

## CHAPTER 11

# Period Pieces

*It helps to remember why we are doing this work. I think there is sometimes the naïve assumption that if we talk about it enough, we will get it perfect, and I don't believe in perfection. I don't believe the world will ever be perfect, or that any of us will ever be perfect, or that our strategies will ever be perfect. In the effort to make social change, we learn and grow and develop, and that is what it is all about. —Charlotte Bunch<sup>11</sup>*

Things happen in every group periodically that remind everyone of the challenges of doing things together in groups, particularly if your group is trying to make change. Some of these happenings are pleasant and welcome. Others are less pleasant and unwelcome. Peace and Power processes call for an awareness and anticipation of periodic group issues and challenges. This chapter describes some things that your group can anticipate to ease the way.

### PERIODIC REVIEW OF PRINCIPLES OF SOLIDARITY

Periodically reviewing principles of solidarity is like cleaning house: It is easy to delay or neglect getting it done! Nevertheless, like cleaning house, it is something that will create a better group “space,” and it feels good once you do it. Some groups select a season of the year as a time for assessing what they are doing and to talk about changes that the group needs to make. In other groups, the time for taking a new look at the old principles comes when the focus shifts, such as when a task is completed or when group membership changes.

Three questions are helpful in taking a critical look at your principles of solidarity.

- Are we actually doing what these principles suggest?
- If not, what ARE we doing?
- What principle is implied in what we are doing?

### OPEN OR CLOSED GROUPS?

Peace and Power groups usually seek to be open to all who wish to join. However, this is a decision that needs to be considered carefully. Some groups may not be able to be completely open because of the work they need to get done. The dilemma becomes, then, how to remain open to new thoughts, to integrating diversity within the group, and yet remain effective in your

---

<sup>11</sup> From an interview with Charlotte Bunch published in *Voicing Power: Conversations with Visionary Women* (Gail Hanlon, ed., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 191–192.

work.

One way to address group membership is to think of openness as relative and changing rather than as an opposing choice of open or closed. Task-oriented groups often need to maintain stability in membership to meet the pressing demands of tasks that form their central purpose for gathering. As the demands of the tasks change, a natural flow of movement occurs as some people leave the group (sometimes temporarily), and others join. Groups that are essentially permanent, such as a group that operates a community shelter, can identify times when membership is open and develop traditions to educate and orient new members.

## **PEOPLE JOINING AN ONGOING GROUP**

Integrating new members is a welcome but difficult transition. In open groups, the demands of constantly integrating new members is a challenge that requires far more time and energy than the group typically expects. Because Peace and Power groups do not function like typical groups, people who are new to the group are essentially in a foreign land, in the midst of a new culture that may be totally unfamiliar. The words spoken may be their language, but meanings of words take on a new character that existing members learn to take for granted. People unfamiliar with the language of Peace and Power often find themselves in a muddle trying to figure out what is really going on. Once a group is committed to welcoming new members, existing members need to be constantly aware of these dynamics and establish ways to ease the transition. The group needs to set aside time to explain and clarify what is going on and to make resources such as the history, purposes, and principles of solidarity available to new members.

Groups that require relative stability in membership may set aside times during the year for orientation of new members. The group plans these events carefully. They can be face-to-face, online, or both. Members of the existing group take responsibility for various parts of the orientation. A typical new member agenda includes a history of the group, a review of the principles of solidarity, an orientation to what the group does, and a detailed description of the contributions expected of all members.

## **MEMBER LEAVING A GROUP**

In groups with unrestricted openness in membership, leaving the group may be a simple matter of not continuing to contribute financially or dropping out of the gatherings or the online discussion. In groups that exist for a purpose that involves personal development, such as a reading group or a support group, the group's purpose may lead to a live-and-let-live response to someone's leaving.

However, when a member leaves a group, this can create a void in the group, and people want to acknowledge the leave-taking openly in some way. In a group where an individual's leaving has consequences for other members of the group, it is especially important to state in

the principles of solidarity what the group wants to happen when someone leaves.

Creating traditions around this event, similar to the traditions of welcoming new members, is helpful in making this a smooth transition for the group and for the member who is leaving. Because this event represents both an ending and a new beginning, one way to approach it is similar to closing, with an entire gathering devoted to a closing concerning the leaving of the individual.

Each group member takes the time to express appreciation, critical reflection, and affirmation. From this, the person leaving as well as all members of the group can carry new insights into their separate futures

## **ASKING A MEMBER TO LEAVE A GROUP**

As difficult as it may be, sometimes the energies of the group and of an individual are not harmonious with one another. Whatever the issue is, the group must address it in some constructive way. The assumption that we can live together happily ever after is simply not consistent with reality. Ending one phase and beginning a new phase is not necessarily a failure. Still, it is very traumatic for everyone involved to acknowledge difficulty that leads to asking a member to leave.

When a group finds that an individual is not able to function effectively as a group member, the issues must first be addressed openly, bringing to the discussion the fullest of intentions to act in a way that is consistent with the group's principles. The group explores all possible avenues for resolving the issues. The discussion continues until every member is certain that the avenue chosen is one that is good for the group and loving and compassionate for the individual.

## **ENDING A GROUP**

Ending a group does not mean that the group has been a failure. Often it is the celebration of the completion of the purpose for which the group formed. If the purpose was not a specific task that the group can wrap up in a neat package, then knowing when the purpose has been accomplished may not be easily recognizable.

For example, a group formed to provide support for one another may find that after a while, people have sources of support elsewhere that had not existed when the group was first formed. When this happens, the group may have evolved into something that is no longer meaningful. When coming to the group's gatherings or showing up online begins to be a chore rather than a pleasure, it is time to consider ending the group.

Rather than let a group simply fizzle out, plan a specific event around which the group acknowledges their ending. The event provides a means for everyone to close this phase of their experience, taking something from it into the future. Planning for a gathering for a final closing of the group online can be a rich and growth-enhancing experience.