendance at worship is a primary practice. Reading spiritual works, then spending time considering what I have read is another practice. A deep practice for me is to be silent in the forest, especially if I am in contact with the Earth.

Donna Beckwith - Perry City Friends

Activity that I use to deepen relationship with God. One support I use is a Night Office written for Quakers

Anonymous, New Bedford Monthly Meeting

Spiritual practices are actions to bring one closer to God.

Friends pray, meditate, read, walk, hike, run, bicycle, sit with cat on lap as I am now.

Life can be a spiritual practice if one focuses on life with God. (Personally not successful at this but I do know some Friends who are much closer.)

Nancy McLaughlan, Bridge City Meeting, North Pacific Yearly Meeting

Queries are one of the greatest Quaker gifts to humanity.

Posing a query lifts something out of a knee-jerk, pro/con reaction and holds it in a Light that can probe assumptions, look at different points of view, and measure against stated values.

Unfortunately, in practice, Friends can either raise a query as a gentle-seeming means of asserting an agenda/dissent/over-my-dead-body opposition, or accuse each other of doing the same. It can seem like a non-violent battle using queries as weapons.

Answering such queries in honesty and humility can diffuse hostility, shed Light, and raise different queries.

The best query I ever heard is: "what is the question that you hope does not get asked?"

Anonymous

The most important practice is "worship"--to rest in the awareness of the Divine within and around us. We are enjoined to live our lives in a simplicity that allows daily time for this practice.

Gail Eastwood, Southern Humboldt Worship Group

What does it mean to discern something? To reach clearness / become clear?

To discern something is to understand the Reality of some part of Creation more nearly as it is in God's understanding. To reach clearness is to discern how God is leading us to act in response to our discernment. The Way opens, or becomes clear, when in God's kairos the time has come to act.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

I think discerning means to align one's path with God's, as best as we can know that.

When I have arrived at clarity, I feel as though I have arrived at a decision that is firm and clear, but also very spacious and open. I feel God to be very present and the possibilities of how I will continue to be guided are boundless, but a sure path, narrow or wide, has emerged.

Anonymous, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM)

To develop a deep felt sense that every aspect of a question has been properly considered and the best course of action has been determined. I personally feel it more than think it, when I am clear on something. When I have clerked a committee or group, I feel it when no one is tense, and everyone has spoken and reached consensus. Sometimes clearness is a committee takes longer than one might imagine -- if it seems there is consensus but some people's verbal or body language still is tense, then there is not clearness.

An Anonymous Attender

to discern is to invite the spiritual into the decision making. To reach clearness/become clear. hmmm. (maybe you will share some of the other answers?)

Liz, Savannah Friends Meeting

It's knowing something in your soul, not your mind.

Anonymous, Brooklyn Meeting

Clearness or discernment is the state of being spiritually at peace with a matter or an idea.

P.W. - FGC QUAKER from Madison WI

Discern for me, is reaching an understanding. Clearness is knowing what I am to do with my understanding as it touches and impacts my life.

Anonymous, New Bedford Monthly Meeting

Discernment is the understanding of God's will (or the "greater logic" if you prefer impersonality in your divinity) through the sharing and refinement of human perspectives. As in Meeting for Business, there is a belief that there is a solution or path beyond our current understanding and discernment is the process of reaching or approaching that path or solution by questioning and listening and spiritual practice.

Ken Haase, Beacon Hill Meeting, NEYM

Discernment means "dividing" or sorting. In the iconography of the masculine, the archetype of the King carries a sword. The shadow King, a despot, wields the sword as an instrument of violence, but the good King wields the sword as a tool for dividing the beneficial from the harmful; an instrument of discerning.

I would like to put forward a word on "God's Time." Friends accept that clearness may take a while, that it may happen in God's time, kairos, rather than our time, chronos. We usually mean that God's time, like geological time, moves very slowly, on a grand, godlike scale. But I would like to propose that sometimes God's time is like a lightning bolt. Jesus said to Simon (later Peter) and his brother Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Scripture says "IMMEDIATELY they left their nets and followed him." (Matthew 1:20) Jesus then calls more fishermen, James and John, who leave their father Zebedee in the boat and follow. I picture the old man standing in the boat with the nets which need mending thinking "WTF?" Be on the lookout for the kairos that is Right Freakin' NOW. You don't want to miss God's call...

Carl Magruder, Pacific Yearly Meeting

To feel clearly the divine Guide, to feel a falling away of difficulties or objections, to feel relieved of opinions or prejudices. Not the same as liking a solution.

Anonymous, Cambridge Meeting

To find that quiet place within and examine the validity of...is it still true? This is a short and almost inane answer to deep questions that may not have words in the answer...if I can find that quiet, connected place within and feel the same about a leading, then I am clear. If I can communicate a leading to a trusted Friend and they understand - I am clear.

Donna Beckwith - Perry City Friends

To come to an understanding. To know what is the right thing to do or what is the right way to be. Sometimes this is easy and other times it's a hard struggle.

Clearness often takes time. There have been times when I have been impatient with myself because I couldn't decide something. I would feel that I was being wishy-washy. Then when the clearness came, I would realize that the time hadn't been right until that moment. So, I think clearness can have a time factor to it.

Nancy McLauchlan, Bridge City Meeting, North Pacific Yearly Meeting

Standing still in the Light implies getting probed from all directions and revealing otherwise unseen motives, assumptions, consequences, and connections to everything else one stands for. In that Light it gets clear why one would do what one is proposing to do. Then what one does reveals what their greatest value is. That's testimony.

Unfortunately, clearness committees can become support committees guided by the principle of Cheat on they Wife as Long as thou Canst. Which is still clear.

Anonymous

To perceive deeply into the inner truth, to let the truth of a situation illuminate ones current position and course of action.

Gail Eastwood, Southern Humboldt Worship Group