



Quaker Dialogue

Most open group discussions are characterized by an aggressive competition for floor time by a few dominant individuals and withdrawal by those who are softer spoken or less successful at "jumping in." This leads to a general atmosphere where no one really listens to the other points of view and those who do speak often feel (rightly) that they are not really being heard. The problem is exacerbated when the viewpoints expressed are widely divergent or controversial.

Quaker values emphasize respect for each individual. Over the years they have evolved a process that enables dialogue groups to function without the negative side-effects. The process is deceptively simple:

1. A question is formulated, and each person is asked to address it.
2. Each person speaks in turn, usually going around a circle.
3. Anyone may pass and take their turn later if they don't feel ready when their turn comes around.
4. Each speaker takes as long as needed to fully express him or herself, consistent with the number of people in the group and the time available.
5. No one is allowed to comment on or rebut anyone else's statement.

The power of this process is remarkable. It needs to be experienced to be fully appreciated. If, for example, there are 10 people in the group, each person can speak until they are satisfied that they have expressed themselves fully and been truly heard.

Furthermore, each person spends 90% of the time listening. There is freedom to really listen because one is not simply waiting for a pause to jump in. People are not cut off, put down, or squeezed out. The goal is not to "win" the argument or convert the other person to a particular point of view, but in fact this open process promotes growth and change by promoting full expression and real listening.

The process also promotes respect and understanding of a diversity of viewpoints. The process can work well even with widely divergent or potentially hostile points of view being expressed.