

Dealing With A Child Abuser in the Meeting Community: The Experience at Rochester (NY) Meeting

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The following is the entire minute on child sexual abuse that was approved at Rochester, NY Meeting on 14th day, 5th month, 1995. This was the result of many years of struggle in the Meeting over how the meeting should respond to the presence of a known child abuser in its midst. It is important for Friends to be aware that this situation is not foreign to other Meetings, and is potentially present in all Meetings.

Minute on the Meeting's Response to Child Sexual Abuse

The members and attenders of Rochester Friends Meeting have struggled with the issue of child sexual abuse. This endeavor was prompted by the presence, in Meeting, of an attender with a past history of child molestation. The experience brought to light a complex mix of strongly held, conflicting, and seemingly irreconcilable personal concerns. This minute is an attempt to resolve the conflict and find a sense of the Meeting derived from principles of Quaker spirituality.

For the purposes of brevity within this Minute, persons with a history of sexually abusing children will be called "offenders." Persons who suffered sexual abuse during childhood will be called "survivors." Meeting members and attenders will be denoted by the inclusive term "attenders." We use these labels with caution, knowing that they cannot adequately describe a person's experience, that offenders may also be survivors, and vice-versa, and that dependence upon labels can be a barrier to seeing the Light in another.

Queries

1. Do we affirm that we will use Quaker practices to resolve conflicts, and to find and express a witness on the issue of child sexual abuse?
2. Do we place a high value on the rights, safety, and loving guidance of children in the Meeting? How do we structure our communal life to best ensure the well-being of the children?
3. Can we learn to love and forgive and change?
4. Do we provide effective witness and ministry to adult survivors in the Meeting?
5. Do we affirm the dignity of offenders and provide effective witness and ministry to them?

6. Do we strive to move beyond labels to recognize that of God in each other?
7. Are we open to the Light that can be found in the testimony of offenders and survivors?
8. Are we grounded in the spirit of true Listening which arises from peace, faith, and love?

Testimony

Child sexual abuse, and physical and emotional abuse and neglect of children, are forms of violence directed against children. These wrongs occur in secrecy, and can be contained neither by ignoring the occurrence of abuse, nor by secrecy on the part of the Meeting in keeping the identity of an offender confidential. While we can never ensure complete safety for our children, open truthfulness provides the most basic requisite for children's safety. Because disclosure of child sexual abuse is traumatic for the offender, survivors, and the entire meeting community, Meeting mechanisms for such disclosure must be imbued with extraordinary compassion or they will backfire, possibly driving abusive behavior deeper into secrecy, reopening wounds for survivors and leaving the Meeting community to deal with a profound sense of failure.

After an inward repentance, an offender's recovery within the Meeting depends on self-disclosure and placing him or herself under the care of the Meeting. Self-disclosure requires courage and can be viewed as a form of the Quaker virtues of truth-telling and plain-speaking. Placing oneself under the care of the Meeting is an acknowledgment of a need for help, a commitment to Quaker principles and practices, and most importantly, a commitment to live in community with the Meeting.

We are reminded that the Meeting should not be an agent of punishment, either through intention or insensitivity. Yet we must balance our concern for inclusion with a concern for the welfare of the Meeting's children, for survivors of child sexual abuse, for the offender and for the Meeting community as a whole. A decision to welcome an offender into the care of the Meeting is a response of love, and requires a commitment by the Meeting to care for the entire Meeting community. We offer the following affirmations for consideration by Business Meeting in its seeking.

Quakers have traditionally placed high value on the rights and nurturing of children. The Quaker family and Quaker school are based upon the ideal of cultivating "the seed of God" within each child. In March 1993, the Meeting first came to unity around child sexual abuse when it agreed "to undertake general mutual care of each other and of the children." Caring for each other is our loving task, our safety, and our spiritual sustenance. It is the basis of a Quaker community response to child sexual abuse.

We affirm loving relationships among mutually responsible and consenting people. We oppose sexual relations between adults and children, which by their nature cannot be mutually responsible and consenting, and which are necessarily harmful.

A fundamental Quaker precept recognizes that each person is a Child of God and repository of the Inner Light. Currently the larger society is pessimistic about the recovery of sex offenders. Clinical literature cites high recidivism rates and a personality profile that includes deceit of self and others. Some adult offenders have greatly suffered from child sexual abuse, resulting in emotional difficulties extending over many years. While we cannot provide a comprehensive therapeutic setting for offenders or survivors, we can affirm that survivors can recover and offenders can control their behavior. Quakers have always affirmed the possibility of change based upon the promptings of the Inner Light.

The Meeting can provide support to an offender seeking to make restitution to those he or she has wronged. The concept of restorative justice is based on the possibility of righting relationships between persons within a community. Offenders have an especially heavy burden to carry in meeting the common human need to periodically restore and make right their relationships with others. By welcoming an offender into the care of the Meeting, we remind ourselves of our own needs to make right relationships, and provide a witness to the possibility of restoration and its healing power.

Survivors and offenders need the support of a spiritual community. The Meeting can provide a spiritual framework for recovery through worship, listening, truth, love and forgiveness.

- We are a community of ordinary people, each of whom has a special relationship with God. Our worship grounds us individually and as a community, and is the basis for Friends' testimonies and practices.
- Committed listening to survivors and offenders is crucial. For the survivors it can be seen as a development of the Quaker tradition of bearing witness to suffering and oppression. Behind the witness is a faith that strength, wisdom and compassion can arise from the experience of unchosen and undeserved suffering. For the offender, true listening allows us to learn to know the complex person behind the label, to recognize their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and to value their struggles to recover.
- Because child sexual abuse is so threatening on so many levels, we, attenders, survivors and offenders, need to express our fears and emotions, and often cannot truly listen or worship until we have worked through our feelings. We need to feel that we will be heard, and that we will be held in the Light. Yet, in speaking out of our fears, we may hurt another in the process. We rely on the Meeting for a strength of spiritual support which includes lovingly speaking truth to us about our actions. As a Meeting, and as individuals, we need practice giving and receiving such messages in an attentive spirit of love and forgiveness. One spiritual pattern for community mutual accountability may be found in Quaker interpretation of gospel order (Matt. 18).

Engagement with the issue of child sexual abuse provides rich opportunities for spiritual growth and community building. It ties to our commitment to the care and nurturing of our children and to our treatment of one another. It challenges our understanding of Quaker principles and practices and challenges us in our daily expression of our faith. We undertake this witness in

hopes that we may joyfully observe miraculous processes of healing: healing of old wounds by survivors, the repentance and restoration of offenders who want to be guided by the Spirit, healing of relationships and spiritual growth among us all.

Practice

Living with the commitment to take an offender under the care of Meeting is the responsibility of the entire Meeting community. The Meeting's Committee for Oversight and Support of the Minute on Child Sexual Abuse (hereafter shortened to Child Sexual Abuse Committee) is charged with concern for the Meeting's response to this issue. Committee members are nominated by the Nominating Committee, and appointed by Meeting for Business. Members will serve three-year terms. One member will serve concurrently on Ministry and Oversight; another on Religious Education and Child Care. Committee responsibilities include:

1. Functioning as a clearness committee for offenders planning disclosure and, with the offender, formulating recovery plans dealing with behavior within the Meeting and larger Society of Friends;
2. Overseeing the behavior of offenders in Meeting until disclosure to the entire Meeting community has occurred;
3. Determining effective, prompt, yet compassionate mechanisms for disclosure to ensure that the entire Meeting community is informed, and overseeing such mechanisms;
4. Maintaining an information and referral resource base for survivors, offenders, and families in crisis;
5. Maintaining an active concern, including listening, serving as a support group, etc. for the healing of adult survivors in a safe environment within the Meeting;
6. Maintaining an active concern for recovering offenders, including advocacy if they are subjected to societal injustice;
7. Maintaining an active concern for families in crisis due to child sexual abuse;
8. Maintaining an active concern for individuals accused of child sexual abuse and their families;
9. Working with Ministry and Oversight to formulate truth seeking, disciplinary and contingency plans if children are felt to be endangered;
10. Working with parents, attenders and other committees to promote values of loving and responsible sexuality in Meeting youth;
11. Working with other committees, broader Quaker groups, etc. to promote opportunities for further education relating to child sexual abuse and outwardly

representing a Quaker witness on child sexual abuse.

Offenders are directed to contact the Child Sexual Abuse Committee for assistance in preparing for self-disclosure, listening for clearness of repentance, personal strategies to prevent relapse, and understanding of Quaker principles. Business Meeting should be informed by the offender of the offender's history, inward repentance, commitment to Quaker principles and wish to live under the care of the Meeting. Clearness session findings and recommendations will be presented to Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. Business Meeting will decide whether and under what conditions it can welcome an individual offender into the care of the Meeting.

If an offender is taken under the care of the Meeting, the Meeting community will be informed of the name of the offender through personal contacts by members of the committees on Child Sexual Abuse, Religious Education and Child Care, and Ministry and Oversight. A statement in the newsletter and in the welcoming statement will indicate only that an offender has been taken under the care of the Meeting. Regional and Yearly Meeting will be informed of these proceedings, and told the name of the offender by a letter sent by the Clerk. Ongoing disclosure to new attenders will be the responsibility of members of Ministry and Oversight and Religious Education and Child care. As often the first to meet new parents, First day school teachers will be asked, when welcoming new parents, to inform them of offenders taken under the care of the Meeting. All of the above methods of disclosure will direct attenders to the Committee on Child Sexual Abuse for more information.

Recovery plans, though individualized, will be based on two general principles. First: offenders will avoid formal contact with Meeting children through functions such as Religious Education, Child Care, Ministry, or Family Support. Second: informal or spontaneous contacts with children will be based on the informed consent of parents. Needs for ongoing contacts between offenders and members of the Committee on Child Sexual Abuse will be determined, and will be included in the recovery plan. Recovery plans will also include openings for offenders to engage in service, fellowship and support within the Meeting.

If Meeting attenders have concerns about the actions of recovering offenders as they relate to the safety of the children, they should inform the Clerk, members of Ministry and Oversight, Religious Education and/or the Child Sexual Abuse Committee. Whoever is first informed of concerns will contact the Child Sexual Abuse committee, which will meet with attenders and offenders to address the concerns raised. If necessary for the immediate safety of the children, a called Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business will be convened.

The Committee will report to Business Meeting, bringing disclosure and recovery guidelines for approval, as well as other information regarding Committee activities.

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