

THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP

Allen Hubbard

Boulder Meeting of Friends

Certainly membership in Friends Meeting means different things to different people, and each of us must ultimately define for him- or herself what his/her membership means. However, Friends have established procedures for introducing and accepting attenders into membership -- procedures normally not taken lightly. A clearness committee of Friends meets to consider with a prospective member the implications of membership, which bear upon both the individual and the Meeting as a community.

Seeking to understand the meaning of membership, I would begin by looking at meaning. There are at least three kinds of meaning: meaning as form, as grasped by a comprehending mind; meaning as purpose, as formulated by a determining mind; meaning as quality of experience, as perceived by a sensible mind. All these join together in varying proportions to form the meaning we attribute to membership in Friends Meeting, or to any other phenomenon we consider.

It helps also to recognize that time and circumstance will often change the relative proportions and influence of comprehension, determination and sensibility, depending on our momentary mood and mind set. Sitting quietly in worship and opening my heart to that of God in all around me, I incline primarily to experiencing the warmth and support that come with membership in our spiritual community. Worship intends to cultivate the sensible mind. Sitting through a difficult committee or business meeting, and noting that a significant percentage of the membership is not there working with me, my determining mind may come to the fore. I might be moved to focus on the purpose of membership, and to question why others are not fulfilling their responsibilities to serve that purpose: doesn't membership mean that you attend to business? Sitting with a clearness committee, as a member or as an attender seeking membership, or attempting to write about the meaning of membership, comprehension will be foremost as I try to formulate thoughts, feelings and beliefs into coherent and meaningful sentences and questions.

We can expect that the meaning of membership will vary somewhat from time to time, from individual to individual, from clearness committee to clearness committee, and from Meeting to Meeting. That said, we still face the challenge of finding and presenting a simple, coherent and useful definition of the meaning of membership in a Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends of the Truth. I

propose to sneak up on this elusive "animal" by first mentioning some things that membership does not imply.

Being Christian is not a condition for membership, nor is it in any way a cause for exclusion. Unprogrammed meetings include in membership a broad range of beliefs ranging from devout Christian to agnostic. Early Friends may have taken it for granted that "Truth" meant a divinely inspired Christian Truth, yet they left the question of the source of channel of Truth open. Affirming the reality of continuing revelation, they naturally could not make the historical Jesus a final spokesman. We hold that "that of God" may "speak" to and through any man, woman, child or living entity. "That of God" refers to qualities of living reality that move us, from within or without, in supportive, creative ways, but a God or Supreme Being is generally conceived as a personified quantity, a separate being. Recognizing this distinction, one can affirm "that of God" without believing in a God. This writer doesn't pretend to absolute knowledge and will not argue with that.

While hastening to add things, I would also mention that the broad range of beliefs held by unprogrammed Friends exceeds the spectrum defined by Christian at one end and agnostic at the other. Friends draw inspiration and insight from all over. Rather than viewing the membership of Meeting as falling along a spectrum, I would use a color wheel as metaphor. Different religious and secular/scientific belief systems are represented by the various colors, but as one moves toward the center, they blend into Quaker gray.

The responsibilities of membership do not include active participation in all aspects and events of the Meeting, though one is generally expected to support the Meeting's activities and purposes. This is implicit in our form of decision making: Consensus. The Meeting does not move on an issue until all members are in general agreement, but consensus is not a rigid thing, and a member's support may not, and need not, always be avid. Removing oneself as an obstruction is actually a positive and constructive act, so standing aside represents a form of support helping the Meeting to move.

Some Friends, perhaps more inclined to a determining mind-set, hold that we should wait on a "sense of the Meeting," a true unity of purpose, before moving. As with consensus, this exemplary ideal need not be rigid. Often unity of purpose proves elusive as long as a Meeting hesitates, but grows when we begin to move. The key is to begin moving slowly and gently enough that the hesitant may easily

catch up, or may be heard, and their reservations carefully considered, so that separation need not occur.

I find it helpful to view Meeting as an extended family, and seeking membership as somewhat akin to proposing marriage. The basic requirements for a viable marriage, and for a viable Meeting, are commitment, affection and trust. Having these, the Meeting can weather any storm, and it is largely these qualities that a clearness committee will seek in an attender aspiring to membership, and that an attender is wise to look for in the Meeting prior to requesting membership.

Unprogrammed Friends have no creed as a basis for unity. Members are not expected to hold certain beliefs, but we do expect to live lives demonstrating commitment, affection and trust. This is largely what it means to be part of, and to participate in, a "Religious Society of Friends of the Truth."

Membership implies a relationship between an individual person and the body of the Meeting, which is a society, community or extended family of (F)friends. It does not imply a relationship between person and God. Though we may be drawn together by "that of God" working within and between us, we are not necessarily bound to or by a belief in God.

The responsibilities of membership work in both directions. The individual supports the Meeting and the Meeting supports its members. Individual support implies participation in various aspects of the life of the Meeting: worship, business, financial, upkeep, education, outreach, etc. Of course, no individual can participate in everything. As in a family, things work most effectively when members do more of what they do best, and leave some things to others. Friends generally expect, however, that members' participation will extend beyond attendance at meeting for worship.

The Meeting normally offers support primarily in the forms of education and opportunity for spiritual growth. Thus, we own and maintain a Meeting House and facilities for First Day School, we meet regularly to worship together, we organize and offer a variety of study and discussion groups, and we join finances and forces for outreach. In cases of individual or familial distress and need, we come together to provide moral and sometimes financial support.

Affection between members of the Meeting is not always what we might hope for. Something akin to sibling rivalry sometimes arises, and since we are all human animals, we might expect this. However, as in a family, we implicitly trust that,

when the Meeting as a whole is challenged, such rivalries will become secondary and members will pull together. This is expected as part of our commitment to the Meeting and each other.

We further trust that members can and will be honest and forthright in dealing with each other. The practice of speaking truth to power begins at home in our own Meeting. Each member is a power, and certainly the Meeting is a power. We speak truth not with the intent of changing the other, but to let him/her/them know how they appear to and affect us. Change, whether it occurs or not, is their responsibility. When we fail in this practice, as we often do because we lack faith in our commitments, we diminish our power and that of the Meeting. Confronting challenge, we grow; avoiding it, we atrophy.

The local (monthly) Meeting is the core and basis for the Society of Friends, but the Society is knit together into regional (e.g., Colorado Regional Meeting) and yearly meetings (e.g., Intermountain Yearly Meeting), and includes also national and international organizations. Some of these serve primarily fellowship, while others have political (e.g., Friends Committee on National legislation) or outreach (e.g., American Friends Service Committee) purposes. Monthly meetings send representatives and financial support to these organizations, but the extent of one's personal involvement and support is largely left up to individual members.

Membership in a Friends' Meeting is a combined challenge and opportunity, a loving responsibility, an uplifting burden. Welcome!