CHAPTER 3

Other Meetings, Other Worship

A LITTLE while ago my Meeting held an 'Open Forum' for the general public. It was just like any other public meeting; people sat in rows on chairs facing a platform on which were a chairman and two speakers. Apart from the subject matter of the talks and the subsequent questioning it could have been a meeting of the local civic society. This type of Meeting is unusual with Friends; we adopt it only for occasions where we expect many people not used to our practices. Otherwise Friends' Meetings, large and small, whatever their immediate purpose, are always concerned also with worship.

This sounds enormously pompous and self-satisfied, like a Victorian business man larding his conversation with texts while refusing to reduce the hours of work of small children. How can one combine property management – and we own and let quite a lot of property – with worship? Let us start by looking at the working method of a Monthly Meeting, which has, among other things, to do just that.

At business Meetings, whether Preparative, Monthly or Yearly, there is no chairman. At a table, where one would normally expect the chairman to be, sit the Clerk and the Assistant Clerk, referred to collectively and impersonally on occasion as 'the table'. Meetings start with silence for a few minutes, silence which is the silence of worship. This Meeting is not one in which human beings are going to argue their divergent opinions, until one or the other gives way or a middle-of-the-road compromise is reached. This is a Meeting whose intention is to find and follow the will of God.

The Meeting then goes on – for it starts with the silence, not when the talking begins – to hear the minutes of the previous Meeting and to discuss whatever affairs are before it. The items are usually introduced by someone – perhaps the Clerk or the Assistant Clerk, perhaps another member of

the Meeting – and the discussion is much like any discussion, except that it is generally calm, and slow moving, with none of the cut and thrust of a political debate. If the emotional temperature begins to rise, someone will usually ask for a period of worship, and in the silence harmony is restored. As the discussion continues, the Clerk will be sensing the feeling of the Meeting. When he feels that a consensus has been reached he drafts a minute and reads it to the Meeting, which will either accept it or discuss it further. Sooner or later a minute is acceptable to the Meeting, even if it is a minute which says, 'We found this subject one of great difficulty, and could not clearly see God's will; we therefore agreed that the matter should be brought forward on another occasion.' When an acceptable minute is before the Meeting there is no voting; the Clerk asks whether it is acceptable, the Meeting replies 'yes' (or in the case of very scrupulous Friends 'I hope so', since they can only speak for themselves) and the Clerk moves on to the next item. At the end of the agenda there will be a further short period of worship, though this perhaps needs to be qualified; it is a further period of silent worship, the whole Meeting being a period of worship.

This pattern of conducting a business Meeting applies to the smallest Preparative Meeting, or even to two or three Friends gathered to settle an issue *ad hoc*, and equally to the conduct of Yearly Meetings. It raises two questions particularly; first, how is it possible to conduct business at all in this way, and second, is it effective, and equally effective, on all types of business?

On the first question I can best comment as a professional administrator and, to a limited extent at least, as a student of business methods. In my experience, the reaching of conclusions in committee is closely related to the degree of community of interest. If every member of the committee has the same ultimate aim in view and the same basic motives, then the committee is likely to reach useful conclusions quickly. Those members with relevant experience will present it, the others will assess it against their common aim, and the practicable courses of action will soon be apparent.

From there it is a short and simple step to choosing the most desirable of the practicable courses.

But committees do not generally operate in this way. Each member is usually differently motivated; either by self-interest or, at best, by concern for the well-being of the organization he represents. The overt aim of the committee (to which all members overtly subscribe) is seldom allowed to take precedence over the interests of the individual members. What is laughingly called a 'theory of games' comes into force; the committee is a battlefield where victory is to the psychologically strong. The demonstration of victory is the vote; if there is no vote it is only because no demonstration is needed, the enemy has capitulated. To foresee the outcome it is seldom helpful to know the facts of the case or the force of the arguments; far more significant are the personalities of the committee members and their group relationships.

It follows, of course, that committee government as usually practised is surprisingly ineffectual. Most committee discussions involve the humiliation of some of the participants, since there are winners and losers, and to lose is to be humiliated. The losers will give unconvincing support to the policy of the winners at the best, and will be constantly looking for a new battlefield of their own choosing, on which they may get their revenge. So policy is made and unmade, at meeting after meeting. swinging one way and another and making very little actual progress.

In Quaker business Meetings there is a much closer approach to a common aim and common motives:

[Being orderly come together, [you are] not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God not in the way of the world] as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspeak and overreach one another in discourse as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, not deciding affairs by the greater vote. 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 [are] 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, and for the carrying on the work of the Lord, and assisting one another in whatsoever ability God hath given; and to determine things by a general mutual concord, in assenting together as one man in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof. In this way and spirit all things are to be amongst you, and without perverseness, in any self-separation, in discord and partiality; this way and spirit is wholly excepted, as not worthy to enter into the assembly of God's servants, in any case pertaining to the service of the Church of Christ; in which his Spirit of love and unity must rule.[1]

This, I think, gives the answer to the first question. It is possible to conduct any business by the Quaker method where those concerned show a common aim and motive; in the Society that aim and motive is provided by the religious basis of the Society. To the second question, as to its effectiveness, my answer would be that the method works best on the issues of most moment. That is to say, on any question of deep importance, whether spiritual or material, my experience has been that of the Minute of the Yearly Meeting of 1936 – guidance has come and light been given us, and we have become finders of God's purpose. The same has not always been true of Meetings concerned with lesser matters, questions of no great importance to God or man such as the adjustment of boundaries. Here I have been very glad that the Meeting was open to members only, and that nobody else was there to see us floundering about making heavy weather of a very trivial question. 'Needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourse' perhaps.

Friends of greater experience often speak with some impatience of the ineffectuality of the Society, of the great time it takes to make necessary changes in procedure and so on. A very few worthy wordy Friends are enough to prevent a

Meeting coming to a conclusion, and somehow it is often those who are most opposed to change who seem to have the time to spare for business meetings. I can understand this view of the Society, yet I think it is somewhat out of perspective. In the things that really matter, the Society seems to move fast enough, often almost without discussion at all. In other matters, where the drag seems to be on, change may not be as important as we imagine. And those same worthy wordy friends have often saved us from stupidities.

1. Edward Borrough, 'A testimony concerning the beginning of the work of the Lord', 1662. *Letters, etc., of Early Friends*, ed. Abram Rawlinson Barclay, 1841, *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1960, § 354.