

Bellingham Friends Meeting Guidelines on Confidentiality (2020/7/12)¹

In all work before committees of Bellingham Friends Meeting involving personal matters or concerns of individual members and attenders, committee members shall use the utmost care and tenderness in granting and maintaining confidentiality.

Confidentiality is defined as follows: Confidentiality is a state of trust in a relationship, between individuals and in community. Violating the trust harms the relationship and creates obligations to accept responsibility for the breach and to repair the harms it caused. Friends should be wary of asking for or granting unconditional confidentiality, understanding that while Friends, if asked, will make every effort to keep private all information of a sensitive nature, changing circumstances may render secrecy to be harmful to individuals involved or to the community as a whole.

When a question of confidentiality versus disclosure arises, any Friend *asking for* confidentiality as well as Friends *asked to provide* it, whether as an individual or a committee, might consider at least the following queries:

“When we serve on committees, do we exercise discipline if we confide in our partner, friend, or family member?”

“Is anyone's safety at risk? If so, how is that person's safety best assured – by what degree of confidentiality and what degree of disclosure?”

“Is anyone's psychological well-being at risk? If so, by what degree of confidentiality or disclosure is that person's well-being best protected?”

“What is the need of any individual or part of the community to know certain information? Is that need of greater importance than the need for confidentiality that some other individual or group has?”

“How are the needs of the whole meeting be met (or not met) by granting confidentiality?”

“If there is a need for the community as a whole to know something of the matter, how it's processed, or its ultimate resolution, can publication of what needs to be known be done in a way that respects the individual's need for confidentiality?”

“What record of this matter would serve both the needs of this meeting and the individuals involved?”

If the Friends involved agree to keep a matter confidential among them, it will be with the understanding that if one party to the agreement is a committee, then new committee members may be included as appropriate, that former committee members will maintain confidentiality, and that if the individual requesting confidentiality chooses to disclose the information to others within the Meeting who are not part of the initial group, they will keep the group informed of who is now aware. If the number of people to whom the “confidential” information is disclosed by the individual seeking confidentiality starts to become a large proportion of the active attenders at Meeting, Friends are advised to seek guidance from Worship and Ministry or another relevant committee

about the wisdom of continuing to hold “confidential” that which is already widely known.

Criminal conduct or the accusations of criminal conduct present particular challenges. Any person involved in a situation that involves the criminal justice system may require emotional, spiritual and/or economic support. Quakers have a long history of being fined or imprisoned for acts of civil disobedience in support of justice and peace. In these cases, a person will likely wish their situation to be broadly publicized.

But a person who has been accused, charged or convicted of criminal acts that carry social stigma, will be aware that other people knowing of their circumstances could result in shaming and ostracizing, and result in the loss friendships, acquaintances, employment and other opportunities. Because of plea deals, the final outcome of a legal proceeding may be quite different than the initial accusation or charge. And, regardless of outcome, the simple act of an accusation or charge being filed will be enough for many people to shun the accused or demand action to keep the accused from coming to Meeting. For this reason, it is important to weigh the benefits of confidentiality against the risks to our Quaker community and the community at large.

If a person has been accused, charged, arrested or convicted of a crime and it has been reported in a newspaper, or by the judicial system online, or in any other form where the general public might read or hear about it, it will not be considered a confidential matter within Bellingham Friends Meeting. Every effort will be made to be respectful and supportive of everyone involved, and to provide whatever spiritual nurture is requested and possible. In keeping with Friends testimony of integrity, and in recognition that keeping secrets can be toxic to our community, if there is a public record of criminal charges or conviction that Friends are aware of, it may be important to share the information.

While it is possible for an individual Friend to bring any matter directly to Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, it is usually best practice to first bring the issue to a committee so that it can be seasoned and then, when ready, brought to Meeting. If anyone has a concern about a person who attends Meeting or Meeting activities, they are encouraged to bring that concern to any member of Worship and Ministry or Pastoral Care committees. The member of either committee when asked will bring the matter to all members of both committees (even if the person about whom the matter is being brought forward is a member of one of the two committees). The purpose of using committees in this way can include helping to provide loving support and care for everyone involved and to worshipfully discern how best to respond to the concern. Nothing in this practice is intended to keep confidential matters pertaining to the safety of individuals or the Meeting as a whole.

The Meeting must always act to protect vulnerable individuals. When we become aware of an accusation, charge or conviction of someone who is attending or wants to attend Meeting, a decision needs to be made in relatively short time about whether circumstances necessitate notifying some or all members and attenders of the Meeting. While we want to provide a safe place for everyone to find connection with Spirit and a supportive spiritual community, whenever we are aware that someone has been accused, charged or convicted of a crime, it is our responsibility to assess the risk to our commu-

nity that person poses by participating in our shared worship and other Meeting activities.

Because of the wide variety of crimes that exist, it is important to distinguish between them. Is the accusation or charge a consensual crime like gambling or prostitution or a so-called victimless crimes like the possession and use of illegal drugs; or a property crime like shoplifting or embezzlement; or a violent crime including domestic violence, assault and rape; or neglect, physical or sexual abuse of children or others unable to protect themselves? Not all crimes necessitate a communication to the Meeting as a whole, but others clearly do.

Whenever an act of neglect, abuse or violence has been alleged, the information will be shared with the Meeting at large at Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business. NPYM *Faith and Practice* advises that “it is essential for the meeting to identify sexual offenders promptly, so that it can maintain appropriate monitoring for the safety of all children and adults.” Some suggested language: “With heavy hearts, and a reminder that the justice system is far from perfect, and that within that system, everyone is innocent until proven guilty, W&M is obligated to notify Friends that a Friend was booked into jail on X charges on Y date. Please hold the person on whose behalf these charges were brought in the Light, and also the person accused.” Pastoral Care and Worship and Ministry committees may decide to bring other information about members and attenders of the Meeting *if it is determined that such sharing is in the best interest of the Meeting as a whole*. If Worship and Ministry decides that sharing the identity of the individual at Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business is NOT in the interest of the Meeting as a whole, any individual Friend who asks may obtain that information from Worship and Ministry.

This process for discerning appropriate confidentiality is not meant to take precedence over state laws requiring the reporting of known or suspected emotional, sexual or physical abuse of vulnerable persons. Friends requesting confidentiality need to be aware that there are Friends in Meeting who may be legally unable to grant confidentiality on certain issues.

In general, when confidentiality is granted, no written or electronic documents containing confidential information should be retained by the meeting, committees, or committee members after their work on a confidential matter is completed.

Official reports from standing, ad-hoc or clearness committees read into the minutes and approved by the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, however, will be retained in Bellingham Friends Meeting records. One clear exception is storage of an individual’s requests for end of life medical and memorial decision-making, to be maintained by Pastoral Care Committee in a locked cabinet or storage box. The clerk will remind the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business of these policies annually in June and in a written notice in the newsletter.

¹ Adapted by Bellingham Friends Meeting August 2019 from Burlington (VT) Friends Meeting, who adapted from Friends General Conference: *Resources for Fostering Vital Friends Meetings. Compassionate Use of Information-Confidentiality vs. Disclosure*. Portland (Maine) Friends Meeting, NEYM. Revisions approved July 12, 2020.