



Religious Society of Friends

This leaflet was prepared by the Conflict Resolution Group  
of Bristol Area Quakers for use by  
Friends and Meetings

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# Dealing with Conflict in our Meetings

Bristol Area Quakers  
Conflict Resolution Group

**Bristol Area Quakers**  
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# DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN OUR MEETINGS

## A LOCAL CONTRIBUTION

Frequently the underlying cause of an upset is buried in past perceived slights and hurts that have not been dealt with but which may be exacerbating a recent problem. Sometimes seemingly trivial events, that do not seem to warrant discussing, build up until there is an issue that feels intractable. It can feel shameful to admit to minor irritations. However, if not dealt with such an accumulation can have sad effects making it difficult to ever clear the air.

If this is the case speaking to members of the Conflict Resolution Group, who will listen and not judge, could assist in deciding on what to do next as part of the healing of a conflict. Such a sharing would be done in the strictest of confidentiality with, if preferred, people not necessarily from one's own Local Meeting.

Fran De'Ath 2011

## WHAT DO I DO?

If you are aware of a conflict developing in your meeting it can be helpful to alert the Elders or Overseers in your meeting at an early stage. This will be treated in confidence, but it enables Friends to be ready to respond or intervene if need arises. Clerks and/or Elders and Overseers are encouraged to alert the Area Meeting's Conflict Resolution Group in the same way.

Quakers are not immune from being hurt by or in conflict with fellow Quakers. However, it is to be hoped that we do have the resources and experience to address conflict between us lovingly and constructively. We do not always succeed.

It is sometimes very hard to be direct with one another, through embarrassment or fear of causing further hurt. If a Friend has offended me in some way it is essential that I find the courage to speak calmly with that person about my hurt, and for the Friend spoken to in this way to listen humbly and consider whether he or she may have been mistaken. Directness need not compromise the love we hold for one another but should enhance it. If you find this difficult you can ask for support from Elders, Overseers or the Conflict Resolution Group within the Area Meeting.

At a meeting of Area Meeting Elders on 22 June 2011 the following statement was agreed:

*We urge Friends to be open with one another about their concerns when conflict arises and to make use of the resources available within the Area Meeting: AM Elders and Overseers, and the Conflict Resolution Group.*

The Bristol Area Quakers' Conflict Resolution Group offers this guidance for Friends. We invite any comments.

## CONFLICT IN MEETINGS – WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

The Conflict Resolution Group was set up by Bristol & Frenchay MM in 2005 to help deal with those situations when conflict arises in our Meetings, as it does from time to time. Does this mean that it is our responsibility to sort everything out? No, we don't think so – just as eldership and oversight is not the sole responsibility of elders, in the same way conflict resolution is the responsibility of all Friends.

So we have a responsibility to reach out to the Friend we feel has hurt us; and we have a responsibility to respond to such moves. We all have a responsibility to search for a solution, without taking sides or polarising the conflict by only considering one view of the conflict. How can enmity be sustained if we truly live up to our Quaker discipline to love our enemies and look for that of God in everyone? But we are human and our reaction to circumstances can lead us to fall short of this ideal.

Friends can sometimes feel so angry and hurt that they withdraw into silence and refuse to engage. This is often what happens – people stay away for a long time, or leave the meeting altogether. Sometimes they demand an apology because they feel so wronged. It is worth remembering that it is the anger and hurt that keeps people away, not an unwillingness to engage in Quaker processes. In these circumstances, another person listening can sometimes provide a way forward, to recognise the anger and help people in conflict to listen to each other. At the same time all Friends must seek to find the strength to forgive, to set aside ill feeling and seek reconciliation. And, of course, the earlier we can do this, the better!

great deal of time and energy to listen well. It's a kind of weaving: reflecting back, asking for clarification, asking for time in turn to be listened to, being truly open to what we're hearing (even if it hurts), being open to the possibility that we might ourselves be changed by what we hear.

The third skill is the skill of *letting go*: I don't mean that in the sense of giving up, lying down and inviting people to walk all over us, but acknowledging the possibility that there may be other solutions to this conflict than the ones we've thought of yet; letting the imagination in – making room for the Spirit. We need to let go of our own will – not so as to surrender to another's, but so as to look together for God's solution. It's a question of finding ways to let go of our commitment to opposition and separation, of letting ourselves be opened to our connectedness as human beings.

If we are to do any of these things well – naming, listening, letting go – we need to have learned to trust that of God in ourselves and that of God in those trapped on all sides of the conflict with us. And to do that well, I find I need to be centred, rooted, practised in waiting on God. That rootedness is both a gift and a discipline, something we can cultivate and build on by acknowledging it every day.

Mary Lou Leavitt

### *Advices & Queries*

In addition to these and other extracts from *Quaker faith & practice*, *Advices & Queries* 1, 11, 15, 17, 18, 31 and 32 may be of particular help, "...not as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light that is pure and holy, may be guided..."

**20.70** Where any have received offence from any other, first to speak privately to the party concerned, and endeavour reconciliation between themselves; and not to whisper or aggravate matters against them behind their backs, to the making parties, and the breach wider.

1692

**20.71** Conflict happens, and will continue to happen, even in the most peaceful of worlds. And that's good – a world where we all agreed with one another would be incredibly boring. Our differences help us to learn. Through conflict handled creatively we can change and grow; and I am not sure real change – either political or personal – can happen without it. We'll each handle conflict differently and find healing and reconciliation by different paths. I want nonetheless to offer three keys, three skills or qualities which I've found helpful from my own experience.

The first skill is *naming*: being clear and honest about the problem as I see it, stating what I see and how I feel about it. What is important about these statements is that I own them: 'I see', 'I feel' (not 'surely it is obvious that ...', 'any right thinking person should...'). This ability to name what seems to be going on, is crucial to getting the conflict out into the open, where we can begin to understand and try to deal with it.

Such a skill is dangerous. It can feel – indeed, it can be – confrontational. It feels like stirring up trouble where there wasn't any problem. It needs to be done carefully, caringly, with love, in language we hope others can hear. We need to seek tactfully the best time to do it. But it needs to be done.

The second skill is the skill of *listening*: listening not just to the words, but to the feelings and needs behind the words. It takes a

As Quakers, we have an array of conflict resolution processes, such as those outlined in *Conflict in Meetings* (2005)<sup>1</sup>:

- Our normal eldership and oversight practices
- Our meetings for church affair
- Threshing meetings
- Meetings for clearness
- Worship sharing
- Creative listening
- Mediation by trained Friends from other meetings

There is also a helpful list of questions in this book to aid conflict resolution:

- What is the problem?
- How do you feel about it? *Or* What effect is it having on you?
- What would you really like to happen?
- What could you actually do?

We need not regard conflict in our meetings as a shameful sign of dysfunction. Conflict can often be the start of a new understanding or initiative. It can be creative rather than destructive. But we need to be willing to engage with each other for this to happen.

<sup>1</sup>Conflict in Meetings, volume 4 of the Eldership and Oversight Handbooks published by Quaker Books 2nd edition 2005

[Statement by Area Meeting Conflict Resolution Group September 2009]

## QUAKER FAITH & PRACTICE

There is a great deal of good advice on how to proceed contained within *Quaker faith & practice*. The following extracts seem particularly pertinent:

### *Disputes among Friends*

**4.23** Area meetings are recommended to appoint a group of experienced and knowledgeable Friends who would be available to give general assistance in the amicable settlement of disputes. If help from outside the area meeting is needed, enquiry should be made of the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings who may suggest Friends qualified to give it. Techniques of problem-solving, mediation, counselling or meetings for clearness may be appropriate in particular instances where disputants wish to mitigate the consequences of confrontation.  
...

1995, 2005

**10.22** Part of the creative experience of a community is learning how to deal with conflict when it arises, and Friends are not usually good at this. 'Speaking the truth in love' is a Quaker cliché, but 'papering over the cracks' is the principle more commonly acted upon. Conflict met in 'brokenness' of spirit can take a meeting a long way on its spiritual journey, whereas unresolved it deadens the life. We are a small Society. Clashes have always arisen, just as they arise in any family group. In one sense the members of a family know each other too well, in another sense not well enough. It is impossible to impress one's relations, but they can be a great standby in time of need, and it is then that they come to know each other better, if the bond is strong enough.  
Joan Fitch

**10.24** In our desire to be kind to everybody, to appear united in spirit, to have no majorities and minorities, we minimise our divisions and draw a veil over our doubts. We fail to recognise that tension is not only inescapable, however much hidden, but when brought into the open is a positive good.  
Kenneth C Barnes

### *Conflict within Meetings*

**10.21** There are times of conflict in every meeting when we are required to find and show the love we have for one another and to face our difficulties squarely, for it is only when we work through them ... that we can move forward together. ... Problems may become tangled and one sort of issue may masquerade as another. Care will be required to identify the root cause. Skill, time and great love are needed to overcome these problems, but where they have been openly faced and successfully overcome, meetings have sometimes been much richer for the experience.  
.....

Deep-seated problems are sometimes more easily resolved when an experienced facilitator from outside the situation is called on.

...

1994, 2001

### *Living faithfully today*

**20.68** ... How do we become reconciled to each other if we are asunder? All I can say is to go up to that person and say what is in your heart; that their ways are hurting but you still love them. But this takes time and not many people like to look in a person's face and find out who they are. So we miss the reconciliation and do not have the experience - that we cared. Given that, then we will know who we are and find relief in tears we all should share. This is where peace starts.  
Sue Norris