NOTE TO FRIENDS: This is the draft for a new appendix to NPYM’s *Faith and Practice*, in response to requests for advice and guidelines about “staying Quakerly” in the use of certain communication technologies.

**Appendix:**

**Friendly Use of Communication Technology**

Technology can bridge geographic distance and can simplify time and travel considerations in our widespread Yearly Meeting. Emails, conference calls, and video connections can provide access for people who have difficulties with mobility, hearing, or vision. We usefully remain patient and tender with each other during continuing changes in media, also with using the devices themselves, and the uneven rate of adoption.

This section considers the use of conference calls, email, and social media, specifically blogs.

**Query for Friends in the use of any communication technology:**

- How can we make our Friendly communications accessible to all, across our differences in use of online media, ability to hear and see, and personal reactions to voiced disagreement?

**Conference Calls**

Telephone and internet conference calls may be used for many purposes, including committee meetings and consultations, worship-sharing, and clearness processes. They have proven to be a medium through which Spirit can move and connect Friends together. Not every Friends group has found conference calls suitable for careful discernment of the sense of the meeting. To open a conference call to the leadings of the Holy Spirit, the following suggestions may be helpful.

**For the clerk:**

- Arrange a time for the meeting in advance.
- Send the agenda, related materials, and contact numbers out several days ahead.
- Encourage Friends to center themselves before calling in.
- Encourage Friends to begin the call with greeting one another. Then open with silent worship before turning to the meeting agenda.
- When the group is large or not familiar with each other’s voices, ask people to say their names each time they speak.
- Remind Friends to pause between comments.
- Keep track of who has spoken and invite those who have been quieter to speak.
- If a decision is being made, ask if all are united in it. Give plenty of opportunity for any participant to voice hesitations.
- Ask for silence if Friends need to re-center in the Spirit.
- Conclude the conversation within an hour and a half.
- Finish the time together with an opportunity for silent worship, or suggest that Friends continue in worship after the call.

**For the participants:**

- If possible, enter into worship before joining the conference call.
Enter the conference on time with materials and agenda close at hand.
If the clerk requests it, state your name each time you speak.
Be concise in your comments.
Take care not to interrupt or talk over anyone.
State when you become lost or confused. Ask for silence when needed.
Remain in a location with good reception.
Use a quiet space away from disruptive noise and activity. If there is background noise, mute your phone.

**Queries for Friends using conference calls**
- Have we determined that a conference call is appropriate to the task at hand and the group involved?
- When deciding to use a conference call, how do we accommodate Deaf and hard-of-hearing Friends?
- Do we conduct our conference calls in a spirit of worship?
- How do we interpret a Friend’s silence during a conference call?

**Email**

Email, when used carefully and thoughtfully, can support good Quaker process in business and decision making. When members live at a distance from one another, Quaker committees may use email extensively. It is an efficient way to disseminate information, minutes, and agendas, and to attend to physical arrangements such as setting up the time and place for meetings. Some committee work seems to lend itself to email communication. Email is seldom suitable for deep listening and group discernment.

We attend to email messages as carefully as when speaking with someone face to face. Because an email can be sent quickly, caution is helpful. Choose words carefully; we cannot depend on tone of voice to carry our meaning. Take time to respond with care. If the matter is complicated, let the reply season for a while. Always review everything before sending.

When agreeing to conduct business by email, make a commitment to check messages frequently for the duration of the project. Respond to messages in a timely manner. We let others know if we are not going to be able to respond for some period of time.

Occasionally email does not reach its intended recipients. When a reply is expected and does not arrive, a follow-up message, telephone call, or letter may necessary.

**Basic Mechanics**

**The “To” Line:** Consider carefully to whom the message will be sent. Include only those who need to see it. Use the “Reply All” for messages that need to be read by everyone rather than default to “Reply.”

**The “CC” (copy) Line:** Putting someone on the “CC” line implies that they might want to see this message but no response is expected of them. If it is unclear or could be misunderstood, be explicit in the message why someone is in the “CC” line.

**The “BCC” (blind copy) Line:** “Blind Copy” is appropriately used for newsletters and other informational mailings where recipients may not wish to share their email addresses. Otherwise, a “blind copy” may be inconsistent with Quaker testimonies of integrity and truth. Generally, either a person belongs on either the To or CC list or doesn’t need the communication.
The Subject Line/Thread: Be clear and specific. Use a new subject line if the content differs from a previous message. Having all related comments identified by the same subject line preserves the trend of the conversation.

Body of the Message: Keep the text focused on one question. Messages with multiple threads can lead to confusion. Simple expression facilitates the conversation. Using an outline or numbering system is helpful. Keep email messages short, including more extensive information as an attachment.

Attachments: Often it is best to send long documents as attachments instead of in the body of the message. It may help to attach the same document in multiple formats, increasing the chance that all readers will be able to open it.

Email can work well when a group needs to gather information and a central person is taking feedback. When many are in a discussion on a topic, the process takes special attentiveness. Participants treat the email conversation as they would a face-to-face conversation with Friends. Read all prior messages first, pay attention to where the discussion is going before responding, and carefully what—and when—to contribute.

When decisions are being made by email, someone acts as clerk, and the group follows the good order of Friends. The clerk ends email conversation and suggests a phone or face-to-face meeting if the conversation is moving too quickly or carelessly, if the conversation is splintering or losing direction, or if some people are not feeling heard.

Group Email Lists and Listserves

Listserves or email groups allow Friends to direct emails easily to a whole meeting or to an interest group. A listserves for a whole meeting is a valuable tools for cultivating and nurturing community. To become part of the listserve, a group is first set up on a server, such as Googlegroups. Friends then follow a defined set of steps to become part of the listserve. The steps usually involve obtaining a password and responding to an invitation to join.

Listserves allow Friends to share important Quaker-related announcements relevant to the meeting, for instance agenda and reports for an upcoming meeting for business. To ensure beneficial use of this email tool, it may be helpful for the meeting to establish guidelines for Friends to rely on. Such guidelines may include:

- A reminder that emails are best written and read with respect, tolerance, and love.
- Asking that emails be directed to the whole group, not an individual person.
- Separating functions between announcement-only groups and ongoing discussion groups.
- Asking that Friends use informative subject lines and indicate whether a message is of a secular nature, for example, when a Friend is advertising an apartment for rent, etc.
- Advising that the listserv is not intended as a means to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Sometimes it may be necessary for the host of a listserv to caution a Friend who uses the listserv inappropriately. If after a reminder or two the Friend continues to make inappropriate posts, the meeting may wish to appoint a moderator who will monitor posts to assure they are in keeping with the criteria for use of the group email.

Queries for Friends using email

- Have we determined that email is appropriate to the task at hand and the group involved?
- When deciding to use email, how do we accommodate Friends who do not use electronic media?
- Is a clerk or facilitator needed for this email discussion?
How do we interpret a Friend’s silence in an email exchange?
Do we remember that there is that of God in every person who will ever read this message?

Blogging and Social Networking

Social media including web logs ("blogs") have created new possibilities for Quaker ministry. Quaker bloggers respond to and share each other’s writings. Readers post comments that can develop and widen dialogue among Friends. A few Quaker social networks have taken root on the World Wide Web, allowing a broader range of commentary and discussion on topics of faith, practice, action, and experience.

Writing a blog or using a social network as a form of religious ministry requires a degree of maturity and self-discipline. The absence of editorial oversight makes it easy to fall into self-righteous or aggressive posturing. At their best, Quaker blogs offer an extraordinary range of insightful, informed, and spiritually profound communications. Quaker writing online can be a prophetic and teaching ministry. This emerging form continues Friends’ long tradition of publishing Truth.

Writers can’t avoid presenting a persona that is only a fragment of who they are as whole people. This phenomenon has been part of the human experience for as long as people have been communicating with the written word. We may fall into the assumption that online communication is effectively equivalent to meeting in person, but when communicating in virtual space we remain aware of the limitations of our written words.

Online networks are often referred to as “communities.” This is community in a significantly different sense than the embodied relationships of meetings and neighborhoods. An essential element of a local community is accountability for words and actions. In meetings we know that what we do and say will have potentially long-lasting consequences for relationships with each other, and may affect lives beyond the meeting. Purely online relationships do not necessarily have this characteristic. For the most part, Quaker bloggers and commenters use their real names. However, the capacity for anonymity, combined with increased potential for misunderstandings and lack of context, can lead to contentiousness in online discussions, including Quaker forums.

Online discussion forums seem to work best when linked to physical communities and connected to face-to-face relationships. Local or quarterly meeting blogs can function effectively as forums for sharing ideas and discussion for this reason. When writing a blog or commenting on a social network we remain conscious of the Friends who might read it, and the potential effects on relationships in other contexts. This awareness is a helpful restraint when we are sometimes tempted to express ourselves in an overheated or ungenerous manner.

Queries for Friends Using blogs or social networks

- How do we avoid addictive use of electronic communications?
- How do we stay grounded in a worshipping community while active in online media?
- How do social media support our spiritual practice or ministry?
- When is it appropriate to have a support committee for an online ministry?
- Do we remember that there is that of God in every person who will ever read this post?

Quotations

The Religious Society of Friends is a small world, and the chances are high that you might one day meet the real people behind the blogs. It’s more like talking in someone’s living room, rather than shouting at a protest march.

Robin Mohr, 2009
As with other practices, we are free to make conscious decisions about the way that we use technology, rather than accepting the typical patterns of our culture as inevitable. Having recognized this in my own life, I have established the discipline of a ‘Sabbath rest’ from online communication each Sunday. I find that having at least one day each week without checking emails or social media helps me to regularly detach from the impulse to become dependent on constant connectivity. This helps to re-establish a quality of consciousness that is not restlessly seeking stimulation and distraction. Some Friends find other ways to avoid getting lost in distraction, such as choosing internet passwords that remind them to be mindful or take a break from the screen, or even restricting their computer’s internet access at certain times.

Craig Barnett, March 2015

Some questions for discussion around Friendly Use of Communication Technology

- What is your Quaker group’s experience using email?
- What is your group’s experience with email groups or listserves? What works well? What concerns have you had?
- Are there other technologies that should be mentioned in this appendix? What would you add, what would you say about it?
- Do you have other advice or questions for Friends about “staying Quakerly” when using communication technology?