

## Chapter four

# Making Decisions

After looking at our general approach to spirituality in the previous chapters, I want to look now at something rather specific: the Quaker way of making decisions. In particular, we will look at the Meeting for Business, leaving till the next chapter our consideration of decisions and choices in personal life. Meeting for Business may seem relatively humdrum, but, as we shall see when we look at it in detail, it gives a surprisingly clear demonstration of what Quakerism itself is about. It is of course a subtle and sometimes difficult process that we go through, so it is not easy at first to understand. We have been recently helped in this by two books that describe it well, one from inside the Society of Friends, Barry Morley's *Beyond Consensus*, and one from outside, Michael Sheeran's *Beyond Majority Rule*. Sheeran, a Catholic, is surprised at the effectiveness of our method, for all its apparent idealism, and he sees it as unique in the modern world. All the more surprising, then, that such a subtle and unusual practice has survived all these years. (In Sheeran's own order, the Jesuits, there was a similar practice of discernment in the beginning but it has apparently not survived. He made this study of the Quakers to see how the original practice might be recovered.)

Our method of making decisions together is probably the practice we have best preserved from early times. The individual practice of meditation, which I described in the first chapter, has largely gone into abeyance, but our corporate practice of deciding things together has remarkably survived intact. We can get a sense of this continuity by listening to a description of the early practice by one of the leaders of that time, Edward Burrough. He was born and bred in Underbarrow near Kendal in the North

West of England, but spent most of his life travelling for Friends, leading the first mission in London in 1654, lobbying parliament, writing pamphlets, then dying all too early from his treatment in Newgate Prison. He wrote a pamphlet in 1662 about those first meetings, and contrasted them with meetings of other people he knew from that time, from the New Model Army under Cromwell to the churches that were then struggling to shape the life of England:

We therefore... did... ordain and appoint that the men Friends of the City (not excluding any) should meet together at the Bull and Mouth<sup>64</sup> or elsewhere once in the fortnight, or once a month, as they in the wisdom of God should find it necessary, for the management of truth's affairs... that they should order in outward things relating to truth, and be assisting one to another, for the good and honour and service of the truth, and the Friends of it, so much as in them lay, according to that measure of the wisdom of God given to them, in perfect love and unity together, bearing one another's burdens, and helping together in mutual accord and good will...

Thus for these causes, and for these ends... was your meeting of men as aforesaid ordained and appointed...<sup>65</sup>

Being orderly come together, not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses, but to proceed in the wisdom of God... to hear and consider... not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contest, by seeking to out-speak and over-reach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, in the way of carrying on some worldly interest for self-advantage; not deciding affairs by the greater vote, or the number of men, as the world, who have not the wisdom and power of God... 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 to be carried on; by hearing and determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity. I say, as only one party, all for the truth of Christ... to determine of things by a general mutual accord, in assenting together as the one man in the spirit of truth and equity, and by the authority thereof.<sup>66</sup>

If you read the section in our current *Faith and Practice* on 'The Sense of the Meeting' (3.02-3.07), you will see how close we are today to what Burrough described. (See Appendix 2).

I need to add something to Burrough's description, though, or rather draw out something that was stated only implicitly. It is in that phrase, which Burrough repeats four times, 'in the wisdom of God'. This is saying that Friends do not rely on their own wisdom, however good that might be. They are looking for something beyond themselves, though it comes, when it does come, *through* them. That is the significance of Barry Morley's title, *Beyond Consensus*, and it is the point he most wants to make. We bring our minds to the issues we think about, certainly, but we do not resolve the issues simply by bringing our minds to them. We wait to be enlightened. Morley therefore contrasts this spiritual way with the more rational way of 'consensus'. Consensus is achieved through:

a process of reasoning in which reasonable people search for a satisfactory decision... Through consensus we decide it; through [a] sense of the meeting we turn it over, allowing it to be decided. 'Reaching a consensus is a secular process', says a Friend. 'In sense of the meeting God gets a voice'.<sup>67</sup>

This process can take a long time, of course. Who knows when we will all be enlightened so that we can all agree what needs to be

done? It might prove to be difficult and even trying if everyone has to get on board, including the stubborn ones and the dull ones. So why do we do it this way?