

A Case for Eldering and Discipline

by [Herbert N. Lape](#) Friends Journal April 1, 2009

Modern Friends are often uncomfortable with the term *eldering*. It conjures up negative images of scolding old men wagging their fingers in narrow, legalistic judgment of behavior. In the classic Quaker movie *Friendly Persuasion*, there's a scene that sums up this modern sentiment. The young son of the lead family abruptly stands in meeting for worship and shouts the message, "God is love," only to receive a scowl of censure from a cranky elder on the facing bench. The boy covers his eyes to retreat from the uncomfortable and persisting glare. The tension is relieved only when the understanding father, played by Gary Cooper, pats his son on the knee in a gesture of fatherly love and assurance. In the 18th and 19th centuries, elders of this portrayed variety instituted a tightening of discipline that led to the disownment of numerous Friends for a long list of infractions. Given this history, we are understandably much more comfortable with a nurturing pat on the knee than an evil eye of discipline.

However, true eldery is not about discipline alone; it is also about the fatherly or motherly pat on the knee. Good elders identify and support gifts in the ministry, care for the sick and those in need, pray for healing, and perform a host of other warm, supportive activities that nurture the spiritual vitality of the meeting. But elders have always understood that spiritual vitality and growth require both discipline and nurture. Conflict in particular is seldom resolved without some appropriate form of discipline.

Today, individual Friends are seldom disciplined for any infraction of what former Friends would have called "right order"—that is, conduct in keeping with religious teachings. Instead of discipline, we trust in counseling and conflict resolution with its emphasis on mediation. We hope for a "win-win situation" where everyone is happy. If individuals are troubling the peace of meeting, we seek to counsel them into good behavior with the equivalent of Gary Cooper's pat on the knee. While this can be effective if the offending party is open to counsel, it can involve many lengthy sessions that often prove fruitless since there are no consequences to ignoring the counsel.

In our reactions against this excess of legalistic finger wagging, have we gone too far in the other direction and abdicated responsible, moderate discipline and legitimate authority?

I have been involved with Quakers for many years at the local, yearly meeting, and national level. It has been my experience that we can do a better job of dealing with conflict if we recover our tradition of discipline by appropriate bodies within monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. I've seen the positive fruit of recovering a comprehensive eldery tradition of both nurture and discipline in my monthly and yearly meeting.

As with any meeting, we have had situations where individual behavior has caused considerable conflict in the meeting. Families and individuals have transferred memberships to escape the discomfort, or have simply left Friends behind to seek, ironically, a more "peaceful" faith community. The offenses were typical: chronic lateness to meeting and entering in a loud and noisy fashion, using meeting for worship to debate controversial matters, or criticize the meeting for failing to do one thing or another, refusal to recognize the authority of the clerk to run an orderly business meeting, and the usual instances of tale bearing, detraction, and lack of care for the reputations of others, especially those with whom Friends are in conflict. Historically, our meeting community, like others, has been very tolerant and patient with conflict-prone individuals, hoping that positive nurturing would encourage offenders towards more productive behavior. Several years ago, continued disruptive behavior on the part of several individuals produced such a conflict that several people stormed out of business meeting in disgust. Our Ministry and Oversight Committee realized that our approach had to change or we were going to lose valued members. An ad for an FGC Traveling Ministries program on dealing with disruptive members in the meeting miraculously appeared at that moment, so we sent a member to learn. Prior to this, several members of our Ministry and

Oversight Committee had been studying Quaker traditions of eldering and had already begun tentatively to try eldering discipline.

With the encouragement of tradition and contemporaries (the FGC program confirmed our own tentative efforts in the direction of discipline), we became more confident in our efforts to elder disruptive behavior, and we have developed a pattern. With the first instance of complaints, we encourage Friends to be tolerant of initial troubling behavior, especially among new attenders and the young, preferring the pat on the knee and belief that continued exposure to Friends practice will educate without the need for direct speaking. We plan strategies to help engage disruptive individuals to use their gifts in positive ways through service. If, however, the disruptive behavior continues and threatens the peace of the meeting, we assign a member of Ministry and Oversight to speak directly to the individual or individuals about our practice and how their behavior is falling short of the ideal and producing unhealthy conflict. We offer counsel and help to encourage change. On the occasions where the behavior continues despite these efforts, we write a formal letter outlining the behavior that must change. We reiterate our commitment to speak with the individuals any time we witness continued behavior that does not adhere to our sense of right order. If necessary, we might follow up this letter with a meeting of two or three “elders” from Ministry and Oversight with the person causing concern. Then one of our members is assigned to be the oversight elder with instructions to speak immediately to the individual if the offending behavior reoccurs. Our monthly Ministry and Oversight Committee regularly reviews how things are going with particular conflicts and modifies our actions accordingly. It has been our practice to begin with small, private actions and avoid group meetings that can end with contentious debates about whether the behavior in question is Quakerly and the discipline legitimate. Eldering is not a judgment of innocence or guilt. It is simply a statement that the behavior in question is producing major conflict in the meeting that threatens our communal health.

It would be nice to report a storybook ending to our discipline efforts, but, as expected, individuals have responded differently to discipline. Some have responded well, respected the needs of the community, and modified their behavior. Others have maintained that we are attempting to crush their prophetic witness to Truth and have withdrawn from active participation. Individuals are free to choose their responses. We can't force them to see things our way, but we can insist that certain practices that have promoted communal peace over the years be respected. The weight of meeting opinion has been very appreciative of our efforts to defend communal boundaries of good practice, and our meeting has been growing. At the same time, we have also taken actions that embraced the nurturing and supportive aspect of eldering. Ministry and Oversight followed the advice of an FUM pamphlet, *Becoming the Meeting that God Has Called You to Be*, by telephoning all members and active attenders to see how we were meeting their needs. These calls have enabled us to be more supportive of individuals in the meeting. We have received many more requests for clearness committees, prayer sessions for healing, requests for pastoral support for the sick, and the like. But these calls have also given us an opportunity to hear first hand the frustrations that some individuals have about individual behavior and messages in our meetings for worship and business. In the past, these folks might have left, figuring that there was no avenue for expressing their concerns or that no one would take action. Through these phone calls, we have initiated education sessions for vocal ministry, but have not assumed that this would be enough. We have also “elderred” individuals who continued to fall short of our best practice.

It would be wonderful if mediation, counseling, and positive nurture worked all the time to produce “win-win situations,” but it has been our experience and our tradition that we all need discipline on occasion. We are all fallible human beings who make mistakes, causing hurt and conflict.

It has also been our experience that Quaker communities that fail to exert discipline in an open way through properly recognized channels will slip into unofficial discipline through tale-bearing, back-biting, and shunning of offending individuals. When meetings fail to openly discipline through approved channels, a passive-aggressive approach to discipline is all too common among us.

Let me emphasize again that eldering is also about spiritual nurture—recognizing and supporting gifts in the ministry, visiting the sick, setting up clearness committees, prayer sessions for healing, and many other activities. But in the depths of our being we know that there is no spiritual growth without some form of discipline. Yes, we do have to be very careful that we don't go too far and slip into the legalistic finger-wagging excesses of our past, but I believe that recovering a tradition of moderate eldering will help us become more vibrant and spiritually alive communities of faith. I don't think that most people are looking for warm, fuzzy faith communities. I think they want to be part of real communities that wrestle with conflicting testimonies and are unafraid of exercising legitimate authority to settle conflicts in time-honored practices. I believe that our own meeting has become more vibrant and spiritually alive, at least in part through the practice of eldering that has embraced discipline as well as nurturing.