

13.05 Achieving clarity about a concern is a particular exercise in discernment. It is a process that begins with considerable private reflection and the asking of some tough questions. Is this a desire that someone else do something or is it really a call to act oneself? Is this concern in keeping with the testimonies of the Society? Is it genuinely from God?

The discernment process is not confined to solitary reflection. As a Religious Society we are more than a collection of people who meet together – we meet as we do because we believe that gathered together we are capable of greater clarity of vision. It is therefore the practice in our Society for a Friend who, after due consideration, believes that he or she has a concern, to bring it before the gathered community of Friends. This is both a further part of the testing process and an expression of our membership in a spiritual community. It is a recognition of mutual obligations: that of a Friend to test the concern against the counsel of the group and that of the group to exercise its judgment and to seek the guidance of God.

13.07 'Concern' is a word which has tended to become debased by excessively common usage among Friends, so that too often it is used to cover merely a strong desire. The true 'concern' [emerges as] a gift from God, a leading of his spirit which may not be denied. Its sanction is not that on investigation it proves to be the intelligent thing to do – though it usually is; it is that the individual ... knows, as a matter of inward experience, that there is something that the Lord would have done, however obscure the way, however uncertain the means to human observation. Often proposals for action are made which have every appearance of good sense, but as the meeting waits before God it becomes clear that the proposition falls short of 'concern'.

Roger Wilson, 1949

3.05 The right conduct of our meetings for church affairs depends upon all coming to them in an active, seeking spirit, not with minds already made up on a particular course of action, determined to push this through at all costs. But open minds are not empty minds, nor uncritically receptive: the service of the meeting calls for knowledge of facts, often painstakingly acquired, and the ability to estimate their relevance and importance. This demands that we shall be ready to listen to others carefully, without antagonism if they express opinions which are unpleasing to us, but trying always to discern the truth in what they have to offer. It calls, above all, for spiritual sensitivity. If our meetings fail, the failure may well be in those who are ill-prepared to use the method rather than in the inadequacy of the method itself. It is always to be recognised that, coming together with a variety of temperaments, of backgrounds, education and experience, we shall have differing contributions to make to any deliberation. It is no part of Friends' concern for truth that any should be expected to water down a strong conviction or be silent merely for the sake of easy agreement. Nevertheless we are called to honour our testimony that to every one is given a measure of the light, and that it is in the sharing of knowledge, experience and concern that the way towards unity will be found. There is need for understanding loyalty by the meeting as a whole when, after all sides of a subject have been considered, a minute is accepted as representing the discernment of the meeting.

Not all who attend a meeting for church affairs will necessarily speak: those who are silent can help to develop the sense of the meeting if they listen in a spirit of worship.

3.06 The unity we seek depends on the willingness of us all to seek the truth in each other's utterances; on our being open to persuasion; and in the last resort on a willingness to recognise and accept the sense of the meeting as recorded in the minute, knowing that our dissenting views have been heard and considered. We do not vote in our meetings, because we believe that this would emphasise the divisions between differing views and inhibit the process of seeking to know the will of God. We must recognise, however, that a minority view may well continue to exist. When we unite with a minute offered by our clerk, we express, not a sudden agreement of everyone present with the prevailing view, but rather a confidence in our tried and tested way of seeking to recognise God's will. We act as a community, whose members love and trust each other. We should be reluctant to prevent the acceptance of a minute which the general body of Friends present feels to be right. As a worshipping community, particularly in our local and area meetings, we have a continuing responsibility to nurture the soil in which unity may be found. In a meeting rightly held a new way may be discovered which none present had alone perceived and which transcends the differences of the opinions expressed. This is an experience of creative insight, leading to a sense of the meeting which a clerk is often led in a remarkable way to record. Those who have shared this experience will not doubt its reality and the certainty it brings of the immediate rightness of the way for the meeting to take.

Stuart Masters
Woodbrooke