

FOCUS ON

Conflict & Eldering



When Conflicts Arise:

Crisis or Invitation?

PETER PHILLIPS and THE NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING COMMITTEE ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

As Quakers, our attitudes towards conflict can be ambivalent. Some aspects of Friends testimonies suggest that we would not be prone to conflict among ourselves. We like to see ourselves as peace loving; we certainly hope to never be violent or coercive. Friends aspire to spiritual tolerance and being open to diverse views and beliefs. We hold that there is that of God in every person, and thus that each person is

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deserving of respect. Believing this, how could we ever hurt each other, even unintentionally?

At the same time, our commitment to truth and integrity means that Friends can be strong-minded. What we experience as the truth is the truth to those who experience it, and we can sometimes forget that none of us carries the entire truth. Like all other humans, Friends can be stubborn, accusatory, judgmental, persnickety, eccentric, dismissive, irritatingly over-buoyant, pedantic, and persistent, particularly in matters that we believe arise from the Spirit. Sometimes we behave like bumper stickers that, while sincere, are the quintessential one-way communication, affording neither an invitation nor an intention to engage in dialogue.

Our structural traditions may contribute to fostering internal conflict. Unlike most other faith communities and secular institutions, monthly meetings do not have an operational hierarchy that can be called upon to lend authority at times of internal strife. Our quarterly meetings no longer serve as enforcers of spiritual discipline, chastising Friends who “walk wayward.” Within programmed meetings, the pastor seldom has authority to correct or admonish behavior that is hurtful to the body. Meetings without pastors have Ministry and Counsel Committees, but no corporately authorized source of admonishment or adjudication in the event of misbehavior. The delicate practice of eldering has too often come to be seen as authoritarian and punitive instead of authoritative and lovingly instructive. We have no human resources department, no bishopric or Holy See or episcopacy. Quaker communities caught in self-destructive conflict have no institutional resource to which to turn for a ruling.

So what happens when conflicts do arise? How do monthly meetings respond when an attender is made uncomfortable by the physical advances shown to her by an elderly member, and is prompted to no longer attend? What happens when the treasurer cannot account for some thousands of dollars entrusted to her? What happens when during a building project to restore the meetinghouse, the advice of a long-standing and experienced member is not followed, causing profound hurt? What happens when a coldness between two Friends goes beyond ignoring each other at social hour, beyond parking lot gossip, and blossoms into a public, toxic dance, making the rest of the meeting flee? What about the Friend who preaches at length every First Day, on inscrutable topics, reading from a prepared paper?

By tolerating such dysfunction in our meetings, we end up enabling bad behavior, and realize too late that we are paying a price: our meeting shrinks; the joy disappears; and our labors become wearisome. We have abandoned the gifts of Light and Spirit.

It was with these concerns in mind that New York Yearly Meeting created its Committee on Conflict Transformation. Over the last six years we have come to some tentative conclusions—let’s call them firm observations—about Quakers and conflict:

- Quakers are uncomfortable discussing conflict in plain and simple terms. We are slow to acknowledge it—to put a name to it—even when it hits us when we enter the meetinghouse as strongly as the scent of newly baked bread.
- We often cannot bring ourselves to handle either inner conflict or corporate conflict with joy and confidence, as we do other tasks. We think we lack the necessary skills to bind our own wounds, which we perceive are unique to us, have not been experienced by others, and are too embarrassing to discuss with Friends outside the meeting.
- Quakers sometimes confuse tolerance with enabling, and in this way equate enduring hurtful, bad behavior with open-mindedness and liberality. They often conclude that dysfunction is the price one pays for an accepting and open heart.
- Many conflicts within Friends meetings arise from issues involving money or other property.
- Most conflicts that grow out of hand and seriously disrupt monthly meetings do so either because of a failure of corporate eldering (which does not mean personal scolding) or because of a failure of the Ministry and Counsel Committee to faithfully fulfill its charge of caring for the spiritual life of the meeting.

A robust literature exists from which one can learn the nature of interpersonal conflict and the skills needed to resolve the conflicts that threaten larger units (such as families, schools, communities, or workplaces). Two useful themes run through most of this literature and provide good starting points for meetings burdened with conflict.

The first common theme is to remember that each disputant in a conflict is usually acting in good faith. No one gets up in the morning with the intention of being contemptible. The differing views are almost always legitimate and, therefore, deserving of respect and empathy.

The second recurring theme is that most people who act out do so because they are not getting something that they need. Usually it is not merely attention. Rather, it is something that is a more fundamental need and that (usually but not always) the larger body has in its power to give. It may be dignity, affection, respect, sense of belonging, or having been heard. Most people need to know that what they do for the group is

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valued by the group, and that what one is led to suggest is honored and considered by the rest of us. It is easy to see the behavior that is displayed; it may be harder to see the unaddressed need that gives rise to that behavior, and that must be addressed for the behavior to stop. Perhaps the best questions to ask when observing and assessing an interpersonal conflict are: *What does that person need that she's not getting? And does the meeting have a role in providing it?*

These are principles that are frequently applied in conflict resolution. But New York Yearly Meeting has chosen a different approach: what the Mennonite author and scholar John Paul Lederach terms "conflict transformation." Resolve the behavior that disrupts the meeting, and the sources of the conflict are temporarily mollified but remain largely unchanged. Use the conflict to prompt a change and transform the Friends meeting into a place better able to acknowledge and deal with conflict in love and integrity, and the body deepens and enhances its own spiritual journey.

The question in conflict resolution is this: How can we get rid of this guy so we can go back to the meeting we used to be when everything was fine? The questions in conflict *transformation* are these: How can we use this event as an opportunity to change ourselves into a body that is not as susceptible to fostering hurt and anger? How can we advance to a new place in our journey? Resolve the conflict and the disputants cease. Transform the conflict and the disputants change. As John

Paul Lederach writes in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, this approach states the goal of "building healthy relationships and communities, locally and globally. This goal requires real change in our current ways of relating."

Our committee has recently held three one-day workshops in various parts of New York Yearly Meeting. We have been approached by about a dozen monthly meetings with specific concerns relating to crises among their members, and individual Friends have called the clerk for questions and counseling. We encourage other Friends so inclined to share their experiences with us, so that a pool of prayerful insight might be collectively sustained.

It is a truism that conflict is always with us. Because that is so, let us make the most of it. Let us take the opportunity to embrace the tension and grow from the experience of transformative practice. Let us have the courage to believe in one another, even in conflict, even in change. □