VOTING *NOT* TO VOTE: TOWARD CONSENSUS IN THE WCC

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As Friends, we cherish our traditions of "corporate discernment" and "seeking the will of God." We know from experience that listening to God as a body of believers actually works. It draws us closer to each other, closer to God, closer to the truth, and closer to a knowledge of right action in the world.

Less notably, however, are we given to analytical thought about the theory and practice of corporate discernment. Of course, we have valuable programs at some of our Quaker institutions that try to interpret our ways for others and train them in what others might consider our "techniques," yet most Friends Meetings do not carry out that kind of interpretation and training for their own members. Most Friends would also resist the idea that listening for God's leadings is simply about "technique." So how do Friends share their learnings about spiritual discernment with those who might be interested?

Over the last eight years, I have had the unique opportunity to accompany the World Council of Churches as it seeks to shake off the burden of "Robert's Rules of Order" and embrace a discernment-based mode of decision making. As an unofficial "expert Quaker" in the World Council of Churches house, I have been able to introduce our wisdom and experience into the WCC's process of transformation. This has given me the opportunity to put into words those things which, in most Friends Meetings, go without saying. In addition, I've also had to recognize some limitations of what we have to offer.

In March 2000, at a meeting in a monastery high above Damascus in Syria, I offered the following descriptions of Friends' decision-making "techniques" to representatives of the larger Christian community.[1] Actually, they involve spiritual disciplines and attitudinal dispositions as much as anything, but they also involve skills that can be learned, and they do make a difference.

- *Attitude toward God:* We enter into the Business Meeting with hearts and minds prepared to be led by the Holy Spirit. We renew our commitment to divine authority and our belief that the living Christ is present this day to teach and lead us. We sub-

mit to the Divine Will and seek to lay our own strong feelings and desires before God.

• *Attitude toward the other members:* Our process places a high value on the strength of the community. A Sense of the Meeting is only achieved when those participating respect and care for one another. It requires a humble and loving spirit, imputing purity of motive to all participants and offering our highest selves in return. We seek to create a safe space for sharing. We pray that we might listen carefully, respectfully, lovingly. We listen always for the presence and message of God through what someone is saying, knowing that each of us is endowed with some measure of Divine Light. The creation of the blessed community is both a necessary prerequisite and an inevitable by-product of corporate discernment. While this is most easily accomplished at the local level, where members are already known to each other, it has been our experience that, when we invite the Lord's help, deep Christian community can be formed even among strangers.

• *Attitude toward the process:* We value process over product, action, or outcome. We respect each other's thoughts, feelings, and insights more than expedient action. The process of reaching a decision yields more "results" than the decisions themselves. Attention to the divine movement in the community is, in fact, the source of decision and action, so that process and outcome are ideally two sides of the same sacramental experience. Through that experience of the Unity of the Meeting, we are prepared for faithful discipleship in the church and world. A decision which is made without that experience is of little value.

• *Attitude toward potential outcomes:* We know that none of us is likely to enter the Meeting with a fully-formed understanding of the will of God, and so we expect that a new way will emerge which is not necessarily identified with the position of any person or faction. According to George Selleck, "A group, meeting in the right spirit, may be given greater insight than any single person."[2] Further, as Janet Scott says,

> A gathered meeting under the authority of God is often able to find unity in creative ways which were not considered before the meeting but which become apparent during its course. Though the process of Quaker business may take some time, at the end it can find a united

meeting able to act swiftly because the action has been widely agreed.[3]

• *Commitment to the authority of the meeting:* All authority rests in God. Once the Meeting has discerned God's will as best it can at that moment in time, the decision of the Meeting is vested with a measure of Divine authority. Decisions are not "revisited" by staff, clerks, or committees. Those who were not present accept the decision of the Meeting. This is not to say that the Meeting's decisions have ultimate authority, since our discernment is never free of human imperfection. The Meeting itself can always revisit decisions, and new light may be found.

• *Role of human leadership:* The Meeting is served by a Presiding Clerk, and often also a Recording Clerk. Friends are appointed for a limited time, and these roles are widely shared among the membership. The Clerks have no formal authority of their own and cannot speak for the Meeting. Their task is to focus and enable the discernment of the Meeting by laying business before it in an orderly way, managing the pace and discipline of the discussion, listening for the Sense of the Meeting to emerge, restating that Sense in clear language and asking for approval, and recording the business in written minutes. The Clerks develop the agenda and discern whether an issue is ripe for consideration by the Meeting or needs further seasoning by a committee. The Clerks are responsible for judging the "weight" of each comment by discerning the movement of the Spirit in the Meeting, rather than developing a tally of opinions, pro and con. The Clerks are servants of the Meeting and not participants in the discussion. On rare occasion, when a Clerk finds that he or she must speak to an item of business, a replacement Clerk must be found until that item is concluded. Thus we avoid the temptation to assign any authority to human figures which would obscure our utter dependence on the authority of God.

• *Role of written minutes:* The Clerk makes sure the Meeting understands what is being approved by stating it in clear language which is written down, read back, discussed and approved by the Meeting at the time the decision is made. The minutes, once approved, become authoritative. They are kept and referred to indefinitely. Thus minutes and minute-taking are crucial to the process, and are seen as a weighty spiritual practice rather than secretarial function.

• *Personal conduct:* We usually only speak once to each item. We only speak when recognized by the Clerk. We don't plan messages ahead of time, but listen instead to the movement of the Spirit and pray for guidance as to whether we are being led to speak. We fully expect that our message may not be needed, as God may have empowered another individual to offer the same insight. We do not offer redundant messages, since the Sense of the Meeting is not discerned by a tally of opinions. We pray continuously for the Meeting and its Clerks. Friends often find the Meeting for Business to be a purgative, humbling and awe-inspiring experience as we let go of our own self and personal agenda. Although the Meeting is a solemn event, humor is sometimes appropriate and helpful. We refrain from comments which suggest argument, debate or an attempt to convince, and rather give testimony to our experience of the leading of the Spirit in this matter. We listen thoughtfully and respectfully, observing a pause between messages for deeper listening. Each person present has a responsibility to participate and not hold back if they are led to speak. Every member of the church has the responsibility to attend the Business Meeting to the extent they are able.

• *On dissent:* "If an individual differs from what appears to be the general sense of the Meeting, it may be taken as a sign that the Divine will has not quite been grasped."[4] The Meeting should be especially sensitive to sincere expressions of difference from the growing Unity. These may indicate that the Meeting has not truly listened to God's prompting among us. When a Friend feels he or she must "stand in the way" of Unity, the Meeting and the Friend will patiently labor together in hopes of coming to a truer understanding of God's will. However, individuals do not hold a power of veto, and should be ready to recognize the validity of corporate leadings and to submit to them if conscience allows, being recorded in the minutes as "standing aside." While we boldly profess a spirituality of unmediated relationship with the Divine, we are always mindful of how the human person is, in fact, already a mediating force. Our own past experiences, our fears, our sin, and the influence of our cultural context, can all obscure our discernment of God's will. The presence of dissent and discord in the Meeting is therefore always an occasion for prayer, repentance and conversion by the whole Meeting.

• *On time:* Quaker decision making takes time. We can not allow ourselves to be hurried. A sense of urgency or pressure can quickly erode a process of deep seeking. We don't impose a deadline for making any decision. If Unity is not reached in one Meeting, the matter is laid over.

• *On not finding the Sense of the Meeting:* We take no action until there is Unity on taking action. Thus the Quaker process is essentially a conservative process in that respect. Things stay the same until we are in Unity on changing them.

Friends would not claim to have perfected this process, or that we always practice it with complete faithfulness. What I've described in this paper is Quaker process in its ideal form. Most Friends are painfully aware of how our human nature falls short of the spiritual ideal, and of how fragile our process can seem. Corporate discernment of the will of God is a risky and imperfect proposition. In relying so extensively on the Holy Spirit, we make ourselves vulnerable to pitfalls and failures. However, far from being a weakness, such vulnerability is central to our understanding of the power of worship (and business) "in spirit and in truth." To fall into the hands of the living God requires leaping, laying ourselves open to risk. Our commitment to this process, and our assurance of its outcomes, can only be proven in the eschaton, but still we give testimony to the truth we have been given, and are able to say that we have tested this method and found it that it does indeed bring us into Unity with the will of God.

Even as I delivered my paper, I could feel that it was not being well received. It was too mystical, not practical enough. How could anyone expect a massively diverse fellowship such as the WCC to embrace such a practice? My message boiled down to "trust me, it works." Of course, the myriad of schisms within Friends do little to inspire that trust. As beautiful as I thought my paper was, I knew that it had not been very useful at that point in the process.

I came to appreciate that there were other, more helpful, sources upon which the WCC could draw. In particular, the Uniting Church in Australia had made the change from majority rule to consensus decision making, and had developed an extensive how-to manual. Whereas Friends were offering a spirituality of discernment, the Australians had the mechanics all worked out.

Yet spirituality and practice are never divorced from each other, just as faith and works go hand in hand. The core problems that had driven the WCC to seek alternative modes of decision making were a sense of

polarization, winners/losers, and the perpetual disenfranchisement of certain voices. These are problems of ethos and of spirituality. They would only find their solution if our new techniques and mechanics allowed for the emergence of a new spirituality. Whereas I had attempted to offer a spiritual perspective, from which new practices might be derived, I came to understand that the WCC needed new practices, from which new spiritualities might be discovered.

After three years of intensive work, the Special Commission on which I sat presented its final report, and in September 2002 the WCC officially voted to cease voting. The implementation of this decision has taken several more years, with tireless work by a group of ecclesiastical lawyers engaged in writing new "Rules of Debate" for the WCC;[2] not at all how Friends would have gone about it!

I have repeatedly been "eldered" by Quakers because the new WCC consensus process is not "spiritual" enough, not focused enough on discerning God's will. The development of "Consensus Rules," with their focus on definitions and mechanics, were first undertaken without any explicit reference to Scripture or God's will, although a section on the theological and biblical bases for the practice has been added. I've been reminded that Friends don't use the word "consensus;" that this is a secular term, and that I should correct this mistake within the WCC. Then again, if understood as a factor of spiritual discernment rather than a political process, it can work.

Setting aside the fact that these are condescending remarks, I continue to feel that these comments reflect a misunderstanding about the ecumenical context. By definition, those of us coming together to make decisions from among the divided churches do NOT have a common presupposition about the nature of God's revelation or the human capacity to understand God's direct will. Quaker decision-making starts from a very strong common understanding of the nature of God, and builds from there. The WCC doesn't have that common ground. If we tried to start with a common articulation of the nature of God and God's relationship with the church, we would never get to the work of describing a new ethos of decision-making. Indeed, that's the purpose of the ecumenical movement—to reach for agreement on such divisive questions, and it is proving to take many decades! Therefore, the discussion on Rules has necessarily been focused on what seems to Quakers like banal matters—a precise definition of consensus, fairness to minorities and majorities, procedures for ensuring the process does not get hijacked, who has veto power, what are the rights of dissenters, etc.

Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but I continue to believe that the process of consensus itself, regardless of the theological suppositions we each bring to it, will allow a deeper spirituality to emerge within the WCC decision-making bodies. From the mundane the sublime will emerge. I believe this, not because I believe in the WCC, but because I believe in the reality of God's Presence, and I trust that He will make Himself known.

In 2005, the Central Committee gave the new Rules a trial. This was the final meeting of the Committee before the upcoming Assembly. This Committee of 150 people, elected to their task in 1998 in Harare, had journeyed together through pain and joy and had a genuine desire to see the consensus procedures succeed. But no one knew what would happen at the Assembly in early 2006, when almost 1,000 delegates would gather in Porto Alegre Brazil, and with almost no training in consensus, be asked to make critical decisions for the life of the church.

What happened was, simply put, it worked. Consensus worked! The Assembly delegates entered the process in good faith. They listened respectfully to each other, participated in the mechanics of the process with enthusiasm, and struggled through hard issues without attempting to move to a premature decision. We discovered that the mechanisms for "recording dissent" (what Friends might call being recorded as standing aside) were an important safety valve. And the business concluded ahead of schedule, allowing us to move together into the closing worship with a profound sense of ourselves as a Gathered Meeting. Praise God, for He is indeed faithful in giving us the mind of Christ!

NOTES

1. The complete paper, "An Introduction of Quaker Business Practice," is published online at: www.edengrace.org
2. George Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986).
3. Scott, Janet "Business Meetings," *Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers)*, ed. by Margery Post Abbott et. al. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 37.
4. *Op. Cit.*, Selleck.
5. See the extensive description of biblical and practical bases for consensus decision-making on the WCC website at: http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/guidelines-for-the-conduct-of-meetings-of-the-wcc.html.