

Threshing Meetings

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‘Threshing Meetings’: This term currently denotes a meeting at which a variety of different, and sometimes controversial, opinions can be openly, and sometimes forcefully, expressed, often in order to defuse a situation before a later meeting for worship for business. Originally the term was used to describe large and noisy meetings for conviction of “the world’s people” in order to “thresh” them away from the world.



When might a threshing meeting be considered?

- Where a difference of opinion(s) is causing distress or disturbance to individuals or the meeting, or delaying a necessary decision.
- Where a potentially contentious or controversial issue needs to be addressed.
- To allow views to be expressed to enable movement towards greater clarity.
- As a preliminary to a decision-making meeting.

Preparing for a threshing meeting

- Give good advance notice.
- Include all who have a particular interest in the matter.
- Make a special effort to ensure that Friends of all shades of opinion will be present. The meeting will be less useful if Friends of a particular view are absent.

Everyone attending needs to be clear about the purpose and conduct of the meeting.

They should be able and willing to understand the disciplines inherent in the process so that sensitive and vulnerable people do not feel marginalised or threatened.

Those with confidence and authority should be prepared to stand back to allow the less articulate to have their say and should have the ability to challenge actions, views, behaviour in a caring and affirming way.

Appoint a **clerk or co-clerks** who are not involved personally in the issue. It may be helpful if they are experienced Friends from outside the meeting so that everyone within the meeting can take part. It is important that the clerk maintains the discipline of the agreed guidelines.

Background papers with factual information should be circulated beforehand, together with **guidelines** for the meeting (see below). An **outline** of the intended procedure is helpful. A **timetable** is useful, although this should not limit what needs to be said. Adequate time is needed to allow everyone space in which to be heard, though it is wise to agree a time by which the meeting will close.

Suggested guidelines

- Friends should wait to be called by the clerk, who will request a reflective silence between contributions. They are not limited to speaking once only, but should only do so after everyone has had the opportunity and encouragement to speak, so as to allow space for the less confident members to be heard.
- Everyone is free to state his or her views clearly, passionately and honestly.
- Contributions should be received with respect and attention, seeking what truth they may hold.
- Friends should resist using words suggesting accusation or blame and should keep to simple statements of how a specific view, action or behaviour affects them.
- Any personal disclosures are confidential to the attending group.

The meeting

At the outset the clerk reminds Friends of the importance of the guidelines and obtains their explicit agreement to observe them. They may be amended if all agree.

The meeting begins and ends with a period of worship.

The first part of the threshing meeting will be a time for feelings and views to be expressed and heard. This is followed by looking forward to the future, if the meeting is ready. On the other hand, it may be that the forward look will be better addressed at a further meeting which may be called to do this. A break may be taken if it will be helpful.

The meeting should be a safe place for expressing and receiving feelings. It is best to make no notes of the threshing as these might not help the process of moving forward.

The clerk will close the meeting, minuting that a threshing meeting has been held.

It is important to be aware of a need for informal oversight to ensure that there is care and thought for everyone's well-being and to see that anyone who has been emotionally affected is not left to leave unsupported.

What can a threshing meeting achieve that other meetings may not?

Doubt and anxieties can be expressed without obstructing a decision, which can be liberating.

It may be helpful in clearing the air and bringing some clarity and understanding that had previously been lacking.

It can be useful when there is an issue that would benefit from hearing ideas and views without any intention of coming to a conclusion.

It allows for an interval for reflection before a decision needs to be made.

When is a threshing meeting inappropriate?

Where a conflict involves a particular individual or individuals, threshing can be experienced as oppressive or even as scapegoating and is not recommended.

When only two or three people have a disagreement, mediation may be preferable.

When the issue is complex and requires particular knowledge or detailed explanation, a meeting for learning or exploration, with papers in advance, would be better.

Other Quaker processes to consider are: a meeting for clearness, creative listening, worship sharing.

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