FRIENDS CONSULTATION ON DISCERNMENT

Quaker Hill Conference Center
Richmond, Indiana

December 12-15, 1985

Sponsored by
Earlham School of Religion
and
Quaker Hill Conference Center
PREFACE

For the past six years Quaker Hill Conference Center and Earlham School of Religion have co-sponsored a three-day Consultation of approximately 50 Friends on a variety of important topics to the local Meeting: Quaker Service in 1980, Ministry in 1981, Eldering in 1982, Membership in 1983, Spiritual Authority and Accountability in 1984, and Spiritual Discernment in 1985. We try to bring together a broadly representative group of Friends, including persons from Friends General Conference, Friends United Meeting, Evangelical Friends Alliance, Conservative Friends, and Independent Yearly Meetings. This year 55 people from 20 states and 27 yearly meetings were represented, including Canadian and London Yearly Meetings.

Although the topic under discussion obviously helps draw Friends to these Consultations, most of those who come also find that the gathering turns out to be a religious experience which draws Friends into a new sense of spiritual fellowship and commitment which they had not anticipated.

Since we began these Consultations six years ago, both the availability of funding and the desire of Friends to attend has exceeded our expectations. The last three years persons have had to be turned away because we could not accommodate them. Each year we have been able to balance the budget and at the same time provide enough travel pool assistance to enable this to be a truly ecumenical Quaker Consultation both in geography and yearly meeting affiliation. Because we do not aim for repeat attendance, this means that the Consultations now have an alumni/ae list of 218. For many, this has become a spiritual fellowship of Friends which has carried on long after their experience at Quaker Hill.

This year's topic on Spiritual Discernment proved to be timely and deeply significant, primarily because we all have the need to discern God's will and truth for ourselves personally and corporately everyday of our lives. It is, spiritually speaking, the place we live and work and have our being. For a fuller statement of the subject which the Consultation took up, turn to the Prospectus on page iv which was sent out to all invitees last September. Then turn to the Table of Contents and the program schedule to get an overview of the papers presented and the group discussions which enlarge upon the theme of the Consultation. Much of the important work goes on in small groups and informal discussion. In addition, there are times of worship, table fellowship, group singing, role plays, relaxation and fun.

In the past years, we have put into this booklet of Consultation findings some of the supplementary material that was sent out in advance. This year we are including only a bibliography of material pertinent to the topic. One of the
advance papers distributed was by Paul Lacey, which has since been published as a Pendle Hill Pamphlet #264 entitled, Leading and Being Led, ($1.50). Also recommended was Michael Sheeran's book, Beyond Majority Rule ($4.95), and George Selleck's pamphlet, Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting (25 cents). These can be purchased from the Quaker Hill Bookstore, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, IN, 47374, or from Friends Book Store, 156 North 15th Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19102. Prices listed do not include mailing charges.

At the start of this year's planning, there had been discussion whether we should discontinue the Consultation series, believing that it is better to "stop while you are ahead" rather than continue them beyond their time of usefulness. But the strong and positive response this year seems to suggest that they should be continued for the time being using the same format of approximately 50 persons meeting at Quaker Hill Conference Center. Moreover, a natural topic emerged from this year's Consultation for next year's theme. Whereas the focus this year was on "discerning the will of God" by what was termed "spiritual discernment," the natural sequel to this is "doing the will of God by living the life of obedience through the empowerment of God's gift of the Holy Spirit." The exact title is yet to be formulated but there seemed to be a clear leading that this should be the focus when the Consultation meets next December 11-14, 1986, at Quaker Hill.

One of the important results of these Consultations has been the publication of the findings in this booklet format. Except for the first Consultation on Quaker Service, we still have a limited supply of booklets which sell for $5.00 each (which includes shipping). They provide an excellent source of information for study groups who want to deal with the topics covered in this series. To date over 1,000 of these booklets representing the six Consultations are in circulation. Booklets are available from Quaker Hill Conference Center.

For the Consultation Steering Committee,

Wilmer A. Cooper, Coordinator of the Consultation

Eldon Harzman, Director of Quaker Hill Conference Center

Please Note: Additional copies of this booklet and previous Consultations (that are in print) are available for $5.00 each (postage included) from Quaker Hill Conference Center, 10 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, Indiana, 47374.
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How do we discern God's leading in the everyday decisions of our lives, both those which affect us personally and those which involve us corporately? Because Friends believe that it is possible to have direct and immediate access to God's will and truth by the Light of Christ within, the issue of spiritual discernment is very important for Friends.

When we are honest with ourselves we realize that often it is not easy to discern God's will and his truth. We find ourselves just as prone as anyone else to misread spiritual leadings, or to let self interest distort our discernment of the truth. Individual claims to truth can easily deceive us into believing that we have a corner on the truth. Also, we need to be cautioned, as Friends were advised in the past, not to "run ahead of our Guide." For these reasons we need continually to check our leadings against the spiritual discernment of others.

Thus to correctly discern God's will and truth is only partially a personal and individual matter. For Friends, spiritual discernment involves a group process. It may take place in the corporate meeting for worship and business, or it may take the form of individuals checking their leadings with a spiritual friend or with others in a spiritual support group, or with a clearness committee appointed by the meeting. This calls for the discernment of the "sense of the meeting" where Friends collectively seek the Light within until all minds are clear about a particular decision to be made or action to be taken. It is here that individual leadings are tested and accommodated in the presence of God. It is also here that, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, Friends believe we can reach a deeper level of truth in the gathered meeting for worship.

The purpose of this Consultation is for an experienced group of Friends to consider afresh the meaning and significance of spiritual discernment "after the manner of Friends," and to assess whether Friends today are faithful to "the sense of the meeting" procedure practiced historically. An attempt will be made to spell out some advices for Friends to guide them in the use of this method of spiritual discernment for both personal and group decision making.
FRIENDS CONSULTATION ON SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Co-sponsored by
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Quaker Hill Conference Center
Richmond, Indiana

December 12-15, 1985

Clerk: Louise Wilson

Thursday, December 12

5:00 p.m. Arrive and get settled
6:00 Dinner
7:00 Introductions and background of Consultation
7:30 KEYNOTE: "Waiting Upon God"
    ALASTAIR HERON, London Yearly Meeting
8:30 Small Groups meet to get acquainted
9:30 Worship Epilogue -- Charles Heavilin

Friday, December 13

7:30 a.m. Breakfast
8:30 Worship -- unprogrammed
9:15 SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION
    JAN WOOD, Northwest Yearly Meeting
10:15 Break
10:30 RESPONSE BY JOHAN MAURER
    and plenary discussion
11:15 Small Groups meet for discussion
12:30 p.m. Lunch
Free time
3:30 BEYOND CONSENSUS: THE QUAKER SEARCH FOR GOD'S
    LEADING FOR THE GROUP
    MATT DRAKE, Wilmington Yearly Meeting
4:30 RESPONSE BY WILLIAM TABER, JR.
    and plenary discussion
5:15 Break
6:00 Dinner
7:30 Small Groups meet with assigned tasks
9:00 Hymn Sing
9:30 Worship Epilogue -- Ann Proescholdt-Shaw
Saturday, December 14

7:30 a.m. Breakfast
8:30 Worship -- unprogrammed
9:15 Small Groups continue with assigned tasks
10:15 Break
10:30 Role plays on Spiritual Discernment in Friends
Business Meeting

JOYCE MARDOCK HOLDEN, Canadian Yearly Meet:
plenary discussion to follow

12:30 p.m. Lunch
Free Time (Tour of Earlham and Richmond for those interested)
3:30 Small Groups continue with assigned tasks
5:00 Free Time
6:00 Dinner
7:30 Reports from Small Groups in Plenary Session
9:00 Hymn Sing
9:30 Worship Epilogue -- Ric Schultze

Sunday, December 15

8:00 a.m. Breakfast
9:00 SUMMARY REPORT BY PARTICIPANT/OBSERVERS
DOROTHY REICHARDT, Philadelphia Yearly Meet
RICHARD SARTWELL, Evangelical Friends Church
Eastern Region
10:00 Consultation Evaluation and Guidance for
Future Consultations
10:45 Break
11:00 Closing Worship
12:00 p.m. Lunch
1:00 Departure
FRIENDS CONSULTATION ON SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT
December 12-15, 1985

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Waiting Upon God
Alastair Heron

Our task in this 1985 Consultation is, I believe, harder than any faced by Friends on the five previous occasions, and our responsibility is correspondingly greater. As one studies the themes in their sequence -- service, ministry, eldering, membership, accountability -- and the reports that resulted, it becomes inevitable that at some point our present theme would find its place. We are not a secular nationwide or multinational organization seeking to become more effective; we are not one of the mainstream churches, hierarchical or congregational: we are Quakers, the Religious Society of Friends in the Truth, the inheritors of the Children of Light. To the extent that, as individuals and as meetings, our lives, our decisions and our actions are no longer consciously and single-mindedly intended to be based on the guidance of the Spirit of God, we have squandered our inheritance. Note well that the problem does not lie in the imperfections of our perceptions of God's will for us; it lies in our individual and corporate loss of conviction that we can and should be guided by God in our lives, decisions and actions.

The words used in the first paragraph of the prospectus for this gathering sadly are invalid as a general statement of current conviction: "Friends believe that it is possible to have direct and immediate access to God's will and truth by the Light of Christ within..." That invalidity remains whether one uses the whole sentence or ends it after the word 'truth.' It is just because of this invalidity that the rest of the sentence -- "...the issue of spiritual discernment is very important for Friends" -- is not only accurate but in need of strengthening. The issue of spiritual discernment has become the central basic issue for Quakers everywhere. And because it is both central and basic it is unifying, not divisive. We are free to live the spiritual life in "the many mansions" of which Jesus spoke, in that love and fellowship which has its ground in a shared experience of God's active involvement with each one of us and with all of us together. And to whatever point our individualism, our security-seeking or our doubts may have brought us, few can with integrity claim exemption from the recognition that "all we like sheep have gone astray, every one to his own way." So let us in true inward humility turn to God as our only reliable mentor and guide. Only thus can we presume to approach our present task.

"What You will, where You will, when You will"

This daily prayer of Anselm is explicit, unequivocal and comprehensive. It is an expression of intent without reserva-
tions. It is also by implication an affirmation of faith -- a threefold conviction. God is personal, God's will is a personal matter, and it is communicable. As a statement of faith, I believe unreservedly in a personal God whose purposes can be communicated to each one of us directly through the action of the Holy Spirit, as well as in other ways; that such purposes are an expression of divine love; and that voluntary obedience to the leading of the Spirit is the basis of a fulfilled life. This obedience is itself an act of faith, bringing confidence that with the guidance will come the strength needed to follow it.

So let us first consider the three elements of that conviction of Anselm. First, what can we mean by a 'personal' God? Here I am grateful for Hans Kung's analysis: "God is not a person as man is a person...God is more than person...It is part of the completely incommensurable nature of God that God is neither personal nor non-personal, but both at once and therefore transpersonal...the Bible shows us that there is someone who faces us as benevolent and absolutely reliable...God is one who faces me, whom I can address." This is critical for the spiritual life, yet very many Quakers today are hesitant or negative about it, often because their concept of 'personal' is entirely human and therefore limiting. Yet without "a God who faces me, whom I can address," the 'will of God' can have no practical or positive meaning for me in my everyday life. What remains is an impersonal and apparently arbitrary power to which the only possible responses are resignation or impotent rage. There is no meaningful place for love -- because there is no relationship.

But if God can be addressed, if there is one who faces each of us, if indeed there is a relationship, then God can address us: "Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth." The loving purposes of God can be communicated to us, and our God-given freedom can be used -- to cooperate or to go our own way. The true extent of our freedom is however greater: we are not compelled to listen. And even our willingness to listen becomes meaningless if all our incoming lines are always occupied, or if our minds are noisy. Only very rarely, it seems, does the urgency of God's purpose justify the breaking-through of a Damascus road experience. God's usual way is to wait with infinite patience for us to accord priority and be still.

The Usual and the Exceptional

At the very beginning of his paper Leading and Being Led Paul Lacey lists some of the various ways in which Quakers have referred to the guidance of God. For our present purposes it may be important to emphasize one distinction, that between the 'usual' and the 'exceptional.' Clearly if we are following Anselm, or Paul Lacey when he writes, "These phrases say that it is not only possible but essential to our nature for human beings to hear and obey the voice of God; that we can be directed, daily, in what we do, the jobs we hold, the very words we say...", we are talking about the 'usual'. But when Fox spoke of 'great openings' or 'leadings' he was describing experiences of
of God's guidance that were over and above his daily experience: these were special, exceptional. The importance of this distinction for us today lies, paradoxically perhaps, in the relationship between the usual, daily experience of being guided by God, and the exceptional, special leadings or openings. We have to ask ourselves, "How far is the likelihood of our being given a special opening determined by the extent to which our daily lives are guided in a voluntary discipline of holy obedience?" The parallel in the scientific field (to which Quakers have contributed out of all proportion to their numbers) is close, and suggests a positive answer to our question. The great scientific 'discoveries' came to prepared minds. If today very few Quakers are living under guidance in a day-to-day commitment, should we be surprised at the extreme rarity of great openings among Friends generally? Or should we even be surprised at the widespread reports of shallowness and lack of authenticity in the spoken ministry?

From such questions it is but a short step to the topic of 'concern' which some Friends in London Yearly Meeting have been considering together over the past two years. This working party of the Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee has just completed its report which, with any necessary amendment, will go before Meeting for Sufferings next year.

In October 1984 an "Invitation to all Friends" appeared prominently in The Friend (published weekly in London) in which the working party asked all readers to consider two questions, and to share the outcome by private letter in their own words. For our present purpose the key question was as follows: "Is 'obedience to God,' in an explicit intent to cooperate with a wise and loving purpose, still generally accepted as the basis for individual Quaker living and decision-making? If for you it is the basis, how do you in practice seek to be obedient?" This invitation was accepted by sixteen Friends, four Meetings, and a group of Friends within another Meeting. The report notes wryly, "It is obvious that the vast majority of The Friend readership either did not read the invitation, or did not feel moved to share their thoughts with us," and goes on "...the lack of response is at least consistent with the recognition that more Friends today find it difficult to say what they believe."

Towards the end of the report the working party emphasize that "in the living structure of our religious society both communication and coordination depend upon the faith-in-action of all our members. If there are few Friends today bringing traditional Quaker concerns to their meetings...it is in the spiritual quality of our daily lives that we must seek the causes." And later, "We find ourselves with no alternative but to report that it is not the nature of Quaker 'concern' that has changed, but our own faith and practice."

The Testing of Personal Guidance

One of the few modern Quakers to address our theme directly was Geoffrey Nuttall, and in his book The Holy Spirit and
Ourselves there is a chapter entitled "The Guidance of the Spirit." Here he warns against the danger of "failing to keep in mind the truth most fundamental in the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit's dealings with men are always personal in the fullest sense." One implication of this is that our human limitations must always be taken fully into account, so "if it is the guidance of the Spirit of Christ that we want, we must neglect neither reason nor conscience, fallible though both are, for the Spirit will use both." But he goes on to recognize that the Spirit can also lead "by some inner compulsion," and again we may be mistaken in our intuitions. What then is the way to keep error to a minimum? He writes, "It is only by walking in the light, by whatever light we have, that we can prove what is well-pleasing to the Lord; only by the renewing of our faith day by day that we may keep our vision open to the eternal things not seen except by the eye of faith, and by them prove what is God's will for us...The trouble with most of us is that, apart from lack of discipline, we are unwilling for this degree of loyal commitment to the Spirit's guidance."

In his 1978 book, Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster "chose to list guidance among the corporate disciplines" because, he wrote, "We have heard little about how God leads through his people, the body of Christ. On that subject there is profound silence."(p.151) I am not at all sure he was correct, but it may be significant that three years later in his next book Freedom of Simplicity, he perceived it as necessary to base his consideration of corporate simplicity -- in the church and in the world -- on a detailed treatment of holy obedience in the life of the individual. When we move on to consider the role of the group in spiritual discernment, we too will encounter that necessity.

There is always danger when something becomes too familiar. Of course we all know that the guidance of the individual needs to be tested in the worshipping group. The early Christian community knew this, as tellingly evidenced in Acts 15:28: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," and so did our own first Publishers of Truth. Michael Sheeran notes (pp. 26-27) that "...early (Quaker) preachers found it expedient to submit their leadings to each other as a way of testing or letting the 'self-consistence' of the Spirit become operative." We shall be considering this testing process during our time here together, sharing our own experiences of contemporary approaches. So wherein lies the danger of what I have called 'the too-familiar'? It can I think be revealed by distinguishing between 'process' and 'practice.' We are all familiar with the 'process,' as is evidenced by the words of our prospectus: "...individuals check their leadings with a spiritual Friend or with others in a spiritual support group, or with a clearness committee appointed by the meeting." But how closely does the 'practice' resemble that familiar 'process'? How many Friends do you know in your local meeting who quite often need the 'process' -- not just on rare critical personal issues -- because they are committed in their daily living to seeking and following the leadings of God's Spirit as a way of life? For those with that need, is the 'process' readily available and spiritually adequate to meet it?
Is it, Friends? If we here are to seek guidance ourselves about spiritual discernment that we can share with others, nothing less than the whole truth will do. We dare not be defensive.

The Testing of Corporate Guidance

In the concluding section of the report about 'concern' on which we have already drawn, the following passage appears:

The insights of our special interest groups must be listened to and tested by a wisdom more broadly based than their own. This leads naturally to the one thing in common between individual concerns of the traditional Quaker kind, issues that individual Friends or local Meetings have become concerned about, and the issues with which at least some of the informal groups are clearly identified. That one thing is the need to provide religiously valid means by which the will of God can by sought in each case..."

Such means of testing can only be as religiously valid as our discipleship. A 'short period of worship' before a monthly meeting or a committee 'starts its work' is no guarantee that the purposes of God for that group of Friends will be understood. What matters is the quality of practiced discipleship that each Friend present has brought from her or his daily life."

Once again, as in our Consultation we give specific attention to the problems of spiritual discernment as faced by the group, we shall find ourselves drawn below the surface considerations of the Quaker process. As we seek to see it afresh, we shall need to face the implications of the fact that many Friends today have very little experience of that process, either because they rarely attend meetings for church affairs, or because these meetings are no longer 'held in the Life.' We shall be aware that many Friends -- including some who surprise, even startle us -- now confuse the Quaker decision-making process with the wholly secular exercise of seeking 'consensus.' But below the surface we shall inevitably be brought again to see, and then to know, that "what matters is the quality of practiced discipleship."

Starting Where We Are

We all know that it has from the very beginning been the Quaker way in spiritual matters to speak only from experience, from where we stand either personally or as a community. Earlier this year I felt impelled to share with Friends gathered in London Yearly Meeting my conviction that "we are a people that sits in darkness because we assert our independence and trust to our own strength and ingenuity. We expect the Holy Spirit to move through us in Meeting for Worship, but not in the ordering and revision of our priorities for the use of our time and resources in our daily lives." I went on to quote Dorothy
Steere, who said in 1983, "I believe that one of the things that keeps us from listening to God is our fear of what may be asked of us. The risk of change is too great, the demands too high and costly...To come near to God is to change,' and change is hard. So we set up barriers of non-listening, of turning off our spiritual antennae."

We can rightly be inspired and challenged by the experience of others, but unless we contribute what we know experientially, it will be profitless merely to discuss our topic and then to issue our 1985 commentary on what is left of our Quaker inheritance. Despite our sense of personal inadequacy, our proper reluctance to claim too much, we do have insights to share. We are each one of us unique, and so are God's dealings with us and our responses. In loving tenderness let us be as open to the expression of doubt, of inability to report much experience of God's guidance, as we are to the relative confidence of others among us for whom this has become the norm of daily living. Above all, let us grasp thankfully this rare and precious opportunity to be still, to have quietened minds, to have all our incoming channels open and alert.

As Tillich has written:

"Waiting is not despair. It is the acceptance of our not having, in the power of that which we already have."

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Heron, Alastair, "Darkness In The Land", Quaker Monthly, October 1985, 193-5.


Sheeran, Michael, Beyond Majority Rule, Denver, CO, Regis College, 1983.

Steere, Dorothy, On Listening to God and to Each Other, Philadelphia, FWCC, 1984.

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION
JAN WOOD

As I come to you, I have a deep and earnest desire to tell the truth about discernment. Concurrently I feel an incredible inadequacy to do so. I am so aware that I can only bring fragments of the Truth. I fear the partialness of my seeings. The leap of faith that I participate in is that this will be a loaves and fish miracle where in offering up partialness, a multiplication of Truth will occur. I trust that Jesus, our Present and Inward Teacher, will knit the fragments we all offer up into a sturdy fabric of Truth; a fabric that is useful to us all; a fabric that can wear long and well.

I am convinced that to understand the processes of discernment, one needs to understand the nature of God's purposes upon the earth. We will have very different views about discernment as we see God differently. So the first appropriate thing is for you to get a glimpse of my theological contexts for this discussion. You may not agree with my operative theology -- but at least you will know why I think as I do -- and why I see discernment as I do!

For me all the purposes and acts of God rise from and are encompassed by what it means for God and humankind to be present together. The Love Story of God to humankind is one of Presence. God's heart has consistently said: "I want to be with you." That is the theme in the narrative of the Patriarchs, in the hoped-for theocracy of Israel, in the blazing anger of destruction and exile, in the provision of a remnant, in the Incarnation, in the Atonement, in the Pentecost, and in the Kingdom-come -- now and forever. "I want to eat with you, think with you, play with you, work with you, intercourse with you, share life in all of its complications and wonders." "Fear not, I am with you" has been the one promise that winds its way from Genesis through Revelation, and continues to be a witness to our hearts this very day. It is no fluke that the Incarnation of Godness in human form would be called Emmanuel: God with us. The mind boggling truth is that the I AM, the ALL in ALL, the transcendent Essence of Being, the source of all createdness wants -- even yearns -- to be with us. That One has made every provision to bridge the gaps between the infinite and the finite; between perfection and brokenness; between Love and alienation; between Life and Death.

The I AM did not set up moralistic hurdles for men and women to jump over to prove their godward intentions. The Godhead did not scheme a system by which humans could earn a place in the heavens. Any form has always been a product of an outpouring of essence. Form is but a molding around Essence; a tangible reflection of the intangible realities. Right and wrong. Good and bad. They are not the essential elements of our navigation...
towards God. The essential elements of our seeking and abiding in the Presence of God is one of being in the Truth of ourselves and in the Truth of the Godhead. There is no system. It is only a relationship. There is not even an infra-system that ensures the relationship. As the Abraham narrative communicates, righteousness is not a matter of doing everything "right." It is a matter of being in appropriate response/position/stance with God. And thus we read in Genesis 15:6, "And he (Abraham) believed the Lord; and He (God) reckoned it to him as righteousness." Believing was not necessarily an appropriate response to the data -- that Abraham would be the father of multitudes of descendants. Believing was an appropriate response in the light of who was giving the data. What is appropriate for relationship with a God of Love is to participate/to splash/to swim/to be immersed in the Essence and Presence of God. To align our very being and all that flows from it with Life in God. From this amazing and incredible union of God and human comes the fulfillment of our paradoxical desires: to be totally, uniquely fulfilled in our individuality and at the same time to be a oneness and in union with all the universe. Personhood. Fully unique. Fully joined. We are virtually "driven" by our natures to find this our resting place in the universe. Our home. Life.

The fact is that we humans try to find Life where it cannot be found. God calls us into total union with the Godhead. What we try to enact with Him/Her is a loose affiliation. But that does not work to bring us the deep desires of our heart. We try to eat the fruit that would lure us with godlike control and knowledge. But it doesn't work. We take shortcuts of self absorption that leave us with ashes in our mouths. For everything that is inappropriate to the Truth of God and of ourselves is dysfunctional for Life. A distortion. A cruel counterfeit that saps our personage, our energy and leaves us with only the bitter dregs of death -- now and forever. That is the essence of evil. Non-God. Non-Reality. Non-functional. Non-Life. It is the antithesis of Life, Substance, Reality. Its power is a manipulation of life's elements. It can only usurp creation and unravel it. It can never create. Its forgeries create illusion and deception. It is as solid as shadows. Its perceived power can only exist outside the encompassing of Light. Certainly, it is no clumsy counterfeit. Even the elect can be fooled. Discernment is the Life-saving magnetism to the heart of God that reveals the forgery for what it is.

One does not escape evil by doing good behaviors. "Good" is simply a fragrance that is given off by Life, an evaporation from the essence of God. Mark 9:18. "Badness" doesn't damn a person. Badness is the stench of non-alignment with Life. It is the rot, decay of that which is separated form the vitality/the sap of Aliveness.

Therefore to discuss the problem of discernment at the "twiglettes" of good and bad, right and wrong, choices/behaviors/acts would have us perpetuate the error of the Pharisees. The core of discernment is to be so filled with Godness, to be so in-Life that all that is illusion and non-Reality falls off like the ineffectual sham it is. To know God
is to see the universe as it is. To not be fooled or deluded. To be rooted and grounded in the heart of God. To live and have our being there. George Fox was one of the most discerning men of Christendom. His sensibilities were sharpened almost beyond what he could bear. But seeing the size and shape of death around him was not his place of empowerment. He did not "rest" until he finally saw the ocean of Light and Love flow over the ocean of darkness. Then in the Truth of the realities of the universe, he had a place to stand. A place from which he could not be moved. He became a true discerner.

The early motions of discernment in a person are often cast in thoughts and perceptions: "Something is wrong." Discerning persons often grow up from childhood feeling that they are critical and judgmental. They are often deeply troubled by things that no one else seems to perceive. The good news is that the person is beginning to perceive "under," to question the forgeries of the universe, to worry and be troubled that others are not perceiving the same realities. But I suspect that discernment is not mature and health-giving until one's vision is filled with the view of God, His nature, Her purposes, Their impact upon the present situation. The discener must not only recognize the evil that would so easily beset us, but also be a fanatical and consistent envisioner and practitioner of redemption. That is the heart of God. For Redemption is that motion of Life that moves into the eye of evil and explodes its arrangement from the inside out; freeing each element of the situation to be rearranged for Life.

Why am I belaboring these points so long? Why am I not getting to the nitty gritty of how a person discerns? It is because this feels crucial to our understanding of the discerning process. If we were to bring to this discussion the basic notion that life-in-God is a process of being right -- "righter" than the "lost" -- we will view discernment as a vehicle for keeping us safe from being wrong or mistaken. If we see evil in capital letters of substance and dualistic power, we will demand of discernment the ability to keep us alert and informed of evil which is "out there to get us." If we have forgotten the lesson of Galatians, are living under our brand of legalisms to entitle us to God's favor, we will use discernment as a tool to keep ourselves and others "in line." We will use it to know who is "in" and who is "out." If discernment is perverted into sleuthing the evil in persons and in situations, it degenerates into judgment/criticism that is divorced from its fundamental function and nature -- LOVE. All of these approaches will reduce discernment to a sword unto death rather than a scalpel unto Life. Only when discernment is knowing God does the truth of its function begin to emerge.

Characteristics of Discernment

1. Discernment is a perceptual ability.

Discernment is the ability to perceive good from evil. Its perceptions may come through a feeling, a "knowing." Inasmuch as
there is an arrangement of life that is a counterfeit were the currency of the universe -- discernment sees "under" and "through." It senses from what spirit, from what source a thought or behavior is coming. It is that illumination that looks under the obvious to perceive what is truly operative. This becomes so very crucial to those who no longer walk by the Law, but by Grace. Under the Law one clearly knew where one stood. There were objective yardsticks to see if all were going well. The Law of the Spirit appears to be more illusive to us. Things are not always as they seem. The surface does not always portray the heart. Jesus' recorded conversations are so often enigmatic because he was speaking with discernment to the internal realities rather than the surface interactions. Jesus always spoke "under" to the core of the issue. And it certainly looked upside-down. The publican is commended for entering the Kingdom of God; the Pharisee is about to be cast into perdition. So much that seemed to be "right" was challenged by the actions and teachings of Jesus. How can anyone know what is true anymore? Discernment knows the heart. The heart of God.

2. Discernment is living, not simply perceiving.

The discerning person responds and makes choices that are consonant with his/her seeings. I believe that part of the greatness of Quakers has been that not only have they been a discerning people -- but they understood that this was a living-matter not just an evaluation-matter. Quakers have been quick to put their lives where their understandings were.

It is necessary to live into the fullness of one's Light and discernment even before we have the whole picture. It would be nice to wait until we see how everything fits together. But that is a luxury that we cannot wait for. What is required is that we walk in what we know now. In the walking more will be added. In the obedience to the discernment we presently have, more discernment will be opened to us. I believe that is part of the meaning of what Jesus said: that to those who had, more would be given. And to those who had not, it would be taken from them. Matthew 13:12. In refusing to act on what we already know, we become increasingly blind. If a person is using discernment to keep themselves and others safe from failure, this is a very difficult point to live out. The temptation is to be like the man in the parable that had one talent. He was afraid that he would do the wrong thing, so he took his talent and buried it so it would remain unrisked until he could return it to his master. To live into the partialness of our knowings is a necessary risk of walking by the Spirit.

3. Discernment is never the "end of the sentence."

We do not discern simply to know. Solomon asked God for a hearing heart to discern good from evil so that he might govern God's people well. I Kings 3:9-12. This simple sentence is so rich in the knowledge of discernment! Solomon knew the truth about whose people it was that he was called to govern. How easy it would have been to take it at face value that this was his nation. He understood that discernment found its rootage in
being able to hear and obey God's voice. And he understood that
discernment was not the end of the sentence. Discernment is
always a service that is given in Love for others. It is to
free, to heal, to call to Truth and Life. Its function is bathed
and immersed in Love. Now this can be difficult. Discerning
flirts with some of our most deadly failings: the way we use
knowings for control, for upmanship that feeds our ego, for the
idolatry of being our own gods. Some of us shiver when we hear
and speak of discernment -- for we have felt the sting of
discernment that used a knowing to hurt and harm another. And
did that in the name of God. Discernment's task is not completed
with simply knowing; it needs to bridge to the reality of God's
will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

4. Discernment is of the Spirit/spirit -- God's Holy Spirit and
our spirit.

Discernment is not logically derived. (Of course, the
functions of the mind have a rightful place as part of our
personhood! This is not at all to say that one ceases to think
rationally and well. It is to say, however, that logic is not
the judge of whether a discernment is of God or not. The mind
becomes informed by the spirit, rather than the other way
around.) Discernment cannot be empirically judged; it is
ultimately a faith statement. It is a gamble of faith. It is
obedience to an inward monitor -- and upon that we risk all.
There is often no immediate vindication of whether we are hearing
and discerning or whether we are deluded by our own material or
whether we are crazy. After all the chances are pretty good that
Abraham was only responding to his deep wish to escape it all at
Ur. Or that the pressure simply got too much for him and he
began to see and hear things that weren't there. I know of no
wonderful criteria by which we can know that we are truly hearing
and responding to Truth and Godness. There weren't any in
Scripture. Consider Mary who spent at least 34 years out on a
limb of believing the unbelievable. There was not a "three­
point check system" for her. She simply risked all
unconditionally. Yes, we do have some checks and balances
between our experiential knowings, our understandings of
Scripture and the corporate listening of our community of faith.
But ultimately we are left to both a personal and corporate risk.
I believe there is no way to get around it. Discernment, far
from keeping us "safe", puts us at the outposts of our comfort
zones. We choose to live into the fullness of our Light --
regardless of the consequences. With Job we echo, "Even though
he slay me, yet will I trust that it is God at work in me."

5. Discernment has only one Source -- and all that is discerned
is in alignment with the nature of that Source.

It should probably go without saying -- but knowledge
derived from spirits other than God's Spirit are inappropri­
ate/unholy/unrighteous/and ultimately not life giving. The ALL
in ALL is the fount of all of our knowing. We need no other.
The narrative of the Fall would tell us that humankind has been
faked out on this issue before.
We also need to be very careful about denying the Incarnational nature of God's Love which is such that the Godhead will stop at nothing -- even the outrageousness of an Incarnation -- to meet us, to bridge our limitations and finiteness. While our theological constructs may vary considerably, I suspect that to know the Transcendent God is also to recognize the sameness of essence of God constrained in time, space, and physicalness.

6. Discernment sees the big redemptive picture.

The discerning person so knows God's intents of love and goodness, God's transformation of all weakness, tragedy, and shortcoming that the world is viewed in hope. No longer do we have to avert and avoid the weakness, insufficiency, unworthiness, even cruelty in ourselves and in others. There is a God that can take the worst of ourselves and others and weave it into a tapestry of glory. An alchemy of transformation. The discerning person sees -- and therefore can become a co-partner of redemption upon the earth. To step with a willing heart into the middle of life's difficulties and there to explode their sting and horror is to be a transformer of Light and Life. Discernment not only sees through the sham; it sees into redemption and restoration.

So what are the practical guidelines in the matter of individual discernment. The questions that haunt us are: How can I know if I am hearing God? How can I ever tell what is discernment and what is my own internal material? What if I am wrong? What do I do when I see things quite differently from those around me?

My first observation is what discernment is. For the most part it is part of our perceptual field. When we turn our heart Godward, there is a reorientation to the universe that happens deep within our spirit. If we listen to the inner sense of reorganization, we begin to order our lives/make choices/live differently in accordance with that new internal sense. As we live out of our new orientation, our new perceptions, we become increasingly astute and wise, increasingly consonant. We walk in the Spirit. It is a natural growth process. What often happens to us, however, is that we do not attend to the new internal paradigm. We are not true to what rises within us. We deny, repress, live in contradiction to the new life that is rising inside of us. It causes internal havoc. We are at war with ourselves. We are in confusion about our God. We suddenly find ourselves very unsure of what is real and what is not. Then the issue of discernment and guidance and listening becomes very difficult to know about. Interestingly enough the more out of touch we are with ourselves and our God, the more tenaciously we cling to needing to know. We become desperate not to make mistakes. There is a very frantic quality in trying to find "God's will." We are not at ease with ourselves or our God, when we out of fear have chosen not to listen to our Inward Monitor, when we have been too afraid to risk the life of faith.

"But how do I know if it is God?" I hear folks cry agonizingly. I could tell you the standard replies. There is a
"self-authenticating" quality to the voice of God within. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. It is the lining up of all the factors until there is inward and outward consonance. God is recognized by the peace and at homeness that follows. God is recognized by the movement towards increased love and adoration of the Godhead. One can know if one is following God if one observes the fruit of the Spirit accompanying the process. All of these thoughts are true. But in a sense, none satisfy the questioning heart. Again I submit to you my own conviction: until the basic decision to risk all is made, no answer will satisfy. Once that decision has been made -- all the above are useful, but none are really necessary.

You see the issue is much less complicated than we make it. The life of faith is that we claim all of ourselves. The good, the bad. The wondrous and the despicable. The beautiful and the ugly. The whole and the broken. The light and the dark. We claim and take responsibility for our being -- all of it. In the absolute realness of our entirety, we abandon ourselves into the Presence of God. There we abide. There we live forever. There we never try to "get ourselves together" and do life our own way again. There we do not fear ourselves and the darkness that is within us, for God's love has encompassed us with grace and mercy and given us Life. There we do not need to beat ourselves down with self-doubts and interrogations, for we are safe -- just as we are. Of course, the road to many conversion experiences is paved to the words, "Just as I am." What we have not realized is that the Christian life is lived exactly as it was birthed -- in the total reality of ourselves thrown upon the mercy of God. Over and over I experience and observe that the great separations from knowing God are simply because you and I get out of the reality of ourselves. God meets us. Period. Not someone else. Not an idea of us. Not a cleaned-up version of ourselves. Not a de-humanized form of ourselves. Just us. It is from this place of abandonment that we make the next choices for Life as they rise within us. We don't expect ourselves to become detached from ourselves and somehow participate in a "pure" Godness. We don't expect ourselves to be totally right -- when were we ever before? We simply offer up the reality of ourselves to God and to one another, and watch to see what transformations and redemptions are wrought. As we live this out, we find that the agony of expecting our discernment to be other-than-us evaporates like dew in the sun. Wonderful freedom is birthed.

"Well, what if we are deluded in this naive sort of state?" Well, what if we are? If God's transforming grace were enough to cover my sinfulness when I was rebellious, how much more there must be provision when my heart is eagerly leaping into His Presence and Heart. God's nature is faithful to who I am. God knows my limitations. God knows my uprisings and my downfallings. The Godhead will not leave me without a witness. They will send those occasions and persons of correction. And I hear you say, "No, I don't want to have to be corrected! I want to do it right!" Ah so, the spirit of pride in us so quickly would move us from that place of trust and abandonment. Underneath that pride, however, is usually the terrible pain from our childhood that learned that to be wrong was to be rejected,
to be unloveable. Our Lord calls us to a new resting place in the universe than in the childlike trust of our God to be Present and Communicating and Loving. I am aware that coming to this place requires tender healing for many of us. It certainly has meant that for me. If healing is what we need, so be it. Meet Jesus experientially and let him speak to your fragmented, frightened condition of being loved so poorly throughout your life. Some know their brokenness, while others have learned to cope by being strong and capable. When we do this, we can't even feel how frightened we are by the conditional love we have received. We only know that if we aren't in control and doing everything right, it feels as if we die. Let God's Spirit pierce the facade of that four-year-old trying to act like a brave soldier. And let the child know the release of being loved unconditionally by the heart of God. And if you know the healing of God and you have been lured out by our constant enemy, pride, release it. Drop it and return to the truth of yourself.

"Well, what if I do harm to another when I am wrong?" Of course, we will cause pain for another. Our very existence upon the earth means that we will be a cause of great blessing and pain for others. There is no way to avoid giving and receiving pain in this broken world. The very best we can give to each other still has the "underbelly" of our own inadequacies and insufficiencies. I cannot be a perfect spouse, a perfect parent, a perfect friend, a perfect Christian -- not even if I am centered and walking in the fullness of the Light. You and I are not perfect. We are promised that the brokenness of our lives can be transformed in Jesus Christ. This is not to deny that we are certainly in the process of becoming new creatures. For there is a wonderful miracle that happens as we stay abandoned in the Presence of God that indeed transforms our personhood. What I do hold up for question, however, is the prideful internal sense that swells within us that secretly tells us that we are now "perfect." I question the horrible bondage that comes from that condition in which we try to make that perfection come to pass -- expecting that to be the case if we are "truly committed."

But pain is not the end of the story. We are promised that pain need not be unto death in our life or the life of another. Everyone always has the ability to choose pain- unto-Life. Our brokenness cannot damn another. It may cause great and grievous pain; but it can always be transformed and become the wondrous cause for rejoicing. Genesis 50:19,20. Romans 8:28. Making a mess in life is humbling and painful, but it is not the end of the world. "But what if someone does make it the end of their world?" you respond. That is their choice. They had a choice to Live just as you do. I believe that God's gracious mercy does not allow life that is beyond choice. In fact we see in the Old Testament that when a civilization was beyond the ability to make choices for Life, God ended them. e.g. Genesis 15:16.

The corollary to this thought is one that has given Quakers such astounding power. Where there is life, there is still God; there is still hope. God's Spirit abides in every person and is capable of being chosen no matter how badly life's deck seems
stacked against him/her. And thus into seemingly hopeless tragedy and cruelty, Quakers tromped, fanning the almost cold embers into a flame of Life.

"What do I do with the discernments I have?"

Be true to what is inside. Put weight on it. Live by it. Hold it with sufficient tentativeness to be open to others. Yet hold it with sufficient tenacity to live it out until moved differently. Change that is of God's Spirit will come from the inside-out.

Immerse yourself in the Presence of God. Practice the Presence. The only priority of life worth having is knowing God personally, intimately, experientially. Any other priority is not to see clearly the terrain of LIFE. When in a conflict situation, fill the space with Love and Light. Pay less attention to the dynamics of the conflict, the discernment perception and center upon the Truth of God in that moment, to that person, to that situation. Stay in the space of Love. Don't be lured out of it!

Offer up what is within you to others. Offer it up in living. Offer it up in words. It is a gift, not a cudgel. Let it rest lightly. Release your discernment from your ego and your expectations. Flow as a stream that is useful to those who can take from you and in no way diminished by those who can't. Remember, your discernment cannot "save" anything or anyone. Discernment is at best only the illumination by which a person can make choices. God never takes the power of choice and responsibility from any person. God will not be a big scapegoat in the sky: "God made me do it." God lets us see what the choices and consequences are. The responsibility for discernment never releases a person or a group from the responsibility of choice.

If there is disagreement in matters of discernment, be glad that we have another session on corporate discernment in which this issue will be addressed!

In closing I believe that discernment is not a sorting ability; rather it is a recognition and alignment task. To discern is to know God. To be so in union with God's nature and heart that we feel as joined as the Old Testament sense of sexual knowing. The tender intimacy. The wondrous intercoursing. The release in abandonment, trust vulnerability. The utter peace, contentment, smiles that saturate the being. The discerner is a lover, a lover who is ill at ease in any other space except God/Love/Reality/Life. All else falls short of the glory of God and is perceived for the shortfall it is.

The first motion of discernment is to come: to come with all one's inadequacies, insufficiencies, weakness, evil, blind spots, pain. To come to the Love, the Light. To there bathe in Mercy. To shed the heavy begrimed garments of condemnation, failure, control, alienation, brokenness. To splash in childlike
abandon in Life. To abide in the eye of God's care and affection. to see ALL from this perspective. To view life and its intertwinings from the place of being met, loved, and wondrously cared for.

The second motion is to live in the sensitivity of a delicate radar that perceives the slightest, most subtle Godward blip. It is to see and affirm the movements of God in the universe. And from these affirmations of word and life, all Truth and non-truth takes its rightful stance.

"I must continue to speak true to the inner fire. It isn't really possible to extinguish it with any authenticity or obedience. I will be wrong. I will be unwise. I will be corrected. I will suffer -- some for Jesus' sake and some for my own stupidity. Jesus says to accept it all without seeking solace, support, evaluation, judgement from without. Follow the Inner Monitor. Correct as correction comes; stay vulnerable to correction. If I stay obedient and in accountability, God will cover and grace both the "right on" and the "not on." He has promised He won't allow me to stomp out Life in anyone in my error. He will transform and use it. But neither will He protect me with 'perfection' in my ministry for it would only give birth to a prideful spirit."
SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION
Response by Johan Maurer

For me, spiritual discernment as a consultation topic among Friends is exciting because it relates to so many areas where Friends seem to be struggling with issues of spiritual health and renewal. Happily, Jan Wood's paper touches on most of these issues, in one way or another. My best service to you at this point is to put as little as possible in between Jan's paper, just presented, and your discussion of it. So let me point out, as my contribution to the discussion, some of the insights and implications of what she has said which I believe should not go unexamined.

It is a good thing that many Friends are recognizing the value of the concept of discernment and the centuries of wisdom and experience which are connected with it. With such recognition comes the danger of overuse and weakening of the word -- we Friends are as good as anyone in turning pregnant phrases into cliches. It would be especially ironic if the word "discernment" were to lose the critical edge which is at the core of its meaning. In both the secular and spiritual realms (if these need be separated), discernment refers to an ability to discriminate, to see critically beyond surface appearances. This is one of those areas where religious people feel bound to approve in general, but where they can get very uncomfortable with the idea of the faculty actually being used. It is easier to spiritualize and generalize the term and add it to our vocabulary of harmless piety.

This is especially true among people who have been victims of the abuse of critical judgment. Jan Wood addresses this problem directly in a couple of places. First of all, discernment is not the application of a system of rules or morality. So many Friends need to hear this and think through its implications! Legalisms are rampant among Friends, both pastoral and unprogrammed, and the faithful expression of God's yearning for us, God's invitation to us, with which the Church has been entrusted, is in short supply. Yet we all have the capacity to respond in the relationship which is offered to us, and discernment should operate in the service of this response, not as a series of barriers erected by those already "in" to test our worthiness and prevent scandal.

All of this assumes that God really does act in the world to bring about reconciliation with us creatures, and perhaps that is where discussion needs to begin. But having said that, and having agreed with Jan (as I understand her) that discernment should not be understood as getting in the way of God's reconciling purpose, we still have to deal with discernment's critical edge. How do we take into account what Jan calls "evil" and "the counterfeit" which discernment enables us to spot?
Whether we use discernment as a "sword unto death" or a "scalpel unto life," we still make a cut. Some Friends may want to cut away all that does not to them seem consistent with holiness. Others might be reluctant to name anything that is error or forgery. Are there really "many paths up the mountain"; do some of them end in cliffs, and how does discernment operate as our Godward compass in light of our varied beliefs on error and evil?

Questions of rules vs. relationship come up as a meeting or a pastor tries to deal discerningly with the newly convinced Friend. How often do we make judgments based on the new person's ability to absorb the many rules and practices which we so uncharitably keep unwritten? Woe to us if we ever seem to imply any sort of spiritual ultimacy to these rules. Another popular distortion is the substitution of a verbal formula of faith to be fed to the convert as a substitute for the hard work of discerning the movements of the Holy Spirit in him or her. The discerning guide, however, while not imposing rules or systems, cannot conceal the costs of discipleship which may result from the reorientation of life toward God. There is no way to prevent awkwardness with discernment, but it is the discomfort which results from the loss of our cozy but false security, not the oppression of legalism.

Jan Wood does not go out of her way to differentiate a particular gift of discernment from the discernment available to all. It seems to me that the gifted person is the one especially likely to have the early experiences of unease mentioned by Jan. As she says, with maturity comes the ability to relate these insights to God's redemptive purpose. But what is the role of parent, of meeting as the gift becomes evident in a person? As the gift develops, how does it become recognized and used in the building up of the congregation?

Jan says that "discernment is living, not simply perceiving," and that we cannot wait until everything is perfectly clear to us to begin living according to what we have perceived. Jan mentions our fear of failure, and later also talks about our pride and need for control. Friends need to look again at Thomas Kelly's words about the "deepest humility" which makes us bold. True humility is so far from the paralysis of false modesty, which covers up our fear and need to be in control. "Out of utter humility and self-forgetfulness," said Kelly, "comes the thunder of the prophets." In refusing to act on what we have seen, we not only narrow our own vision, but we also withhold our testimony to Truth from the rest of our meeting community and from the world.

In talking about discernment as a service that is given in love for others, Jan touches on issues of servanthood and leadership. Can our meetings stomach discerning leadership? In an age when so much discourse is based on one-upmanship, can we have leadership and followership based on mutual discernment and upbuilding. Will we permit the critical edge of loving discernment to touch our own lives?
Jan stresses the centrality of the incarnational nature of God's love to us. This is connected with her understanding of discernment as a sense which orients us toward a relationship with a loving God rather than the ability to detect violations of morality or some freelance dualisms of good and evil. The proposition is that the infinite God can be present in our finite situation to the extent that it makes sense to talk about a relationship in the first place. The testimony is that Jesus Christ turns incarnational love from theory into experience, from sophisticated theological subtlety to radical, universal availability. Mystery remains, of course, as Jan acknowledges in touching on the timetable of Jesus's revelation vs. the graph of seeking. The question for discussion, however, is whether discernment makes any sense outside incarnational theology. I have an important caution here: The very word we use for this occasion, "consultation," implies that we are truly available to each other as we exchange our deepest experiences and doubts. There is no place for manifestos. Nor is it appropriate to ignore the individuality of unfolding spiritual developments and maturities and hold up frozen models as compulsory structures for all. The task of Christian communication is so supremely precious that it is worth real work, pain and agony to speak and listen through the static of finiteness and bias.

In turning to "practical guidelines" for individual discernment, Jan discusses the preceding movement of the heart toward God and the reorientation that happens within our spirit. How specifically, does this work in our lives -- what does walking in the Spirit look like? (Not prescriptively, but descriptively!) What part does prayer play in this reorientation and its daily renewal? Is abandonment really possible? While we are constantly tempted to grab for (and revolt from) models and systems, we do have a legitimate yearning to hear the testimony of experience. It seems to me that, in our discussion of Jan's assertion that the choices for life arise from the place of abandonment of our true selves to God, we will have a hard time speaking authoritatively if we have not taken the risk of faith in exchange for our own insecurities over personal adequacy.

Jan Wood's paper very helpfully prepares us for discussion of personal spiritual discernment by focusing on attitudes and orientations which can block or encourage an understanding of discernment. As she says, it is basically a recognition and alignment task. It operates in the service of relationship and devotion, and grows with obedience. It does not depend on our self-sufficiency or goodness.

Much remains to be said about how discernment operates in church government and group decision-making. I am interested in hearing more about a sort of in-between area -- how discernment links up with other spiritual gifts in pastoral service, in the ministry of education, in the encouragement of the budding gifts of others, in group support of the prophet and the struggle with unholy powers of oppression. But to begin with, in her choice of emphases for her paper, I believe that Jan has her priorities straight.
Part I. Group Decision Processes
A. Autocratic
B. Democratic
C. Consensus
D. The Quaker Way

Part II. Background of the Quaker Way
A. Origins
B. Basis
C. Importance to the Religious Society of Friends

Part III. The Quaker Decision-making Process
A. Worship
B. Presentation of the business
C. Discussion
D. Sense of the meeting
E. Writing the minute
F. When serious differences occur

Part IV. Conditions Favoring Success of the Quaker Way
A. Participants' common understanding of faith in, and commitment to the Quaker Way
B. Existence of a real community
C. Participants' helpful skills and abilities

Part V. Discerning God's Leading for the Group
A. Use of human/divine capabilities
B. God's guidance experienced through:
   1. silent worship
   2. statements by individuals
   3. group's discovery of "a new way"
C. Unity and God's leading

The Quaker way of reaching group decisions is unique because it is a religious process. A brief review of small group decision processes emphasizes this uniqueness.

In very general terms, the common group decision processes can be categorized as: autocratic, democratic, consensus, and the Quaker way. Each of us has experienced these at one time or another. We know that in autocratic decision-making the group goes along with the leader's decisions. Group acceptance may occur because the leader has special resources ("Come with me; I know a way out of here!") or the leader wields special power ("I
own this company. Do as I say, or you're fired."

Whatever the reasons for the group's acquiescence, the autocratic decision-making process features decisions made by the leader. Such decisions can be clear, fast, efficient, and correct -- or none of these. Participants in the group may have little potential for influencing the decisions. They may also have little desire to carry out the decisions properly.

Democratic decision-making features decisions by the group, based on the vote. The ground rules are one-person, one-vote and the-most-votes-wins. In formal settings we rely on Robert's Rules of Order for procedural details. In informal settings, motions made, seconded and voted-on usually suffice.

The democratic process is a wonderful improvement over autocracy. Democratic decision-making involves the participants more, encourages convincing presentations, and enables debate to occur on the potential decisions. One of its weaknesses is its tendency to limit the formation of alternative solutions. Another weakness is its win/lose focus, with the potential result of an unhappy minority. Those in the minority are encouraged to continue with the process "because next time you may be in the majority." Disgruntled minorities, however, can restrict the group's ability to carry out its decisions.

Consensus as an alternate small group decision-making process is receiving more attention these days. However, this consensus is not a part of our popular culture. Many of us were neither taught what it is nor how to use it. Even the term, "consensus," is poorly defined and often misunderstood. For these reasons, I offer the following four definitions of consensus:

1. A decision participated in by all the members of a group and representing the maximum area of common acceptance. Syn. "sense of the meeting."  

2. ...a decision process for making full use of available resources and for resolving conflicts creatively.

3. ...means that every group member has an opportunity to influence the final decision. Members of the group reach substantial agreement, not necessarily unanimity. In consensus seeking, it is possible to achieve a solution that all members can regard as fair. When members strive for what is best for all, rather than trying to triumph over opponents, they fulfill the highest expectations of the democratic tradition.

4. In a consensus system...the goal of a meeting is...the articulation of the spirit of each member of the meeting who wishes to be heard...all members are given opportunity for full expression of their views. The discovery of an expression to which all can give approval often evolves slowly.
The chairman of the meeting has the responsibility for trying to state the sense of the meeting that emerges from the discussion, drawing together those common threads of agreement found among the various individual expressions.\(^4\)

Absent from consensus are the dictated decisions by the leader, as in autocracy, and voting by the participants, as in democracy. Consensus features a facilitating leadership and a group working to achieve its highest possible level of agreement. Advantages of consensus decision-making include its potential for building community, for seeking creative alternatives, and for avoiding the disgruntled minority. Its disadvantages include the great responsibilities it places on each participant and the fact that the process can take a lot of time. Also, consensus can be particularly subject to obstructionism by one person. A further limitation is that it works best in small groups. Several recent publications attempt to explain consensus as a small group decision-making process. One of the most comprehensive is *Building United Judgment*, written by Auvine, Avery, Striebel and Weiss and published by the Center for Conflict Resolution in Madison, Wisconsin.\(^5\)

The Quaker way of reaching group decisions is different from the autocratic, democratic and consensus processes. The Quaker way has many similarities with these, especially with the consensus process. But, as Howard Brinton pointed out, the Quaker way "...differs radically in being religious."\(^6\) George Fox was quite clear about this difference. He wrote, "Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business...but to wait upon the Lord."\(^7\) The difference was also expressed in 1662 by Edward Burrough who appealed to Friends:

> Being orderly come together, not to spend time with needless, unnecessary fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God, in such things as may upon occasion be moved amongst you, for the service of Truth and good order of the body; to hear and consider, and if possible to determine the same in justice and truth, -- not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to out speak and over-reach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, in the way of carrying on some worldly interests for self-advantage; nor deciding affairs by the greater vote, or the number of men, as the world who have not the wisdom and power of God; -- that none of this kind of order be permitted in your meeting. But in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of truth and righteousness, all things to be carried on; by hearing and determining every matter coming before you, in love, coolness, gentleness, and dear unity; -- I say, as one only party, all for the Truth of Christ..."\(^8\)
Part II. Origins, Basis and Importance of the Quaker Way

The evolutionary growth of Quakerism in the middle 1600's makes the identification of origins difficult. Rufus Jones proposed that the Quaker way of reaching group decisions originated with the societies of Seekers which Fox encountered in the northern counties of England. Elton Trueblood did not cite any specific originators. He simply said:

It is clear that the Quaker method of group decision arose spontaneously just as did the Quaker manner of worship... In Barclay and Penn we find argument for the method, but they were only giving rational justification to what was already an accepted practice when they wrote. 10

In his book, Beyond Majority Rule -- voteless decisions (sic) in the Religious Society of Friends, Michael Sheeran included a special appendix. Its purpose was:

...to demonstrate that Friends decision making is not a process which abruptly began with the inspirations of George Fox but, instead, is an important example of a rich tradition which has marked the Christian community from the days of the Apostles and which especially flourished at the time Fox founded his movement. 11

Sheeran cited evidence that some Baptist congregations led by a John Smyth may have practiced voteless decision making in the years just prior to the formation of the Quaker movement. Unfortunately, Sheeran did not find any document showing that Fox was directly influenced by these Baptist congregations or by any other specific group. So whatever the origins, it is evident that the Quaker way developed early in the life of the Religious Society of Friends. Its continuation to the present is an impressive fact.

The Quaker way of reaching group decisions is based on the belief that a group of persons can discern God's will. Trueblood related the belief to the process in the following manner:

The immense belief of Friends in the reality of continued revelation made them expect a revelation of God's will in a group meeting. They accordingly arranged a group meeting in a manner best calculated to know the revelation if it was forthcoming. 12

The same relationship has been described by Hugh Doncaster. In his view, "...Friends adopted the pattern of their business meeting because they believed it gave maximum opportunity for the spirit of God to find unified expression through the whole membership of the meeting." 13

The Quaker group decision process is of great importance to the Religious Society of Friends. As described above, the process is a direct outgrowth of one of the basic Quaker beliefs.
Its continued utilization throughout the history of Friends gives it further importance. Also, the Quaker process continues to be used throughout the various programmed and unprogrammed branches of the Religious Society of Friends today. Exceptions exist, but I believe they are few.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice presents another view of the importance of the process. It states,

Friends' way of conducting business is of central importance to the very existence of the Meeting. It is the Quaker way of living and working together; it is the way that can create and preserve a sense of fellowship in the Meeting community. From there it can spread to larger groups and larger decisions in which individual Friends or Meetings have a part. Thus it contributes to the way of peace in the world in which we live.14

Further evidence of the importance of the group decision process to the Religious Society of Friends is the presence of questions about the subject in the "Queries." The Queries, a particularly Quaker feature, are a set of questions which assist individuals and meetings in self-evaluation. They have been described as "a profile of the Quaker way of life and a reminder of the ideals Friends seek to attain."15 Meetings use the Queries in a variety of ways, such as reading them in meeting for worship and/or in monthly meeting and preparing written answers to them. The following Queries are among those found in the 1972 revised edition of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice. The first two question the meeting; the second two question the individual.

Are your meetings for business held in the spirit of a meeting for worship in which you seek divine guidance for your actions?

As difficult problems arise, is your Meeting careful to meet them with hearts and minds open for creative solutions, without being hurried by undue pressure for time?

Do you attend your meetings for business in a spirit of love and understanding, seeking a right course of action through a patient search for unity?

Do you recognize that this search may require you to accept with good grace a decision of the Meeting with which you are not entirely in agreement?16

These aspects are evidence of the importance of the Quaker way to Friends. Yet the greatest importance surely has to be that this group decision process has enabled Friends to discern God's will for the group. Experiences of this discernment have left the participants changed men and women. Such experiences have empowered Quaker groups to do God's work in the world.
Part III. The Quaker Decision-making Process

In 1973, I completed a Ph.D. dissertation in which I attempted to delineate the process involved in the Quaker way of reaching group decisions within the context of the Monthly Meeting for Business. The essentials I identified came from a review of the Quaker literature and from a questionnaire survey of twelve Friends who were well-experienced in the process. While lists of various lengths and detail can be constructed, the following presents six essentials of the Quaker process:

1. Worship

The Quaker decision process takes place in a context of worship. Worship opens and closes the meeting and can be woven throughout. Silence is employed during the meeting to enable thoughtful listening and prayerful consideration to occur.

2. Presentation of the Business

Business can be presented by the clerk, a committee or an individual. It is presented as clearly as possible. For example, at the introduction of an issue for consideration, relevant information is presented, such as the issue's context, constraints and history (if it has been before the group previously).

3. Discussion

The subject for business is spoken to by all who have information or opinions regarding it. The vocal contributions are helpful in content and presented in a sincere manner. In the discussion, the participants seek full information, attempting to see all sides of an issue toward the goal of finding God's direction. Differences are recognized, accepted without antagonism, and worked through to an understanding of them and/or creative solutions to them.

4. Sense of the Meeting

In reaching decisions, participants seek Divine Guidance within themselves and in one another. When the consideration reaches a stage where a reasonable degree of unity has been reached, the clerk announces what he or she believes to be the sense of the meeting. The group decision is identified by a statement which all agree expresses the sense of the meeting.

5. Writing the Minute

The clerk or an assistant places the clerk's proposed sense of the meeting statement into written form, called a "minute." At this time, participants may offer substitute minutes for, or suggest modification of, the proposed minute. The clerk then asks for approval of the minute. Upon approval by the participants, the minute becomes the judgment of the meeting and is preserved in the records. (Sometimes editorial changes in the agreed-upon minute can be made subsequently by the clerk and
reported at the next meeting. Also, some meetings approve the sense of the meeting statement in general at one session and then approve it in its final form at the succeeding meeting.

6. When Serious Differences Occur

When serious differences of opinion exist, the meeting may search for unity through silent prayer, followed by further discussion. When the meeting cannot achieve unity on a subject, the subject is either dropped or postponed ("held-over"). If a decision cannot be postponed and a serious difference of opinion exists, the decision may be left to a small committee. In such a case, the committee is delegated to decide and to act for the meeting.

Unity does not mean unanimity. A person may find that he or she can not agree with the sense of the meeting. In such a case, at least three alternatives are available to the individual. The person may agree to stand aside, having expressed a contrary opinion but seeing that the group has clearly reached a sense of the meeting. A more serious stand is to ask to be recorded as opposed. In this situation the person's objection is minuted, although the group is still able to proceed with its decision.

The most serious stance is for an individual to be unwilling for the meeting to proceed. In this situation, the clerk usually has to determine the seriousness of the individual's objection. If the objection is determined to be frivolous, the clerk may state that the sense of the meeting is obviously in another direction and proceed with the meeting. If the objection is a serious one, the group will delay its proceedings. The time gained by the delay can be used constructively to enable all the participants to reconsider their positions through thought and prayer, as well as to listen to and "labor with" the one Friend. The original issue then becomes an item of business at a succeeding meeting.

Part IV. Conditions Favoring Success of the Quaker Way

Three conditions are especially favorable to the success of the Quaker way of reaching group decisions. They are:

1. The participants bring to the meeting a common understanding of, a faith in, and a commitment to the Quaker way.

2. A real community exists among the group participants.

3. The participants bring helpful skills and abilities to the group.

The first is the most important. As Hugh Doncaster has said:
But the Quaker method is not simply a technique; it is a faith which finds expression in a method. The method without the faith will work so long as differences are not too great, but may then break down. The essential safeguard against such breakdown amongst Friends is the faith that God is, that there is a will of God for men discernible by men, and that faithful following of such light as we have seen will lead into realizable unity.18

Any Quaker decision-making group needs participants who share the belief that Truth/God's will/a right way/God's leading exists in any given issue and can be discovered by a corporate, loving, patient, persistent, open search. Another helpful shared belief would be in the worth of waiting. That is, enabling the group to stop short of a decision in order to await a clearer sense of how to move forward or postponing a decision until the next meeting to allow individuals time to seek within themselves and/or with one another. What if each participant came to the meeting committed to finding God's solution for the group and willing, in most cases, to set aside one's own opinions and desires in favor of that? That would be a great asset. The group also needs the shared belief in the Spirit controlled and directed life, in the continued revelation of Truth -- through one's self and any other participant.

The list could grow much longer. The point is, such understandings, beliefs and commitments shared by the participants provide the basis for the group search for unity.

Individuals in any decision-making group will be aided in their work if they know one another. According to Brinton, "The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another, better still if real affection exists among them."19 Friends groups improve their decision-making abilities as they increase and deepen their community-building activities. Small group discussions, prayer groups, fellowship times, potlucks, work days are important ingredients to community. Is transportation provided to the meetings for those who do not drive? Are babysitting and other activities provided so that parents of young children can participate? Every effort should be made to encourage attendance in decision-making groups.

In many ways, decision-making groups, especially Monthly Meeting for Business, are the crucibles of our Quaker communities. Participation in decision-making groups requires us to be open to change, open to one another and to God. Can we disagree and love at the same time? Do we know what is beneath the misunderstandings? Can we "get past" our judgments of others and appreciate their insights? The extent of love among the participants depends greatly upon the group-building experiences found outside the sessions of the decision-making group.

The third condition especially favorable to the success of the Quaker way of reaching group decisions consists of the participants' skills and abilities. These are less important
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The third condition especially favorable to the success of the Quaker way of reaching group decisions consists of the participants' skills and abilities. These are less important
than the first two conditions but still highly desirable. Each participant is essential to the group's search. The participants' abilities to worship, to open themselves to God's leadings is one of the most important abilities to bring to the group. The abilities to listen, to be patient, and to speak audibly and gently are very helpful. Dealing constructively with conflict and being imaginative in the search for solutions are other helpful skills. The graceful withdrawal of objections and the ability to help others accomplish this are important. Constructive use of humor is a real gift to any group.

The Spirit-filled, facilitating abilities of the clerk can greatly encourage a group. The clerk's abilities to submerge the group in worship, to call for silent searching, to gain participation by all, to clarify the issues, and to keep the discussion on track are extremely helpful to a meeting. Such clerks are a blessing.

Quaker groups must consider the conditions which influence their abilities to seek God's direction. Real progress in our decision-making can be gained by improvements in these conditions.

Part V. Discerning God's Leading for the Group

God is present to us, as a group, as in a Monthly Meeting for Business. God's answer/leading/will is available for any decision we might consider. Our goal, as Quakers, is to search for this Divine Guidance, to find it and to embrace it. To accomplish this, we need to use many of our capacities.

All of our human abilities should be used to research the issue in question, to clarify it, to present it clearly, and to help each member of the group understand it. We should use all our human skills to keep an open mind, to encourage participation by all, to speak clearly and briefly, to listen to one another, to be patient with the process, and to lighten it occasionally with humor.

All of our divine/human capacities should be used to open ourselves to God's direction. Individual prayer at home is good preparation. Full participation in the "centering down"/opening worship period melds us into the group's search for God's will. When each of us holds the group "in the Light" while we participate, the group's spiritual roots are deepened. Listening for God's guidance expressed within ourselves and from any other member of the group keeps us truly attentive. Looking for the creative alternative, "the way through" confusion and conflict helps us recognize God working among us. Expecting God's direction for the group prepares us to find and to embrace His answers.

In my research and experience with Quaker decision-making groups, God's guidance has been experienced in three ways: through silent worship, statements by individuals, and the group's discovery of "a new way." Sheeran has given a great gift
to Quakers by his presentation of "real life," twentieth century reports of some of these holy occasions. He reports the following recollections of a former American Friends Service Committee staff member:

In 1948, there were 750,000 refugees on the Gaza Strip; the new state of Israel had just been established. The UN asked AFSC to take responsibility for feeding, housing, etc. At the meeting of the AFSC Board of Directors, all speakers said the work needed doing, but all agreed it was just too big for the Service Committee. They counselled that we should say no, with regrets. Then the chairman called for a period of silence, prayer, meditation. Ten or fifteen minutes went by in which no one spoke. The chairman opened the discussion once again. The view around the table was completely changed: "Of course, we have to do it." There was complete unity.20

Another example from Sheeran describes a series of meetings in 1970 involving Philadelphia Representative Meeting. The 1970 Working Party requested authorization to contact all members of the Yearly Meeting and all Yearly Meeting organizations in order to ask that Friends "look to their possessions, practices, and relationships 'to try whether the seeds of exploitation and oppression' lie in them." At the end of the first meeting, the group was divided. The members agreed to convene an hour early for the next month's meeting in order to seek unity in the worship. In the business session which followed it did not appear that unity could be found. The clerk stated that she saw no agreement. Sheeran goes on to report:

At this juncture, a Friend known for his ability to read the community stood to speak. He had been silent in the previous month's discussion and was not predictably of either party in the present disagreement. He remarked simply that, for the last month, he had kept the proposal of the Working Party on the nightstand next to his bed along with his volume of the traditional testimonies and concerns of the Religious Society of Friends. He had read the Working Party's document many times. He was satisfied that not one word of it was in conflict with the traditions of Friends.

The whole discussion changed. People who had been opposed spoke of how to temper any possible misunderstandings of the proposal. Attention focused on how best to present the document so that it would have fullest effect. The Working Party's proposal was approved and forwarded to the monthly meetings.21

When the group discovers "a new way," it is difficult to report what actually happened. (This may be why I have no quote to share with you here.) The experience is akin to finding that the puzzle you have been laboring over suddenly starts fitting together. But it's more than that. In part, it is the creative group process yet sometimes the result is greater than the sum of
"The way opens" after much struggling together and the result is different from and superior to anything any individual had so far offered. The group unites with a solution that no one thought possible earlier in the meeting. No one jumped up with the answer. Lightening did not strike. Rather, bit by bit, "a new way was found." To say that this was the creative group process is not enough. It is God working in the group.

The result of our searching, finding and embracing God's direction for the group is unity. God leads us in unity. The whole Quaker group decision process is built on the equation of unity and God's guidance. Brinton explained this in the following ways.

The members of the group discover experimentally that, as they become united with God, so also do they become united with one another. Unity is always possible because the same Light of Truth shines in some measure in every human heart tending toward the same goal. By prayer, meditation and worship that goal gradually becomes apparent. 22

In another publication Brinton wrote:

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light be faithfully followed, unity will result.... The nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another, as the spokes of a wheel approach each other as they near the center. 23

A poem, author unknown, expresses, for me, my feelings when we have discerned God's will. The poem is entitled, "Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes."

Thou shalt know Him when He comes; Not by any din of drums, Nor the manner of His airs, Nor by anything he wears; Thou shalt know Him when He comes, Not by His crown or His gown, But His coming known shall be by the Holy harmony, The Holy harmony which His coming makes in thee. Thou shalt know Him when He comes. Amen 24
FOOTNOTES


7George Fox, Ibid, p. 17, Ep. 313, 1674.

8Edward Burrough, see Doncaster, #13, pp. 71-72, Letters of Early Friends, A. R. Barclay, Editor, 1841, p. 305.


16 Ibid, p. 89.


21 Ibid, p. 102.


Matt Drake has given such an excellent and sound presentation of the significant elements of the Quaker business method that all I can do is add a gloss, a commentary or an expansion of some of his points. As I was pondering my gloss, I found myself imagining the different ways in which people from various places in the North American Quaker spectrum would develop their gloss, and the language they would use to describe our process of group discernment. I believe that we Friends are influenced more than we know not only by our own branch of the Quaker culture, but also by the secular regional cultures in which we live. In a gathering like this I believe we are called to be spiritual anthropologists one to another, seeking a common language, an Esperanto of the Spirit. My gloss comes from the background of a Conservative Friend who has tried very hard to learn the languages of other Friends groups, and who enjoys being a kind of Quaker translator, a bridge between various Quaker jargons.

My response will consist of an interweaving of two themes which are both explicit and implicit in Matt's paper: intention and attention. It is my conviction that the key to group spiritual discernment, as we Friends endeavor to practice it in our business meetings, lies in understanding and applying these two concepts.

But before developing these two themes, I want to underline Matt's statements and quotations which emphasize the importance of the Friends business meeting in the life of the faithful Friend. One could argue that the business meeting is at least as important as the meeting for worship, for it is the actual demonstration of the New Testament vision of a fellowship guided by, and obeying, the Spirit. The meeting for worship alone can be (though it should not be) a matter of private salvation or private experience without significant changes in life, behavior, commitment or sacrifice. On the other hand, the meeting for business, if it be spirit filled and properly understood, is a hands-on, laboratory-like experience in which the whole fellowship comes face to face with the Spirit's demands for the sacrifice of time, treasure, convenience and prejudice. When opinions differ widely and the need for spiritual discernment becomes crucial, the best of Quaker business techniques alone will not suffice; then we are driven, as never in a meeting for worship, to seek that spiritual covering which alone can give the fruits of the spirit which can sustain harmony while waiting for the right leading. Thus, God's work among us becomes more real and faith is both tested and strengthened in the business meeting. Both intention and attention can be severely tested by two ever present and very real hazards in the Friends business method: impatience and a vacuous boredom. The Friend who
recognized that these hazards can be a spiritual call to go
deeper into worship brings great power to the work of the church
as well as an opening of his or her own spiritual gifts,
including discernment. Thus the Friends business meeting can not
be described as just the peculiar Quaker form of getting things
done; rather it should be seen as an essential part of the
spiritual formation and the spiritual growth of every seasoned
Friend, for it is that place through which we learn to walk hand
in hand with each other and the Spirit out into the world to do
the work of committed and obedient disciples.

The word disciple brings us back to the dedicated intention
which seems necessary for Quaker group discernment. It is a fact
long recognized that this process works best when there is a
common sense of discipleship among the participants in a business
meeting. In such a meeting there needs to be a profound
commitment to what ancient Friends called Truth (spelled with a
capital T). Whatever theology a modern Friend puts into that
once pregnant and powerful term, Truth, it is still possible to
be in a disciple relationship to it, to the presence of the
Living Christ, to the Inward Teacher, to the Holy Spirit. If we
come to the business meeting with the intention of being
disciples, we are eagerly teachable and reachable and malleable
in the hands of the Living Teacher.

The Book of Acts and some of the epistles of the New
Testament tell us that the intention of being a disciple after
Pentecost brought with it an experience and a knowledge of being
a living, organic part of the Body, the Body of Christ. Paul
even speaks at one point of the importance of perceiving the
Body. Here is one example of how intention makes possible the
experience of attention to what for many people may be a new or
at least rare kind of perception, the living experience of being
a part of the Body. I certainly agree with what Matt said about
the importance of fellowship on many levels: I only want to
emphasize the fundamental importance of the development of this
spiritual faculty of awareness of the Body as foundational to
Spirit-fed fellowship. As people learn to find and to rest in
this reality, they are then able to give attention to the
otherwise subtle signals of the Body and to pay attention to its
needs for health and action.

In practice, this awareness of the Body has several levels.
At one end it may seem to focus on the human dimension of our
fellowship; it may manifest itself in a feeling for the gestalt
of the fellowship, that is for its shape and mood, or as Friends
still say, for its "state" or "condition." But the Body of
Christ goes far beyond our own little group, so it is well to pay
attention to the Holy Spirit which is at the center of this
awareness of the Body. We need a disciple's dependence on the
Holy Spirit. In a business meeting, we should be as deeply
dependent upon it as were the Christians in the Book of Acts,
where the Holy Spirit is described, time after time, as entering
into the decisions of the church.

Thus, at the heart of any successful business meeting is a
significant core of people whose lives are daily in touch with
that which we may call by various names -- the Holy Spirit -- the Inward Christ -- the Universal Light. Of the many skills which clerk and participants need to bring to a business meeting, this skill of discipleship through the Holy Spirit is very important, this daily faithful following of the path set before us, this daily opening, again and again, to communion with the living center of all life. If we want the fruits of the spirit to be present in our business meetings, we need to continue to explore ways to help our members to find and experience this Spirit in their daily lives and in small groups.

Another way of looking at the intention and attention necessary for Quaker group discernment is to consider what I have come to call the five gut feelings of the meeting for business. As I describe these, I hope it is evident that several theological statements are implicit in these gut feelings, just as I hope it is evident that by stressing the gut feelings rather than theology, I am recognizing that the goal is for our theology to become incarnate within our body and emotions as well as our mind. These five gut feelings, then, can be seen as a necessary prerequisite for the meeting for business. They do not, of course, need to occur in the order here set forth, nor do they need, in practice, to be separated into five distinct feelings, since they can certainly be experienced simultaneously. Also, they should be experienced -- in some measure -- throughout a Friends business meeting, and not only just during the opening worship which normally precedes a business or committee meeting.

The first of the five gut feelings is joy, joy at being with these familiar faces. It is joy at coming once again into the blessed fellowship, the community of the redeemed, the community of the freed ones, people freed in some measure from prejudice, fear, loneliness and aimlessness, into the community of people freed, in some measure, from slavery to the principalities and powers of this age, that is, freed from slavery to the unthinking assumptions and drives of whatever temporal culture surrounds us. It is joy at being with other people who have experienced some measure of spiritual transformation, with people who share our vision of reality. It is like returning to one's own family, to one's native land and language. It is joy at feeling our organic connection with these people, joy at feeling our linkage with them through the Spirit and through our common work.

The second gut feeling is the joy, awe and comfort at being once again in the presence of the Great Friend, the Healer, the Transformer, the Restorer, the Giver of Inward Peace and Refreshment, the Inward Teacher. It is like going into a cool building from a hot, noisy street. We are in the presence of awesome power, yet it is very near and personal, and we simply attune ourselves to that quiet, loving presence. Ideally, the presence is so real and the attunement is so pervasive that we can actually let go of our busy agenda; and even let go of our own passionate feelings about some issue to come before the meeting, and just rest in the presence, remembering whose meeting this really is.
At this point in the opening worship before the business, it is well to note that almost all religions and almost all other denominations devote a great deal of attention to the opening moments of worship. We remember the rituals tested by centuries, the beautiful words, the music, the candles, the colors, the incense used to help people move from the ordinary mental state into that altered state of consciousness which is worship. Thus we Friends, whether programmed or unprogrammed, need to bring to our entrance into worship, especially the worship before a business meeting, a strong inward intentionality, a depth of intention which at least matches the care which the traditional church lavishes on the rituals and the outward words of these opening moments. If there is any skill that is fundamental to a good business meeting it is this disciplined and committed skill of attention to the Great Friend, to the Inward Teacher, to the Universal Light of Jesus Christ.

As we rest in that presence, with the intention of giving total attention, we find ourselves moving into the altered state of consciousness of gut feeling three, as we move from joy to assurance. Ideally, at this point we feel ourselves cradled, supported, held up by those everlasting arms. We may feel ourselves loved, bathed in light, dwelling timelessly in the light, baptized into a living, healing presence. At this point there may even be no words, only a sense of unity, unity, unity... It is as if we were entering into a stream, which I am fond of calling the stream of the Quaker Process, which is as real as stepping into a stream of water; just as there is no doubt when we enter or leave a stream of water, so there is no doubt when we are surrounded by that stream of living unity. The amazing thing about that stream is that we don't create it -- we only enter it, for it has always been there, for as it is written, "In the beginning was the Word..." We can describe being in this place as being in an altered state of consciousness, or in the non-linear mode of mind, but I hasten to add that we are not seeking just any altered state of consciousness, of which there are legion. This altered state of consciousness of gut feeling three is what the New Testament describes as being in the Mind of Christ. The assurance of gut feeling three comes from being a living part of the Body of Christ and of sharing in the Mind of Christ. We remember how important a parent's touch is to a small child, how a child needs, again and again, to come back to receive the parent's touch in order to feel safe and to be ready to go back out and to be bold. Just so, as we rest in the Mind and Body of Christ, we are touched on many deep levels, so that we may become bold in the Truth, and even bold with ourselves as we face new ideas and as we face our own prejudices and fears in the business meeting. We are also gentled and tendered in this state of consciousness, just as a child is calmed down by the parent's touch. As we stay in this altered level of consciousness, this being in the Mind of Christ, we discover that the boundaries of the self are blurred and melded, and that the intense pressure of the ego can relax.

It is from this state of consciousness that both the gifts of the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit seem most easily to arise. Since the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit are
indispensable tools of the group discernment process, it seems absolutely necessary for us as individuals, meetings and committees who use that process to give considerable attention to gut feeling three, however we describe it. We can not afford to let gut feeling three end when the initial period of worship is over, and what we call the business begins. Modern Friends, educated and conditioned by the surrounding culture, and having lost touch with the contemplative rhythms of traditional Quakerism, may sometimes find it difficult or even unnatural to conduct business while staying in the Mind of Christ. So our intention must be strong and persistent in order to rediscover the exciting dimensions of attention which are possible through the expanded consciousness of the Mind of Christ.

A business meeting in touch with the Mind of Christ may seem to go more slowly, but it may actually get more done in the end. In this state of consciousness, an individual or meeting tends first of all to contemplate or to "absorb" a new idea or concern for a period of time without judging it or reacting to it, until someone feels a clear inward motion about it. Spiritual discernment seems to flourish best from this contemplative, reflective, non-linear state of mind, which is a wide, non-judgmental, almost non-attached but very alert attentiveness. Being in the Mind of Christ, however, does not mean being "spaced out" for the analytical faculties are not suppressed; they are merely put into their rightful harmony by being surrounded and cushioned by a more vast mind which takes all things into account. Indeed, our analytical faculties are at least as sharp if not sharper in the Mind of Christ than they are at other times; the difference is that here we know that we are not just our surface mind, as we Westerners tend to assume, and the difference is that this surface mind is no longer the master, but the tool, of the more integrated person we become in the Mind of Christ.

The Mind of Christ also lets us see more deeply into ourselves, which is also necessary for discernment. For example the Mind of Christ gives us the inward time and space so that we can separate our fears about a new idea from the facts about a new idea, thus allowing us to think more clearly and analytically about the idea itself, and allowing us to probe carefully to find whether the seat of our fear is a true discernment or whether the cause of our fear comes from an unconverted, unfaithful part of ourselves. The Mind of Christ also gives us the space and time to seek the germ of truth behind the idea, to recognize the problem of discontinuity which it seeks to remedy. The proposal may indeed be unworkable, but by feeling for what John Woolman called the inward motion behind it, the meeting or the committee can be discerning enough to avoid the mistake of just rejecting the proposal without at the same time acknowledging that they must pay attention to the concern which is behind it.

One of the characteristics of old-fashioned Quakerism -- their long, long meetings -- becomes easier to understand in the Mind of Christ. When a meeting operates in this Mind, it is as if there is a restful, sustaining energy flowing through the room, so that the participants, though tired by the effort of a
long meeting, are at the same time rested and fed and energized on some very deep level. Being in the Mind of Christ can even make the handling of routine business more of a pleasure, and because of the consequent openness to discernment, significant new openings may be the more likely to arise even in routine affairs. We speak easily -- or hopefully -- of a covered meeting for worship. Far less often do we hear people speak of a covered meeting for business, though it should be just as possible. Even -- or especially -- committee meetings can be covered meetings through dwelling in the Mind of Christ.

Next we come to gut feeling four, another very important part of the climate needed for the group discernment process. This can be described as a deep feeling of trust. There grows upon us a trust in the immense Power at the heart of the universe, which is also in our own hearts. What some would call faith, I would here call trust -- a deep trust in God, as Person, as Love, as Power, as Light. Above all, there is a deep trust in the process, the process by which God is at work in our individual lives. And this translates into a deep trust in the Friends business process being used in that very meeting, knowing that, through the Mind of Christ, one has a deep trust in the meeting and in what it does to us and what it does with us. If the process breaks down it is often because of a lack of this gut-level trust. We know that we can not will faith, but we can will to be faithful. Such sustained intention and attention can be very important in maintaining a necessary level of trust, not only in our business meetings, but also in daily life.

Finally there comes gut feeling five, which may seem like a contradiction. This is the feeling of excitement, excitement about the unexpected, the unpredictable. It is the excitement of a Holy Expectancy. Every time we enter the room in which the business meeting is about to be held, there can be a mounting sense of excitement as we come face to face with the utter unpredictability of God at work through our lives. As we enter, we never know what will happen! We are like the player who sits on the bench at the beginning of a game who does not know whether he will sit on the bench throughout the game, or whether at unexpected moments the coach will suddenly send him out to play very hard. Perhaps there should be a sign over the door: Beware of entering this meeting -- there are no back seats here! or Beware of entering this meeting -- it can change your life forever. Even the clerk -- especially the clerk -- should enter with this faithful, joyous excitement, this willingness to face the unpredictable, the unknown, secure in the Mind of Christ. It is true that a good clerk often knows ahead of time how an agenda item will be disposed of by the meeting, and it is sometimes true that a skilled clerk often knows inwardly what the meeting will finally decide as much as five or ten minutes before the meeting reaches unity, but a faithful clerk is always prepared for the Holy Spirit to do some very unexpected things. Such excitement and daring are sustainable and safe only as they occur with the other gut feelings, with their combination of intention and attention: first, joy in feeling part of a fellowship of committed disciples; second, joy in the presence of the Great Friend, the Great Parent; third, a profound, gut-level assurance
and unity as one rests in the presence of that Great Friend and feels the expansion of consciousness which comes in the Mind of Christ; fourth, trust in the Process, the gut-level trust of a child in a parent, or the trust of a bright, eager student in a beloved teacher.

I would like to conclude by re-emphasizing the importance of gut feeling three, which leads to the expansion of consciousness in the Mind of Christ, for this is not only the cement which can meld a diverse group of individuals into a unified meeting, it is also the living climate in which group discernment is especially possible. Each of our business meeting skills (and there are many important skills for both meeting members and clerks) need to be seen as functioning not simply as isolated and teachable skills (which on one level they are), but they also need to be understood as functioning in harmony with and out of this most important business meeting skill, the ability to remain in that slightly altered state of consciousness which is in touch with the infinite wideness of the Mind of Christ through our long business meetings.

Not surprisingly, meetings who learn to do this generally find that they go more slowly in order to make haste more quickly. I recently saw this demonstrated at Pendle Hill when a student from the Netherlands insisted that our Pendle Hill business meeting should go back to what she regarded as the proper way to write the minutes, which was to write each minute as it was decided, with the meeting remaining in silence while the recording clerk drafted the minute, which was then read back to the meeting and approved or amended before the meeting went on to the next agenda item. Not surprisingly, subsequent meetings were more efficient and more restful.

But to conclude with this skill of being in the Mind of Christ. This skill includes the ability to use rational thought processes without slipping back into "checkbook-balancing mind" or "discussion-group mind," and it includes being able to speak with precision and clarity without slipping out of the Mind of Christ into "orator mode of mind" or "partisan mind" or "college professor mind." This same skill also helps the meeting for worship, whether programmed or unprogrammed, for there is a significant difference between listening to a programmed or unprogrammed sermon in the expansion of the Mind of Christ and listening to a sermon in what we might call "audience mind" or even "critic mind." The more people who exercise this skill of sustained, spirit-fed attention, the more possible it will be for individuals or for entire meetings to experience what George Fox called Gospel Order, that quiet, unified inward knowing about the next steps a meeting should or should not take, even in the midst of disagreements and great problems.
ROLEPLAY I
Joyce Mardock Holden

THE SITUATION

Gurney Grove Friends Church meets in Legion Hall #492. We have ever since the old church burned back in 1957 and we moved into the hall "temporarily." Right at that time there were several objections which quieted down as the members got used to being in the Legion Hall. But from time to time, there are strong convictions expressed that it is wrong to have any part of or connection with the Legion. Others feel comfortable meeting there. After all, it is cheap rent; they allow us to leave our Sunday School things in their cupboards; and there's a big room for potlucks. We can't get all that anywhere else in town -- we know because we've looked.

OUR TASK

We need to discern the future direction for Gurney Grove Friends Church. Shall we build a new church or stay at Legion Hall #492?

ROLE 1 I feel so strongly that a new church be built that I will give $10,000 to start the fund. Gurney Grove Friends Church is too important to let it slip away. I went to Sunday School and church in our old building and it meant a lot to me -- the organ music, the pews, the quiet simplicity of the worship room.

ROLE 2 I think we can witness to our Quaker principles best by being right here. Remember, last year at their Memorial Day ceremony, the Legion included Conscientious Objectors in their prayer? I think we are making progress.

ROLE 3 We ought to spend our money on important things like peace and missions rather than on a fancy building for ourselves. Just think what $150,000 would do in Africa!

ROLE 4 We have a perfectly adequate room here and Quakers have never set much store in their worship surroundings -- worship can happen anywhere. We really wouldn't be distracted if we were paying proper attention to our worship.

ROLE 5 I teach Sunday School and it's really nice not to have to pack everything up and take it home every week. Why they let us leave our Easter mural on the wall for two
weeks. We baked cookies for the Legionnaires last Christmas.

ROLE 6  I have a real concern that Gurney Grove needs a new building. Gurney Grove community has had a Friends Church for many years. Our presence would be known in the community if we had a proper building. We can't even invite new people to come to this Legion Hall. It's a distasteful atmosphere and very unworshipful, I think.

ROLE 7  I can't worship with all these flags and military symbols everywhere. It goes against all I believe in as a Quaker. Besides, it smells like stale cigars in here every Sunday morning.
ROLEPLAY II
Joyce Mardock Holden

THE SITUATION

The Monthly Meeting just received this letter (see below) from Quaker Hill Conference Center and we are to act on it this month. These Friends are available to attend the conference. The other option is to send one of us present around this table, but, of course, we have all attended one conference on discernment. Whom will we choose?

OUR TASK

We are to choose a delegate and write a short minute stating who it will be and why or how we came to this decision. It is given that we naturally want to send someone from our meeting.

Quaker Hill Conference Center
10 Quaker Hill Dr.
Richmond, IN 47374

Dear Friends:

We are looking forward to the Consultation on Spiritual Discernment to be held at Quaker Hill Conference Center on December 12-15, 1987.

As heretofore, we will be inviting 40-50 Friends from as wide a representation of Yearly Meetings as possible. We would like you to suggest one person from your Meeting who could both contribute to this Consultation on Spiritual Discernment as well as benefit from it. Our hope is to reach new people and limit the number of repeat attenders. We would appreciate receiving a short minute from your Monthly Meeting officially nominating this person and giving some indication of the reasons why you have chosen this one.

Thank you for your cooperation. We look forward to an excellent conference as we have had in the past six years.

Very sincerely,

Eldon Harzman, Director

Wilmer Cooper, Coordinator
THE DELEGATE POSSIBILITIES

Joseph Bartelli He is an academic and recently wrote and published a book called, "Are Friends Comfortable? The History of Friends Decision Making." For this book, he traveled widely among Friends getting various points of view. He is a long time attender of the meeting and a helpful contributor in our business sessions. He says he would be glad to give us a detailed report of the conference so that we can discuss discernment at our next monthly meeting.

Lucretia Haverford She comes from a long line of Quaker leaders and takes seriously her Quaker commitment and ministry. She has represented our meeting at several Friends conferences, including the Friends World Committee in Kaimosi, Kenya. She is experienced in Friends decision making process through her service on many Friends Trusts and Boards. She's just completed a term as our yearly meeting clerk.

Rufus Haverford (Lucretia's husband) He has supported his wife's ministries in every way. He is a quiet, deeply religious man whose messages in both Meeting for Worship and Business are always considered to be truly of the Spirit and carry a great deal of weight. Many young people have come to Rufus over the years to help them clarify their important life choices, but few others would even know this about him.

Joanne Gordon She can only attend meeting sporadically because she works on Saturday nights at a women's crisis center where she is a volunteer "listener." She sees a lot of troubled people and tries to find creative ways to help each one. She is new to Friends, but she is very keen to read about our ways. She has just turned to the meeting to set up a committee of clearness as to whether she should seek professional training in counseling.

Harry Foster Harry was in the Navy when he came in contact with Friends for the first time. He noted something special and different about the Quaker C.O.'s. He was led to resign from his position and do positive work for humankind. He depends a lot on what he calls "God's nudges" for his daily decisions. The meeting has released him to go to Ethiopia in the feeding programs there and to work with the inner city poor.
SUMMARY OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

An important part of the Consultation was the small group discussions. Participants were divided into groups of six or seven each with as much geographic and yearly meeting distribution as possible. The groups met for fellowship and in-depth sharing, discussion of the papers presented to the plenary sessions, and work on an assigned task.

GROUPS TASKS

Think of yourselves as a specially constituted committee of your Meeting to deal with one of the two following tasks and bring a recommendation to the Monthly Meeting. You can name your committee if you would like, such as Ministry and Counsel, or Peace and Social Concerns, etc. Begin to work on your task until you have exhausted the various ramifications and come to a "sense of the meeting" about your conclusion. Please be prepared to report on this at our Saturday night session.

Situation I

Elaine is the daughter of a respected family in your Meeting. After finishing one year in college and after some involvement with drugs she disappeared for a period of time and finally ended up joining an elitist religious group (name it if you would like). At this point the family became aware of Elaine's whereabouts but discovered that they had for all practical purposes lost meaningful contact with her. Communication with her is very limited both from the standpoint of the group to which she belongs as well as from her apparent lack of desire to identify herself with her family. Moreover, the parents are now considering steps to have Elaine deprogrammed, which has only served to aggravate the situation.

Your Task

In this obviously pained and alienated situation you have been asked by the family for help. Try to analyse the various aspects of the situation and discern what help and counsel you can give them. Perhaps you can act as a clearness committee in helping them work through their pain and predicament. Perhaps there are ways you could attempt to reach Elaine so as to re-establish trust and meaningful contact again. What is your leading in the matter and how would you carry it out?
Situation II

Your Meeting is considering sanctuary for a Central American family who are illegal aliens in the United States. If they are discovered by the Immigration Service, they will probably be returned to their native country to face the death squads. To provide sanctuary will be illegal, at least it will be so interpreted by most. Your Meeting is divided over whether to respond to this need. There is general agreement, however, that it would not be wise to take this action unless there is a corporate leading of the Spirit in this matter.

Your Task

How do you propose that your Meeting proceed in terms of discerning God's will? Are there things that can be done to set the proper conditions for discerning the leading of the Spirit? What signs should members of the Meeting look for in their attempt to reach a "sense of the meeting?"

GROUP I

In our first two sessions we began to share where discernment was happening or needed in our lives.

We heard concerns for family, for proclaiming and teaching moral values which were distinguished from the self-indulgent and self-reliant message of the world, for situations of divisions among Friends over the divinity and centrality of Jesus, and for the relevance of the Incarnation and the redemptive story in our lives. We found ourselves sharing a sense of the risk involved in stepping forward with a leading, but the necessity of doing so in order to receive further clarity and support.

In our 3rd session we considered whether the role-play tasks were relevant to our needs, and decided to try the situation which appeared to call for the most listening and healing on our parts. We role-played Situation I where a couple, members of the meeting, come to Ministry and Counsel seeking clarity on how to respond to a daughter who has joined a cult. We found our first response to be: (1) What should the parents do? Should they try deprogramming or not? (2) What can we do? How can we help get her back some other way than deprogramming? We also role-played some elements of "Why is this our responsibility; should we get involved in this at all?"

It was difficult to clarify our task or even to decide who determined what our task was to be as M & C. The two parents were not sure what they wanted and probably did not agree. Did they want help, advice, involvement, support, affirmation, love, or what? One of us called us to prayer to take hands and be channels of God's love to the parents especially. At this point the role-play changed. It was suggested that we try "soaking prayer," a group meeting frequently with the expectation that God would open a way for reconciliation. Some of us agreed that we needed to acknowledge our helplessness and give up our illusion
that we could solve this family's problems by our own power. It seemed to be the sense of the Meeting that we should proceed with prayer in this spirit and that we would need to begin by praying for clarity about what we were to pray for. We were not clear on whether it was necessary for all concerned to accept the position of helplessness before moving on. In the role play the father was unwilling to give up deprogramming as a fall-back position if prayer did not produce results. Did we have enough openness to begin? We considered sending someone from the Meeting to make contact with the daughter but decided that we needed first to pray for the preparation for this contact. We considered involving young people from the Meeting and were concerned not to ask more of them than they might be able to do. We did agree to invite young people to join in the prayer group.

The role play of an artificial situation was useful, but we noted some discomfort over "playing at prayer." We could not do this the way we would hope to do it in our home meetings, because it was artificial. On the other hand, would we be as willing to state our helplessness and rely on prayer in a real situation in our home meetings? We would need to take more risks to do this.

In our last two sessions we returned to issues of immediate concern to our ministries. We considered the relationship between discernment and action. We recognize that discernment needs to be ongoing with our actions. Sometimes we run ahead of our knowledge of God's will; sometimes we hang back. We need to keep listening to all of the instructions.

We considered the role of Scripture in discernment. The extremes, both of which are represented within Friends, range from using Scripture to remove our responsibility for decisions to not knowing anything in Scripture. Can we again immerse ourselves in knowledge of Scripture so that we are able to use it in discernment? We are glad to see more openness to and interest in the Bible among unprogrammed Friends.

Remaining questions include: how can we maintain a sense of community and tenderness toward each other during difficult and divisive deliberations? We experience that we are sometimes at our best in these difficult situations.

We asked ourselves what we have discerned during this consultation for our own ministries in our home meetings. The sense of fellowship and knowing that others are also seeking to be faithful helps us feel strengthened to act more boldly upon the concerns we carry.

GROUP II

We began our gatherings by establishing a few basic ground rules for sharing with one another. First, we would try to share from personal experience when discussing ideas from the presentations. Second, when listening to another we would listen without judgment and with genuine curiosity, desiring to understand rather than to evaluate that personal
experience. With these expectations we began to share with one another our personal journeys of faith in response to Alastair Heron's question, "How have we been obedient?"

In the midst of much diversity, we embraced a spirit of open search, characterized by acceptance and learning, a place that was safe to share, a feeling of being enlarged, good cheer and much laughter, good prayer and singing. As one member quoted, "I was stretched as far out of my comfort-zone as I've ever been without feeling lasting pain or personal injury."

In this spirit we took on the small group task in the third session. The following minute evolved out of two long sessions together:

"The ministry and counsel committee has met and labored with the situation of Elaine and her parents. We have contacted Elaine's parents to express our deeply felt caring for them at this time. In response to their request we have identified a group to meet with them from this meeting who will be in prayer for Elaine and her parents. This group will pray with the parents for God's guidance in this matter as way opens and will commit themselves to continue their prayers for this family in the days and weeks to come."

"Elaine's parents are easy with Jeffrey Aaron convening the prayer group. Jeffrey has stated that he would be willing to contact certain possible resource people for the parents at this time:

1. A lawyer (member of our meeting or referral)
2. The spiritual counterfeits project, a group which has worked with people in this situation
3. Elaine's former college (the dean of students and her college friends).

Jeffrey has also stated that he would be willing to travel out to attempt to meet with Elaine himself.

"If the parents would like a clearness committee, we recommend that it consist of the lawyer, Jeffrey and members of the meeting of the parents' choosing."

"The ministry and counsel committee also recognized that we were not contacted in this situation until it had developed a long time. We are concerned by the lack of community trust this implies. We were not aware of Elaine's difficulties nor of her parents' struggle. We will seek for ways in which we can be more open to each other in areas of pain and struggle and hope to create an atmosphere of welcoming the coming forth of friends in areas of conflict or concern."

From the labor of this task, we returned to our sharing of questions now one of the other growing out of our having listened. In the fresh light of new understandings of different
experiences, we began to share ways for carrying back to our home meetings the richness of our conversations. For example, we yearned to know in our own meetings the leading of the Spirit that led our group in its task work to a place of feeling discomfort with deprogramming and an awareness that this feeling would necessarily lead us into a deeper spiritual discernment process than we had formerly experienced in our meeting.

In our last session we began to understand our differences in being drawn to programmed and unprogrammed meetings for worship. Without trivializing the differences, those from one tradition began to feel a curiosity rather than a judgment about the other tradition. From this kind of seeking, one young pastor was led to speak in unprogrammed worship after another member in worship had ministered, "Be not afraid." Our group departed thankful to God and to each other for the chance to know experientially what we had heard in our larger gatherings, that the beginnings of spiritual discernment are found in knowing the truth that we are never outside of God's love.

GROUP III

"Spirit of God, descend on us, through all our pulses move."

Cathy -- Can we start out by sharing an exceptional experience or a great opening in our own lives?

My first experience of God's presence came with the birth of a child. From then on, I knew there was a God.

Dorothy -- I was awakened by hearing my name called. Then began a series of experiences of guidance.

Charles -- I was at a talk by a Quaker missionary, given when I was a child. The Lord found me, sitting near the back. There was an inward speaking that said to me -- "You are not to be a missionary -- you are to be a pastor." It's been a growing experience ever since.

Hannah -- Tremendous light presented itself, and with it a song:

 Movements of my mind  
 are stilled by the hushing  
 of the summer's breeze as it whispers

 Let thy heart grieve not  
 Fear not for He is with thee.

 And I opened my heart  
 to the words that embraced by soul.  
 And as I listened I  
 felt the presence of His wisdom  
 Presence of His guidance.

 There is that of the Light  
 Along with the beauty
of unspoken words and emotions
that I must try to live,
Try to follow.

Eugenia -- talk about the glory of the Lord. It was everywhere, within and without.

Diana -- I had been holding on to the struggle to know what God's will was. I looked at those untroubled faces at the meeting. "Be still -- I am here."

Lucy -- I felt led to speak in worship. I knew that these were my people.

Alastair -- I've come to realize what an interminably difficult time God has had with me. I had begun sharing fellowship with a group of people who were in the practice of seeking God's guidance together. For the first time in my life, I saw people who manifestly loved one another.

Task #1

We decided to approach the task as a Clearness Committee. It is possible that one or two of us might have been suggested by the parents requesting our help.

We realize cleanness is grounded in prayer.

Our committee began by sharing the commonality of experiences we have had, similar to that of the task. This was an important part of how we approached the task.

As a Clearness Committee we met without the family of Elaine present.

Our response to the request in the first place will be to the family.

We feel the kidnapping and deprogramming are unacceptable violence to us.

We understand the parents' pain and caring.

We feel the healing won't flow until the relationship of parent and child is clarified.

We considered what this committee might do. We would be seeking discernment at each step of the process of this committee.

We will join with the parents in a journey toward fresh understanding of their role.

Some needs of the parents are to have us to unload on. We begin by listening -- (we are preparing ourselves to be able to listen in this committee meeting. We want them to realize we are hearing them.)
The purpose of clearness is not to unload but to move through the process to other sharing events such as a meal, worship together, etc. We want to balance the unloading with the health-giving process. We want the parents to be held in love in many situations.

It would be a subgroup of this committee that would visit the parents as a couple.

After we have listened we will share with the parents some of our attitudes towards them and toward Elaine.

We realize she is their child but she is also an adult. This happens to all parents: children stop being dependent as they become independent.

We assure the parents -- wherever they are and wherever Elaine is -- they are NOT OUT OF THE LOVE OF GOD.

We would have our response depending on what the parents' response is to our visit.

A subgroup of this committee (there would have to be common membership in these two subgroups) would approach and if possible meet with a person who has a close relationship with Elaine; if there is such a person -- or if there is more than one such person -- choosing a mature skilled friend.

We would ask this friend to encourage Elaine to meet with the subgroup.

If she agrees, we would realize that this would be a long-range commitment on our part to continue this relationship.

If it emerged from this process, a Family Relations Group might be formed within the Meeting.

We need to explore whether there are feelings in the Meeting that it has failed this family and address these feelings.

GROUP IV

Our group found much joy and pleasure in our time together. The task enhanced our sense of unity and gave us a focus to develop loving and caring relationships. There was no sense of chafing at the task as an intrusion into the "real" purpose of the small groups. I believe we saw modeled among us how concrete tasks are the structure and form out of which caring, unity, and love are expressed.

Without feeling it important to relate details of our activity in supporting Elaine and her family, I will relate our insights into the process of discernment.

1. In dealing with our feelings toward the group, toward the family and seeking to stay in unity as to what we were
trying to accomplish, the problem-solving fell into place. If we had problem-solved, leaving feelings to take care of themselves, people would not have been so easy in volunteering for sensitive tasks. As we found out, people volunteered joyfully, believing they would be enriched not diminished.

2. Being aware of our own agendas and pre-judgments helped us be open to new possibilities and directions.

3. Prayer helped set the cadence or "holy rhythm" in order to be discerning.

4. When we felt unclear as to what direction to go (discernment), it was time to affirm our faith that God will walk with us in the moments of action and use our actions for good.

5. Sharing past experiences helped us reflect more deeply and discernment came out of these specific past events.

GROUP V

Report - part 1

As clerk of the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, I went to the clerk to propose a minute to this Monthly Meeting. The clerk has suggested that I take the minute first to Ministry and Counsel. The background of the minute is that we have talked by telephone with Friends in Tucson. A refugee family needs sanctuary immediately, beyond what Friends there can provide. Some of our members are willing to provide housing and care for the family, but we ask the Monthly Meeting to minute that it agrees to assume responsibility for this family.

Report - part 2

Ministry and Counsel, at the request of the clerk of the Monthly Meeting, considered how this issue should be brought before the Meeting.

We were mindful of the markedly divergent opinions which some Friends have expressed over this issue. We recognized the potential for divisiveness if the minute were simply laid before an unprepared Meeting.

As we sought leading we recognized that a root of potential difficulties lay in a lack of a unified sense of God's purpose for our Meeting, not only for the issue of sanctuary but for the broader area of our overall responsibility for the poor and oppressed.

That was the concluding point of our first session.

We opened our second session with the reading of Isaiah 58:6-12.
"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

Isaiah 58:6, 7

As our searching proceeded we began to see in the consideration of the minute an opportunity and a call to consider as a Meeting our role in that Holy Ascribement which is the truth of our Society. We began to focus on the minute not as a challenge to be faced but as an opportunity to be welcomed — an opportunity for Ministry and Counsel to be responsive to its mission of guiding the spiritual growth and development of the Meeting and all its members — fulfilling the pastoral needs of our members.

We identified three strands of concern:

1. A concern for all our members, especially those presently on opposite sides of the issue — the need to include and embrace all members in the process, to use the issue to unite, not divide us.

2. An opportunity for learning and the spiritual growth of each member and the Meeting as a whole.

3. A Holy opportunity to seek and discover God's purpose for our Meeting.

We have identified three specific needs which must be met in order that we may have a firm foundation from which the opportunity before us may be fulfilled:

1. A need for the members of Ministry and Counsel to take direct and personal responsibility for the success of the process.

2. A need to deepen and expand the shared social life of our membership.

3. A need to strengthen our community and our ability to participate together in a shared search for God's will for us.

With this background explanation of the process through which Ministry and Counsel has moved in its searching deliberations on this issue, I will ask our Recording Clerk to read our minute for the Consideration of the Monthly Meeting.
GROUP VI

We came with an eagerness to share and learn tempered by an uncertainty over how ready others were to hear our stories of pain and joy. We came from seven different yearly meetings as far apart geographically and theologically as a Friends church in Bakersfield, California, and an unprogrammed meeting in Boston. In all of this we experienced a kind of ecumenism of experience -- a knitting together by our common commitment to know God and her-ways. Our experience as a group came to be a sort of model or paradigm of discernment. In it we felt both the exhilaration and the anxiety of being vulnerable and honest before ourselves, each other, and God. We also struggled with our own fears and impatience. We had trouble getting started but our readiness outweighed our hesitation and we soon were able to share deeply from our encounter with God and experiences of her leading in our lives. Friends talked of visions and voices as well as that kind of guidance that comes with the mounting pressure of fact, circumstance and insight. But most of all we listened prayerfully, in love and without judgment, as we each told our story bits and pieces at a time in the big and small matters of building up God's reign on earth.

Parenthetically, our group experienced the TASK process as an unwelcome interruption in our quickly evolving community. Perhaps it would have been useful as an opening exercise. We suspect however that an "exercise" in spiritual discernment may be a contradiction in terms.

Our group shared nurture, discernment, and a love for God, which, however imperfect, made it a safe place for us to share from deep within. It is perhaps a sad testimony on our home meetings that we're all so eager (perhaps even desperate) to open ourselves to total strangers.

GROUP VII

After reading over our small group task we arrived at a choice out of the silence of worship. Several of us voiced a choice for situation #2 because it was the situation that we were most challenged by through our fears. The rest of the group approved and at that point we "fleshed" out some boundaries and limits for the situation.

We agreed that we, as a Monthly Meeting, would not do this for public attention and that it, for now, would be a one time activity of involvement with Sanctuary.

Our situation was this: The United Methodist Church had approached our Monthly Meeting about housing a refugee family for about 2 to 3 weeks. Because of the Immigration service "hot on their tails" they could not house the family themselves for fear of the family's being caught and deported to their country where there was a strong possibility that they would face the death squad. We had 3 weeks before the family was due to arrive in our area, so we had a few weeks to come to a decision about it.
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At this point our small group discussed how we would approach the process of coming to a sense of discernment. Jesse suggested using the process of the Jesuits which would mean laying out the cons and then the pros. Carol suggested sharing or "brainstorming" where we each were spiritually on this situation so that we could have a sense of where we needed to go to come together. The group felt comfortable with both of these suggestions and after sharing where we were with our feelings we chose to consider ourselves as an ad hoc committee of interested Friends and began our process of laying the cons "out on the table."

Out of a worshipful sense and not commenting on the items, the cons were listed as follows:

- Lawsuits and Courts; aggravation, drained energy
- Pain of breaching law for Meeting
- Threat to meetinghouse; its importance
- Integrity of democracy - God's gift of democracy
- Need clarity of role of Sanctuary group and their intent or "agenda" - publicity? privacy?
- Need for secrecy
- Estrangement of Meeting members not in sympathy; or at least "overload"
- Meetinghouse insurance - risk of loss of
- Fear of jail
- Effect on daily priorities
- Possibility of criminal acts by refugees
- Possible vandalism to meetinghouse by opposition

After listing these we discussed how we felt about breaking the law and were concerned that we would not want to encourage others to arbitrarily break the law and were concerned that we would appear to be doing that and that this would be a threat to democracy.

We fell into worship again and Johan shared three scripture verses with us -- not as a test but as worship. They were Exodus 22:21, Micah 2:1-2, and Matthew 25:34-36. Then the pros began to flow. They flowed like ministry and were as follows:

- Spiritual base takes priority (God's law over man's law)
- Each "con" could be met with planning
- Sense of answering call of God
- In our democratic setting, a chance to enlarge the community understanding of refugees and how they came to be
- Credibility as "letters of Christ" (See II Cor. 3:3, Pieter Byhouwer shared this)
- Pulling meeting closer together
- Godly use of meetinghouse
- Opportunity for personal spiritual growth
- Blessing of knowing the people who are refugees
- We are to be blessings as children of Abraham
- Faithful descendents/faithful testators for future
- Redemption of "Conquest" mentality

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When we had finished listing the pros there was an unspoken sense of approval and the only things needed to be articulated were the how's.

Prior to listing the cons after we had determined our situation characteristics we had listed options which ranged from full meeting participation to no response at all. At this time it felt as though the options that were right for us became clear and from that sense the following minute for proposal to our monthly meeting was written:

We propose that Snowview Monthly Meeting give its approval for one or more of the following families, Byhouwer, Fetter and Paledofsky, to provide sanctuary shelter for a refugee family who will be here in approximately three weeks. Or, if it seems best for the family, we propose that the meeting approve housing them in the meetinghouse quarters. We understand that the family will need accommodations for about three weeks before moving on. We ask the meeting to raise money for the support of this family while it is with us, and to agree to meet other costs, such as legal fees, if they are needed as a result of this action. We also propose that a committee be appointed to take responsibility for all details in accommodations of this family, and that this committee report regularly to the meeting.

We have taken into account possible legal complications and other hardships that might result for meeting members, as well as possible endangerment to meeting property. Holding all of this in our minds and on our hearts, we still feel called to this action, believing that we are following the will of God as we are best able to discern it, as well as upholding the testimonies of our spiritual forebears. These considerations of faithful witness, for us, outweigh the very real practical difficulties which may result.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the experience of listing cons and pros and listing the cons first was an important arrangement in the process that enabled us as a group to begin listing the pros and then flow from them into a worship and seeking process to discern God's will. I feel that if it had been done in reverse, the pros first -- the cons second, that the process would not have led us so readily into the worshipful seeking to gain discernment.

Our group thanks Pieter Byhouwer for his sensitivity to the group as convener and to Bill Taber for his patient clerkship of our ad hoc committee.
Risk Taking/Fear

Spiritual discernment carries a risk that is real and is felt. There is a vulnerability in opening the self to direction from Another. There is risk in the pursuit of leadings that are clear and firm. Obedience is not easy or comfortable. And there is risk in the sense that our discerning may be wrong and we may need correction. There is further risk in the reality of times when our leading is not clear, but we must act anyway. Jan Wood said, "It is necessary to live into the fullness of one's light and discernment even before we have the whole picture. In refusing to act on what we already know, we become increasingly blind." Are we like the one talent person in the parable burying our talent or our insight in the ground in order to be safe from failure? "Discernment is to risk all that we are on all that we know about God."

Most of us acknowledge that we have at some time had fear of what God might ask of us. Sometimes this is fear of change, the change Alastair mentioned when he quoted from Dorothy Steere's 1983 pamphlet, "To come near to God is to change."

As Ann Proeschooldt-Shaw suggested in an evening worship, we are often afraid to take responsibility for fear of risk -- fear of blame, or fear of people's not liking what we do.

She also asked us to consider Noah who built a huge boat with no sign of water except for the word of God. We are often afraid to act on the seemingly unreasonable guidance of God. Jan Wood had already pointed out that discernment is derived from the Spirit -- not logic. "It is ultimately a faith statement -- a gamble of faith -- obedience to an inward monitor -- and upon that we risk all."

This theme was carried on in the groups. We heard people say that you must act on your insight or you may not receive further guidance. And is there risk implied in the quotation we all heard quoted from Kenneth Boulding: "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly"?

We were also given the other side of the picture -- the lesson of waiting for the whole of God's message, which Louise Wilson had learned when she went to the wrong room in the basement for morning prayer. This lesson was reiterated in at least one small group and extended to our use of Scripture in testing a leading: we must be careful to use the whole message and not just part of God's word to us.

We must also be careful not to hang on to an insight or leading like a bulldog when it is time to let it go and move on to a new revelation or the rest of the message.

Use of Scripture

Most Friends at the consultation feel that Scripture aids discernment. In a small group people affirmed that an
acquaintance with the Bible and frequent reading of it helps to bring insight for discernment. And in reports from some of the small groups scriptural passages were quoted as sources of inspiration, insight, and also confirmation.

The Relationship of Personal Discernment and Corporate Discernment

The relationship of personal discernment and corporate discernment is deep and cannot be broken. If we are to have strength in our individual discernment, we must have corporate clearness supporting us. And if we are to have power in our corporate discernment, we must be gathered as individuals who have already learned the way of obedience and practiced discernment. More than once Friends noted that if we are not "in the Life" personally, we shall not likely find ourselves "in the Life" when gathered for meeting for worship on the occasion of business. Those persons and meetings which are "in the Life" may find guidelines for discernment (like Scripture, inner impression, the fruits of the Spirit, etc.) affirming and confirming, but also unnecessary. And likewise, when we are "out of the Life," guidelines, no matter how many, may seem tragically mechanical and unhelpful.

Agendas

Through Matt Drake and Bill Taber we were given the vision of ideal meetings for worship for business and the inspiration to work and pray for that ideal. In the discussion following we got down to the nitty gritty of agendas, which can be a hindrance or a help toward this vision. Here are some tips:

Distribute or post agendas ahead of the meeting.

Is each item on the agenda God's business? And is it ready for the attention of the entire meeting? Perhaps, it needs further clarification, development, and/or refinement in a small group or committee.

No agenda item has a life of its own. If there is no one present who cares about it, it is not worth our holy time.

Remember also that God's time may be different from our own sense of urgency. This particular item may not need to be decided today.

Unity and Community

At the opening of this Consultation Wilmer Cooper stated that a secondary goal of these gatherings is to foster greater understanding and unity among Friends. We believe that all felt this happening here where there were 55 people from three countries and 27 Yearly Meetings from all branches of Quakerism.
people of varying theological views and also a broad spectrum of ages. One person said, "One of the riches of this Consultation has been to meet those 'other' Quakers."

In at least two small groups there were such questions raised as: "Can you be a Quaker without being Christ-centered? And if you can, what does it look like?" But these groups had true dialogue and came to at least greater understanding of one another's views, if not unity. There was prayerful listening without judgment.

Alastair, in his keynote address, stated that because the issue of spiritual discernment is both central and basic, it is unifying, not divisive. It seems that when people began to work on their assigned tasks of spiritual discernment, they were able to work as true communities of faith.

There were questions raised in the course of these days together as to whether we sometimes have to sacrifice unity with each other for unity with God and how we discern that. Do we sometimes push a decision through which splits a community? It was felt that it is essential to seek in prayer for submission to God's guidance, and if all do this, this will bring unity. It was also stressed that a sense of the meeting is more readily achieved in a group which has shared deeply and become a community. We think that we were given a glimpse here of that happening. Yet we must not water down discernment by giving a little bit to everybody. How important is it in discerning that we stay together as a community?

In the role play on Saturday morning there seemed to be different views of the purpose for meeting for worship. Is one of the first questions to discuss: Why do we meet for worship at all?

And are there latent questions which need to be dealt with before we can answer the issue before us? Jan Wood warned us that sometimes, though, we get bogged down by going too far down and tackling questions which are too big and difficult. One way to avoid this is to explore the feelings just under the surface. "What am I afraid of?" is usually the next step down. So you do not have to go all the way to the "basement."

One of the most important ingredients of community is that we care for one another. That this was achieved here was evidenced within small groups by the commitment to understand and love one another even to the point of stopping discussion of the topic in order to affirm and care for persons, and in the whole body by the genuine regret at having to part from this gathering.

Joy

There was a good deal of joy in our meeting -- both the laughter that comes from just plain fun, but also that which comes from a holy joy at being with Friends and, to use the language of Bill Taber, in the "Presence of the Great Friend."
We are grateful to the following:

Joyce Holden and the seven who brought us such laughter and insight through the role play.

Louise Wilson for her warm and light-hearted clerking.

Isabella Bates, Jesse Paledofsky, and Jeffrey Aaron for the joy we found in singing under their leadership and music.

The quick and spontaneous wit of so many of the participants.

Critique and Suggestions

Two-thirds of American Quakers would come at discernment primarily through the Bible. Was that group adequately represented here?

Were suggestions for participants made through "old boy (and old girl) networks"? This is something probably to work on at the local level of our Yearly Meetings.

There was some discomfort at "playing" at spiritual discernment and prayer.

There was a fairly widespread feeling that the tasks given the small groups were an intrusion into the process. The willingness, nevertheless, to work at them shows a wonderful spirit. We hope we are right in thinking that some important learning and even coming-together came through this work.

Some people were disappointed that there was not more work done in the small groups on the personal dimension of spiritual discernment.

Questions and Topics for Further Exploration

For Friends whose understanding of God is not at ease with concepts that speak of the Divine as "outside" and "beyond" ourselves, it remains to be asked: What is going on in the process of discernment? How is their process different from what has been focused on in the consultation?

How do we discern whether the will of God for me at this moment is to be found "in my deepest desire" or "in that which crosses my own will"?

How do we discern when we are in the place where no further guidance is to be received and our calling is to live out what we do know, making choices on that basis; or, on the other hand, when we are in the place where we should not act, not choose, but wait patiently for the guidance to come? In brief: How do we discern when to "live it out" and when to "wait it out"?
If the revitalization of spiritual discernment is dependent upon renewal of our spiritual life, is there anything that Friends can or should do to foster that renewal?

When people speak of spiritual discernment they are often thinking of distinguishing between good and evil. The problem of evil was barely touched upon here. Jan Wood gave us a beginning:

One does not escape evil by doing good behaviors. 'Good' is simply a fragrance that is given off by Life, an evaporation from the essence of God. Badness is the stench of non-alignment with Life. Redemption is that motion of Life that moves into the eye of evil and explodes its arrangement from the inside out; freeing each element of the situation to be rearranged from Life."

Two books which might help in further exploration of this topic are:

Morton Kelsey, Discernment: A Study in Ecstasy and Evil
M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie: Hope for Healing Human Evil

What Are You Taking Home From This Consultation?

Ric Schultze quoted the following Scripture in the worship service which he led:

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

2 Cor. 3:2-3

Will we be faithful to being such living epistles?

May we take with us our yearnings for supporting spiritual discernment and voice them to our home meetings, or in some way act upon them.

At least one Friend is taking home a new understanding of group discernment as modeled in his small group.

Another is taking a commitment to give a copy of Michael Sheeran's book, Beyond Majority Rule, to the meeting clerk as a further encouragement of good clerking.

Still another is taking an actual record of how one monthly meeting in North Pacific Yearly Meeting discerned God's leading on the matter of providing sanctuary for "undocumented persons" from Central America.
We have been given many ideas by one small group of how to prepare the ground in a meeting for an upcoming difficult decision by prayer, informal discussions, materials for First Day School classes, etc.

Another way to prepare the ground is to have worship sharing in small groups on how each person feels about the issues, but with no discussion at that time.

A small group has demonstrated the effectiveness of the sharing first of the "cons" of an issue, and then the "pros" flowed.

Many of us are taking home with us a sense of fellowship and the knowledge that others are trying to be faithful.

Queries

Does your Meeting have a clear understanding of its purpose(s) under God that serves as a foundation for matters of discernment?

Do we approach issues before our meeting, or those facing us personally, as "problems to be solved" or matters about which we seek to discern the leading of God?

Does being true to God's leading sometimes make us offensive? Are we bringing up this issue because God is laying this burden upon us, or are we merely being provocative and insensitive?

To what group do you turn for help in discerning your leading?

These further queries from Alastair Heron: "How far is the likelihood of our being given a special opening determined by the extent to which our daily lives are guided in a voluntary discipline of holy obedience?" "How do you in practice seek to be obedient to God in your daily lives?"
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*Copies were sent to participants prior to the Consultation.*