

Interview with the Clerks at FMC, February 2023
River Smallflower

This past February, I joined the FMC Clerks Team for their weekly meeting over Zoom. In our interview, I was able to ask them some general questions about their lives, what it means to be a Clerk, and how to gracefully navigate discernment during Meeting for Business.

Let's start with introductions. What is everyone's respective role, and how long have you been at FMC?

Ariel Maddocks (she/her): I'm one of three Co-presiding Clerks. I grew up Quaker in Asheville, North Carolina. I've been attending FMC since 2009 or 2010, so I've been here for about 12-13 years.

Betsy Roper (she/her): I'm the Assistant Clerk. I've been at FMC for about eight or nine years. I didn't grow up Quaker, but my family therapist at the time actually introduced my son and I to Quakerism, and I loved it. I've been here ever since.

Ian Harrington (he/him): I'm the Recording Clerk. I grew up in Quaker meetings in Delaware, then became involved at FMC when I came to Boston for grad school in 1977.

Lynne Weiss (she/they): I'm also a Co-presiding Clerk. I discovered Quakerism in high school through interest in the anti-Vietnam War movement. After that, I ended up living in an intentional community home in West Philadelphia with a bunch of Quakers. In 1995, I was invited to a mothers' group that met here at FMC, and I started attending regularly after that. I became a member in 1997. I stopped attending Meeting for a while for personal reasons— I found myself in a mixed-race family, and the lack of diversity here at the time made me feel kind of uncomfortable. Eventually, though, I came back. I was on the Membership Committee for a while before becoming a Co-presiding Clerk. I was new to the Clerks team at the same time as Betsy, actually.

Tom Sander (he/him): And I am the third Co-presiding Clerk. My family is Quaker, going back to the 1700s. My Quaker mother married my Jewish dad and encouraged him to come with her to Meeting for Worship. So I started coming to FMC as a baby, and I've been on-and-off involved for about 20-25 years. I've served on a number of different committees, and through my time Clerking here, I've been a part of three different iterations of the Clerks team.

What is the most challenging part of Clerking?

Betsy: I have not clerked a Business Meeting, but I have clerked an all-Clerks and Conveners Meeting. In my role of being in Quaker leadership, I would say my understanding is that because we speak to the Clerk in Business Meeting, the Clerk gets the brunt of the discomfort in a Meeting, and that can be hard. It can be challenging. I really feel for Ariel, Lynne, Tom and Ian when they have clerked Business Meetings, and I look at it with a lot of trepidation.

Ariel: I think one of the most challenging things is both finding out how to really listen and get the true sense of the meeting, because sometimes people are speaking from a Spirit-led position, and sometimes we get so caught up in our own emotions and desires. It's a matter of lifting everybody back to the Spirit-led sense, and as a Clerk you're working so hard to listen not to the individual but to the Spirit leading that the meeting's finding. When the meeting comes, and I'll say it from the other side as an individual, you often get caught up in that personal piece of, "But wait, I have something." And is that me or is that Spirit? For the meeting to come to trust as a Clerk, you're really listening to Spirit and trying to find that thread through everybody. I think also just remembering the humanity of it all, that we are all volunteers, that Quakerism is made up of so many people—we don't have Clergy, and folks take on that Clergy responsibility. It helps to have a team, so you know you've got this team with you supporting that work. Especially in these very large settings, where you don't know what personal pieces each person is bringing to a Meeting for Business, because we are a fairly large meeting. I think our Meetings for Business are often the size of a lot of Meetings for Worship. And Meeting for Business gets smaller attendance than Meeting for Worship.

I think another part of the question, which Ariel and Betsy have answered, is how do you gracefully overcome those challenges? Or do you have resources for spiritually addressing or processing these challenges?

Lynne: I have to say that I have been surprised, I actually have not found Meetings for Business to be the most challenging part of this role. I do find a little bit that Clerking a Meeting for Business is an out-of-body experience for me. What I find more challenging is dealing with emails from members of the community who are upset about something. I have struggled—and I feel like the team has been really helpful in this—with figuring out what my role is. What is my responsibility, what is the process here? Email and electronic communication aren't really part of Quaker tradition, and yet they're very much a part of our lives.

Do you feel sometimes that you have to be constantly available? Or that technology facilitates that feeling?

Lynne: To some extent, I guess. But I also think that's to some extent my choice. I turn things off if I don't want to be interrupted. I don't know how others feel about that.

Tom: I think another one of the challenges of Clerks is—this may be true about Quakers more generally, but a lot of Quakers in Cambridge Meeting— are conflict avoidant. They either deny that there's conflict, or they don't like to deal with conflict themselves. And so, I think a lot of the difficult issues get bounced up to Ministry and Counsel, or to the Clerks team, to try to figure out what to do with it. It's challenging as a Clerk to figure out, what is the Clerk's responsibility? How do we use the community's time really effectively? What issues are appropriate to bring to Business Meeting? What issues do we need to address, and how can we address them in a way that builds stronger community? Those questions don't always have easy answers, at all.

Lynne: Yeah, I think that's what I was alluding to, Tom— these things around the edges of Meeting for Business. Figuring out what our roles are. A lot of it comes by email, but it doesn't have to. It can be in other forms too.

Ariel: It's kind of an astounding amount of preparation that Clerks need to put into being responsive, because I think that everybody's like, "I've got a question regarding my committee, why aren't you answering me?" The reality is there is a very large community with a lot of needs, and a lot of responsibilities that go with Clerking. Plus the organizing to understand what's coming to Meeting for Business, to then make sure that you can effectively clerk it. And helping to mentor and guide Committee Clerks as they bring business. I give the example of: I was clerking Fundraising and we had something we took in. Some people said that we need to do it a certain way, and it turned into this whole offshoot of conversation. Things that feel like they could be a simple decision, when it goes to a community discernment in a Meeting for Business, become really complicated. Since then, when I work with other Clerks, I'll say, "Here's why I'm asking these questions." I'll often cite that example, because when a Clerk is getting ready to clerk a Meeting for Business, we're asking questions not to be difficult, but to help really ready the business so that the community can discern effectively and make sure we're able to support that committee and their work. Because committees also get very discouraged if something doesn't go well. Meeting for Business when the committee's clear on something, but the community isn't, takes a lot of Clerking effort and constant mental attention.

Tom: Committees get frustrated if they want to bring something to Business Meeting, and the Clerks table says, "No, this is not the right time for it." It's hard for the committees to sometimes understand that we're not doing it to be oppositional. We're doing it to try to make sure that enough thought and discernment has gone into topics so it can be a productive time in Business Meeting, rather than the committee coming away frustrated, the community coming away frustrated, the Clerk coming away frustrated. That's a difficult dialogue. In some ways, the Clerks don't really have power at all, because we're seeking Spirit unity. But in other ways, we do have power to suggest an emerging consensus that we hear, and to test that with the community, or decide when and how is the right time for considering items, and things like that.

Ian: When I was one of the presiding Clerks, I found that there's incredible strength—a lot of things were done so well by the Committees, that it was just a matter of bringing it to Meeting to approve it. There was a lot of work by the Ministry and Counsel, a lot of work by the various forums of committees for reopening the Meeting, that helped decide some of various ways of handling the pandemic. My personal most challenging time was, first of all, being on an all-Zoom Meeting for Business. There was an issue in which it was very clear that the Meeting was divided on something, and so it was hard trying to come up with where the Meeting was, while you were on Zoom and facing time limits. That one Meeting was the most challenging and memorable for me. It was very difficult, because of the time and because of the fact that we weren't physically together.

Have most Clerks Meetings been on Zoom ever since?

Ian: For the first year plus it was all on Zoom, but since then it's been Hybrid.

Tom: But we've also had some challenges. There was one Meeting where we lost connectivity. I was Clerking and we had a group on Zoom and a group in the Meetinghouse and no way, really, to connect the two. The internet kept going out. Ariel had one just recently for a more limited period of time where we hadn't gotten the Zoom connection established. So I think Clerking is hard even when people are all physically in the same room, but it's a whole other dimension of hard when you're having to look at and get a sense of what's happening in the room and on Zoom, with technology challenges that keep those two groups from hearing each other.

Lynne: Have you been to a Meeting for Business, River?

No, Never.

Lynne: Okay, so, the way it works for us is there's a table called the Facing Bench, and sitting at that table is the person who's the Presiding Clerk for that particular meeting, and the Recording Clerk, and then there's either another Co-presiding Clerk or an Assistant Clerk sitting at that table with them. So I feel like that second Clerk has a bigger role now, because you need to be aware of what's going on in the physical room as well as on Zoom. Plus keeping track of the agenda and what needs to be said. So I found myself wondering recently if we actually need to have a third person, in addition to the two Clerks and the Recording Clerk, to be monitoring what's going on. That's probably a much more complex discussion, but anyway. That's how it works. I think either the second Co-presiding Clerk or the Assistant Clerk has a much bigger role than they might have when everyone was in one physical space.

I feel like that would disrupt the traditional structure. It's sometimes hard to feel Spirit when you're not in the room with everyone.

Lynne: Though I think it's accurate to say that we typically have one and a half to two times as many people attending on Zoom as at 5 Longfellow Park.

Ariel: It might be interesting to look back and see what our Meeting for Business attendance was before. It's hard to gauge the relativity of how many people are at Meeting for Worship versus how many people are at Meeting for Business, because we don't have those matching data points. But historically, when we were all at Longfellow Park as our sole way of gathering, how many people were at Meeting for Business relative to how many people were in Meeting for Worship? And now, how does that balance out, because there is an aspect of being able to be in your own space and some of the comfort that brings. I do hear some Friends say that they just can't find Spirit, or center, or feel connected to everyone if they're not in the room. And then others feel like they are able to. How do we find a way to collectively share an experience? That's one interesting thing about Quakerism. Any kind of worship we have together, we all come with different realizations of where we are and what we need and how that arrives for us, because we don't have a minister telling us what to think or how to receive a message. It creates this interesting dynamic of some people not being able to feel Spirit with technology present, some people not feeling Spirit unless they're in the room, and some who can feel it regardless.

What's your favorite part of the role?

Lynne: For me, it's getting to know the people on the Clerks team, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of what the issues are, when facing the Meeting from the perspective of various committees and working groups. I feel like my understanding of the Meeting has really deepened since I've taken on this role.

Betsy: For me, I would say it's the times I've been able to call out the gifts in other people, and knit folks into the Meeting, knit people together and draw connections. That's an incredibly wonderful feeling.

Ariel: I think the feeling of helping the community find the centering that's there, and being able to name and see that. And the community appreciation when that happens, because sometimes it's really hard to get there. But when it does happen, it feels so good, knowing I was able to help listen and feel this, and discover this thing that was present for us, and take on that role of naming it.

Tom: I think I agree with what other people have said. It's a lovely group to serve with. For example, I think the community was really divided in the summer and fall about Covid. We had

a lot of listening sessions, we had a lot of discernment on that, and it felt really good to kind of bring the community back together about that. It's important for the community and it's a wonderful feeling when you feel like you can be a catalyst for finding unity in the Spirit.

Ian: I would echo a lot of what the others have said. There's something beautiful about being part of the Clerks team during a Meeting for Business when an important decision is made. I remember being one of the people attending Meeting for Business, and at that time I felt a lot more as an individual. But being part of the Clerks team has changed my perspective, in that I feel like I'm part of a larger whole.

What practices do you strive for in Clerking, or what qualities do you admire in other Clerks?

Ariel: I think one of the hard parts of Clerking, that I really love and strive for too, is this idea of, How do I trust that Spirit will lead those who are present? And it's not my place, when I'm clerking, I have to set aside my own leadings and really trust that the community leading will arrive at the right place. It's easier to do that by just saying, Hey, I'm busy. I'm sure the Community will follow their leading and arrive at the right place. But as Clerk, you have to be present, and set aside your own personal leadings, and so I really strive to find out how I can set aside my own leadings and come really open to finding where, as a community, we are being led. The pieces that help put that practice in place, making sure that I'm practicing that truly deep listening and not carrying my own stuff, or my own Spirit leading, but trusting that the community's spirit leading will take us where we need to be for our decision.

I will say, I really admire some Clerks that have this amazing ability to say, "There's something rising," and knowing just that right moment to step in and ask, "Is this where we are?" To hear and see where that is, following that and understanding where Spirit is moving in the community. Because sometimes you have someone saying something really oppositional to what the decision is, and then that's actually bringing you closer to the decision. Some people can just name that so quickly, and so efficiently.

Betsy: Ariel, I think of you as one of those people. *laughs*

I've heard it said that a really gifted Clerk gives the appearance that there's all the time in the world in the Meeting. And yet, being on the Clerks table, I know that there is an agenda. So there's that Chronos and Kairos tension, right? I think the thing I admire the most in clerking, or the skill I strive for, is to be grounded, and to take time knowing that we will get to the agenda and also move it along. Holding both, that balance is what I'm always looking for.

That sounds hard.

Tom: Betsy named a really salient challenge. I struggle with trying to both think of what's ahead and where we are in the agenda, and how to balance that. I think the other tension, with all the logistical things of being a clerk, is to stay grounded in Spirit at the same time as you're aware of all the practicalities and who's saying what and who's not being called on. That is a tension that I find very difficult, and I'm in awe of people who can do both effectively. It's not like they're closing their eyes and they're not aware of anything that's going on—they're very aware of what's going on, and they're listening very effectively and presenting issues well.

Lynne: You were talking about staying in Spirit, and I was thinking, I strive to be in the moment. I remember I attended many Yearly Meeting Sessions via Zoom this summer, and I was so impressed. The person Clerking those Meetings was Bruce Newman. He seemed so relaxed, he was taking everything in and trusting that we could be in the moment and that we were gonna get to where we needed to be. He was able to make a few jokes. And I just remember thinking, wow, that's the kind of Clerk I hope I will be at some point. He was a real inspiration.

Is he still the Clerk of Yearly Meeting?

Lynne: Does it change every year? Is that how it works?

Ian: Generally every three years.

Lynne: That is a really big job.

Ariel: Yeah, if Cambridge seems like a big job... whew.

I assume it's all volunteer-based, even for the Yearly Meeting?

Lynne: We make a lot of money actually. *laughs* No, it's all volunteer-run.

Are there any resources you look to for guidance? And how do you process after a Clerking meeting?

Ian: For me, Meeting for Worship is a perfect place for processing. And then, there's a lot of resources in the Meeting. People who are involved in the Meeting, talking with them about what's going on really helps. I'm Holly Lapp's husband and so driving home from Meeting with her is a good way of processing, because she's very familiar with everything happening. Having time with her afterwards is very helpful.

Tom: There are times when I've Clerked at Business Meeting, and by the end I feel totally emotionally spent. It feels somewhat vulnerable because the community's kind of expecting you

to play an important role. Maybe Bruce Newman doesn't feel spent at the end. *laughs* But I usually do. For me, that's not the right time to process at all. I need some time. I think many of us are our own harshest critics, like we can instantly see ten ways we should've handled things differently, or why didn't I say X, or whatever. So I find it helpful to put some time between when we have Business Meeting and when I reflect on it myself. One of the wonderful things about having a Clerks table is, we can come to each other with our different perspectives on what went well, or what could have been done differently. That's also really enriching. When I started off as a Clerk, I had a mentor Clerk who was not on the Clerks table. I would ask her a few weeks after Business Meeting whether she had thoughts about things that went well or things that I could have done differently. I think it's very helpful to get outside of yourself, because the wealth of people within our community have great ideas. [32:34]

Lynne: Yeah, I mean, these meetings of the Clerks team are one resource. Certainly, Faith and Practice has been important to me. I don't know if everyone on the Clerks team does, but I have a small support group who I meet with. It's a support and eldering group, and I really want them to offer advice as well as tell me things they think I did well. That's helpful. I clerked the most recent Meeting for Business, and felt completely fried afterwards, and watched the last few episodes of a trashy TV series. That's one way to deal with it.

Which TV show?

Lynne: The White Lotus.

Ariel: I never would have known that Lynne. *laughs* That's another reason why talking to each other is so good. But yeah, I also think that preparation piece, this group is so important for that. It's so hard to understand, with some things for the community having a lot of complexities. Sometimes I'll approach an issue or proposal thinking it will be a quick thing, seeing that a Committee put it together, I won't anticipate having to go into deep discernment. Having this group over the years—it's been a different combination of people—but it's easier to figure out with the group. They can say, "Hey, we can't do this item in ten minutes." That helps me set a realistic expectation for myself going into Meeting for Business, regarding what a reasonable agenda is. Also, the crafting and the ordering of items in the agenda... The wisdom of the community, the people who have been Clerks both past and present, how they can help offer insight. And like Lynne said, I think that Faith and Practice, either the paperback copy or the current web-based version through New England Yearly Meeting. There's just a lot of Quaker readings out there. I think it's the constant question of, how can I foster growth and help hold this space for the community?

Betsy: I would add, it's been said that these Meetings are very helpful to process Business Meetings, and All Clerks Meetings. In fact, it's part of our agenda. We plan to talk about them and I find that very comforting, knowing that we'll have that space.

Thank you so much everyone. It's so special to be able to interview and get to know all of you, and have a deeper understanding of what the Clerks do. I feel like coming at it from this perspective of not knowing much is really awesome, because it's a great resource for other people who might feel like it's not easily accessible, or like they're discouraged by not knowing certain things about the Meeting.

Tom: Come to Business Meeting, March 12th!

Ian: I'm also hoping that what you write might help interest others in attending Meeting for Business in Worship. It's only a very small portion of our Meeting that attends. I just always hope that others would have the same experience as I did. The first time I attended Meeting for Business was at FMC when I was a grad student, and I was so excited by that first one I attended that I went to Harvard Square and called my parents to tell them what I had experienced. *laughs* I just hope that more people will give it a try.

I would love to come.

Tom: I wanted to add that when Business Meetings go well, the outcome that comes out of it is not anything that anyone could have foreseen going into it. It's not like, this group wanted A and this group wanted B, and they wound up with something halfway in-between. It's like, this group wanted A and this group wanted B, and together, through listening in Spirit, we wound up with C, which neither group could have thought of initially. That's the beauty of it, when Business Meeting goes well— it's not a split-the-difference approach, it really is the community coming together through Spirit to a new place they didn't expect.