

Note on confidentiality: You have a right to ask for personal matters to be dealt with in confidence, but the person who is seeking to help you will also need support and advice. An Elder or Overseer may ask your permission to share with another member of the care team. At this stage, it may be wise not to speak of the same matter 'in confidence' to several other Friends.

Stage 3. Conciliation Group

If these early stages have not been successful in resolving the problem any or all of those involved can ask for help from the Conciliation Group. This can be done by approaching the group by email or contacting one of the Area Meeting clerking team.

If the matter is a disagreement over a technical matter (see the penultimate paragraph of Stage 1) the Conciliation Group may feel it is more appropriate to pass it to those with experience in the matter under dispute, or who would draw in expertise from Friends House.

The convenor of the Conciliation Group should, in consultation with the parties involved, ask two available members of the group to meet with the Friends directly.

This is a living document, which may require revision in the light of experience.

Southern Marches Area Quaker Meeting Conciliation Group

Dealing with Conflict in our Meetings

Ways forward with Conciliation



Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Penington, 1667. *Quaker Faith and Practice* 5th edn 10.01

Disagreements, misunderstandings and conflict arise in all communities. We need to consider how best to handle them and if possible resolve our differences without either 'sweeping a problem under the carpet' or escalating the problem. *Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP)* makes it clear that all parties in a dispute have responsibilities in this respect:

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

Yearly Meeting in London, 1692. *QFP* 5th edn 20.70

How do we become reconciled to each other if we are asunder? All I can say is to go up to that person and say what is in your heart; that their ways are hurting but you still love them.

Sue Norris, 1982. *QFP* 5th edn 20.68 (extract)

We also refer Friends to Chapter 14 of *With a Tender Hand: A resource book for eldership and oversight*, by Zelig Gross (Quaker Books).

While this is good advice for all Friends*, we are aware that such approaches are not always successful and that there is therefore a need for procedures that enable the people concerned to access support and help from others in order to resolve their conflict. For this reason a Conciliation Group has been formed of individuals from all our Local Meetings. It has drawn up this document in order to clarify the action that can be taken by any Friend who is unhappy with the actions of other individuals or groups within our Area Meeting.

We feel that an effective procedure for resolving conflict should:

- be compassionate
- be impartial
- focus on non-adversarial methods in a spirit of 'love and peace and tenderness'
- allow swift handling within as short a time frame as possible
- encourage resolution of conflicts by informal means whenever possible
- give clear guidance on how to manage a more formal process, should that be necessary
- be easily accessible and well-publicised throughout the Area Meeting
- be simple to understand and use.

We suggest three stages, with the hope and expectation that most conflicts will be resolved in the first stage.

Stage 1. Speak directly

If possible, approach the person who has upset you directly at an early opportunity. If it is a decision or process of your local Business Meeting, or committee, that you disagree with talk to the clerk, or to the convenor of that committee. Remember that face-to-face contact, a phone call, or maybe even a letter, are usually preferable to an email when trying to resolve difficulties. Consider carefully before writing an email which you copy (or which your recipient might copy) to any number of other Friends.

Some difficulties are perhaps best dealt with by taking an active part in Business Meeting. Try to attend regularly, ask questions about decisions that puzzle you, state your doubts or difficulties openly and listen carefully to the responses, just as you can rightly expect others to listen carefully to you.

* Where we use 'Friend/s' we intend the inclusion of both Members and Attenders.

If you don't feel able initially to speak to someone directly, you can ask any Friend for support. If this person is an Elder or an Overseer, they may seek to clarify with you whether this is still at the very informal stage (are you asking them for support just, 'as a friend' or 'with your Elder's/Overseer's hat on').

If the problem is difficult or complex, or involves more than one Friend, or if early attempts do not resolve matters, the person you've approached may suggest that the matter is shared with at least one of the Overseers.

If you feel that this process isn't working then you could consider contacting the Convenor of the Conciliation Group, and together seek a resolution.

It is possible that the difference of opinion arises from what one may think of as a technical matter, for example something to do with accounts, building or human resources practice. If this is the case the first action must be to raise the matter at a Business Meeting and for the Meeting to obtain advice from specialists, for example at Friends House.

It is important that all those involved in a conflict take responsibility for resolving it and don't allow it to become a divisive element in the life of the meeting. It is usually best to avoid involving other people and expecting them to 'take sides' or get involved.

Stage 2. Support from Overseers and Elders*

If you have not received a satisfactory resolution from enacting the first stage you can seek more support from other Friends. Remember, as others become involved, the importance of trying to be specific about what has upset you. Focus on what was said and done; things that you have personally experienced, it's best not to assume you know what others are thinking or would want. Try to see the other person's point of view and resist the temptation to express opinions about another person's character, or speculate about their thinking and motivation.

If the difficulties are not easy to resolve, other Overseers and Elders may need to be involved. Part of the reason for this is that the person (or people) who have upset you may also need to be supported so that you can speak openly together, using, wherever possible, our already well-established processes for dealing with difficult issues.

Always be willing to accept an apology. We hope that all concerned in a conflict will be willing to think it possible they may be mistaken, but do not necessarily expect a recantation of an opinion – you may have to agree to differ.

* We include Pastoral Care Groups here.