# Experiencing Ouaker Community

Introducing the ways that Quaker meetings are organised, nurtured and led



This unit invites you to find out more about the Quaker experience of being a Spirit-led community. This distinctive understanding and approach to community is evident in our local and national structures, how we run and nurture our meetings, and the Quaker way of doing business and making decisions.



#### Experiencing Quaker Community unit aims

#### This unit aims to help you:

- become more familiar with the ways that Quaker meetings are organised and led
- understand how we live out our commitment to one another and nurture our community as Quakers
- explore your own response to experiencing community with Quakers

# Overview

The Quaker approach to community invites each of us to live up to our unique potential, while learning to go beyond the boundaries of our own small selves as part of our commitment to one another. This is a profoundly counter-cultural approach and it is at the heart of the Quaker way. Early Quaker Isaac Pennington described the experience of community among Quakers in this way:

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying for one another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Quaker faith & practice 10.01

Of course, Quaker meetings are in no way perfect as communities. We often fail to live up to Isaac Pennington's description, and experience our human inadequacy and brokenness. As members of the Religious Society of Friends, however, we continually renew a commitment to trusting in something greater than us as individuals: our community embodies, however imperfectly, Divine love at work in the world. Quakers have developed traditions of spiritual hospitality and nurture to promote a healthy community and to deal with conflicts when they do arise. These include our system of pastoral care under the guidance of elders and overseers, and specific tools for addressing concerns such as meetings for clearness and threshing meetings (see Distinctives 1 for more on these).

Our way of making decisions reflects the Quaker understanding that the Spirit is at work in our community. Our business meetings are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that

God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God's will can be recognised through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making from the secular idea of consensus.

Quaker faith & practice 3.02

This process of waiting for the guidance of the Spirit involves learning to let go of our own personal agendas and allow decisions to be 'discerned' rather than voted on, argued about or pushed through. In the words of John Punshon, 'the meeting for business cannot be understood in isolation; it is part of a spiritual discipline.' (*Quaker faith & practice* 2.85).

Quakers do not have ordained ministers, so we all share responsibility for the wellbeing of our meetings. However, certain roles such as elders, overseers

and clerks are filled by Friends for specific periods of time to ensure that our communities are effectively led, organised and nurtured. For Quakers,

to be without an ordained clergy is not to be without either leadership or ministry. The gifts of the Spirit to us include both. For us, calls to particular ministries are usually for a limited period of time, and those gifts pertain to the task rather than the person. In one lifetime a person may be called to a number of ministries.

Quaker faith & practice 12.02

'Ministry' may involve being asked to serve in a particular role such as elder, or it may be very different: we all have gifts and all minister to one another. For some Friends their ministry may involve working with children and young people, while for others it may be providing a warm welcome for visitors, working on the meeting house garden or introducing Quakerism to enquirers through outreach activities such as Quaker Quest or Quaker Week.

Quakers are part of a community that goes beyond the local meeting. Although the local meeting community is probably the first point of contact for most Friends and is where we attend meeting for worship, our membership is actually of our area meeting. The area meeting covers something like a county or city and is made up of several local meetings. In Britain, 'Britain Yearly Meeting' is the name of the national body to which all area meetings belong, and is the final constitutional authority of the Religious Society of Friends in England, Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. A yearly meeting is a forum for working out the ministry and witness of Quakers in the wider world; it is also an annual assembly of Quakers to which all are welcome, where worship, work and fellowship are shared by the national community of Friends.

# Quaker distinctives

## Distinctives 1

#### The healthy Quaker meeting

There is guidance about how Quakers try to nurture our communities in *Quaker faith & practice*: in *Advices & queries* 17–22, which is in section 1.02; in section 12.01; and in the introduction to chapter 12, 'Caring for one another', If you prefer listening to the *Advices & queries*, there are mp3 audio files of them available in this unit of the online Becoming Friends course.

You might also like to watch the video 'An Introduction to Quakers' in which Quakers discuss their experience of community, among other themes. You can access the video in a number of different ways:

- online at
  - www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html
  - www.quakerweek.org.uk/intro/quaker-worship
  - www.youtube.com as 'Introduction to Quakers'
- on the DVD *An introduction to Watford Quakers*, available from the Quaker Centre bookshop (see Further exploration for contact details).

To find out more about specific Quaker discernment and support methods, you could read the following sections of *Quaker faith & practice*:

- meetings for clearness: *Qf&p* 12.22–12.25
- threshing meetings: *Qf&p* 12.26
- support groups: *Qf&p* 12.27
- guidance if you have a particular concern: *Qf&p* 13.08
  - > for more about 'concerns', see the Faith in Action unit

#### Distinctives 2

#### Local, area and national Quaker structures

These structures fulfil different roles but are all interrelated. They changed in 2007, so copies of *Quaker faith & practice* earlier than the fourth edition will not reflect current arrangements.

You might like to look at two diagrams giving an overview of the relationships between the different Quaker structures. You'll find these diagrams on pages 108–109.

You could read the following sections of *Quaker faith & practice* online, or in the fourth edition book, for an introduction to the roles of different meetings:

- local meetings: *Qf&p* 4.33
- area meetings: *Qf&p* 4.01–4.02
- Yearly Meeting: *Qf&p* 6.04–6.05
  - > Yearly Meeting history: *Qf&p* 6.01
- Junior Yearly Meeting: Qf&p 4.21
- Meeting for Sufferings: *Qf&p* 7.02
- centrally managed work: *Qf&p* 8.02
  - ➤ more about the four central committees: *Qf&p* 8.08–8.11

#### Distinctives 3

# The Quaker business method and decision-making

The Quaker Life leaflet 'How Quaker meetings take decisions' gives a clear overview of this process. You'll find the text of this leaflet on pages 110–112.

You could also read the helpful introduction to Quaker decision-making on the Scottish Quaker website: www.quakerscotland.org/businessmeetings

You might like to watch the video 'Who's in charge and how are decisions made?' made by Friends at Watford Quaker Meeting about the Quaker approach to decision-making. You can access the video in a number of different ways:

- online at
  - > www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html
  - www.youtube.com as 'Who's in charge and how are decisions made?'
- on the DVD *An introduction to Watford Quakers*, available from the Quaker Centre bookshop (see Further exploration for contact details).

#### Distinctives 4

#### Elders, overseers and clerks

You could read the following sections of *Quaker faith & practice* to find out about the roles of elders, overseers and clerks in our meetings, and the nominations process by which they are appointed:

• elders and overseers: *Qf&p* 12.11

• elders: *Qf&p* 12.12

• overseers: *Qf&p* 12.13

• clerks: *Qf&p* 3.12

• nominations process: *Qf&p* 3.23

#### Distinctives 5

#### How do Quakers approach ministry?

Section 10.05 of *Quaker faith & practice* discusses the Quaker understanding of ministry (other than spoken ministry in meeting for worship – see Silence and Waiting unit for more on this).

You might also like to listen to or read about Quakers' experiences of ministry:

- there are audio clips about ministry on the Becoming Friends online course
- you'll find these extracts on pages 113–114

#### Distinctives 6

# Children and young people in Quaker communities

Quakers seek to ensure that children and young people are welcome and integrated into Quaker meetings. The following sections of *Quaker faith & practice* talk about how Quakers try to do this:

- *Advices & queries* 19: Qf&p 1.02
- taking the nurture of children seriously: *Qf&p* 10.10
- a baby in meeting: *Qf&p* 2.50
- children as respected community members: *Qf&p* 2.75
- Junior Yearly Meeting as community: *Qf&p* 21.06

See also Discovery 5 for more about children and young people.

# Discovery

## Discovery 1

#### What's Yearly Meeting like?

To find out more about national Quaker gatherings and structures, you could ask your Becoming Friends companion to arrange for you to talk to a Friend with experience of any of these:

- Yearly Meeting
- Junior Yearly Meeting or other events for young people
- a national Quaker conference
- Quaker Life: Central Committee or Representative Council
- Summer Gathering

You might ask the Friend what the gathering was like – how was it organised and how was community nurtured? What did they find enjoyable or challenging about the experience?

You could also join in a discussion about experiences of national Quaker gatherings on a Quaker discussion forum:

- the Britain Yearly Meeting forum at: www.quakerweb.org.uk/forum
- www.friendlink.org.uk (aimed mainly at young Quakers)
- the Experiencing Quaker Community unit forum

## Discovery 2

#### **Exploring membership and belonging**

How do we come to feel a sense of belonging, or come to consider applying for membership as Friends? Harvey Gillman considers these questions in 'Reflections on membership and belonging'. You'll find this article on pages 115–117.

You could also look at editions 25 and 26 of *Journeys in the Spirit* (a resource for Friends working with children and young people), which are about 'belonging and joining'. Read through the materials and try out any of the activities that interest you – sometimes activities aimed at young people work very well for adults too! *Journeys in the Spirit* is available

- in many meeting house libraries (ask your librarian)
- online at: www.quaker.org.uk/journeyschild
- from Quaker Life Email: ql@quaker.org.uk Tel: 020 7663 1013

## Discovery 3

# How have local Friends experienced their role as elder, overseer or clerk?

Ask your Becoming Friends companion, or another experienced Friend in your area, about their experience in the role of elder, overseer or clerk.

- What was this experience like?
- What were the main responsibilities of the role?
- Did they receive any training or support?
- Were there aspects of this service that were a particular challenge or joy?

# Discovery 4

## What are Quaker business meetings really like?

Why not arrange to attend a Quaker business meeting in your local area? Your Becoming Friends companion can help with this and explain local procedures. You could discuss your experience afterwards with your companion or other experienced Friends – use some of the questions below if they are helpful.

You might also ask your Becoming Friends companion to help you set up a small group session to explore local Friends' experience of Quaker decision-making and our business method: you could use the questions below as starting points for discussion.

- Do your business meetings seem to you like meeting for worship?
- Do you seek to discern the will of God for the meeting as a whole?
- Have you experienced occasions when a decision has been reached that really felt Spirit-led, or otherwise?
- Are you listening to the Spirit speaking through human beings and to the response of those who listen?

 When the meeting moves towards a decision with which you are not in sympathy, do you accept this with good grace?

# Discovery 5

# What's going on for children and young people locally and nationally?

You could ask to discuss this locally with an overseer or other person with responsibility for children and young people in your meeting (your Becoming Friends companion can help arrange this).

- What provision is made for children and young people in your meeting?
- How well are they integrated into the life of the meeting?
- Are their insights and energy welcomed in the meeting?
- In what ways do they challenge Friends locally to renew their commitment to worship and action?

To find out what is going on at a national level, you could explore:

- the pages about working with children and young people at: www.quaker.org.uk/cyp
- the Young Quaker Space website at: www.yqspace.org.uk

# Discovery 6

# How is my local meeting nurtured?

Ask your Becoming Friends companion, or another experienced Friend, about spiritual hospitality and nurture in your local meeting, and how Friends promote the health of the meeting community. You could ask:

- What efforts does the meeting make to grow closer as a community?
- Are there ways for Friends locally to share their joys and concerns, and those things in their inner life which matter most to them?
- What activities has the meeting used for fostering friendship in the meeting?
- How does the meeting deal with difficulties or conflicts when they arise?
- How do Friends locally minister to one another outside meeting for worship?

# Deepening

# Deepening 1

#### Your own sense of ministry

What gifts do you have? Do you experience a sense of calling to any particular ministry? Section 2.66 of *Quaker faith & practice* speaks about ministry.

Perhaps you would like to spend time reflecting on the questions this raises for you.

- You might like to use the 'ministry cards' on pages 118–120 to reflect on your own sense of ministry. Cut the cards out and try moving them around on a table or the floor: are there any which speak to you, either in a positive or negative way?
- You could also reflect on ministry with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

# Deepening 2

## Your own experience of community

A healthy community is a place of growth, through both the nurture and the challenge we experience within it. Section 10.19 of *Quaker faith & practice* speaks of the challenge of community.

- Does this reflect your own experience?
- How have you been shaped by your experience of community, either with Quakers or other people?
- What gifts or challenges do you bring to your local Quaker community?

You could also reflect on this with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

# Deepening 3

# Responding creatively to the experience of community

The Quaker way of experiencing community includes the invitation to:

- let go of our own agendas and desired outcomes
- allow ourselves to be upheld, even prayed for, by others
- hear the truth, even when it is uncomfortable for us.

You might like to take some time to reflect deeply on your own response to these invitations. You could:

- respond by drawing, painting or using another creative method
- respond in music, song or movement
- respond in writing
- go online and blog about your response
- discuss your response on a Quaker discussion forum:
  - > the Britain Yearly Meeting forum at: www.quakerweb.org.uk/forum
  - www.friendlink.org.uk (aimed mainly at young Quakers)
  - > the Experiencing Quaker Community unit forum
- share some of your reflections with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

#### Deepening 4

#### Learning to listen as spiritual friendship

Learning to listen to one another at a deep level is central to the experience of spiritual friendship and discernment at the heart of our Quaker community life. You could try an exercise in deep, prayerful listening with your Becoming Friends companion, or ask someone else you feel drawn to do this with.

You'll find the listening prayer practice on page 268.

You could use one of the example focus questions given in the exercise:

- 'In what ways have you experienced God in your life during the last week?
- 'What has been going on in your prayer life this month?'

or use one that asks about community, such as:

• 'Is there a time when you have felt truly upheld and cared for in a community or group situation?'

or use a question of your own.

You may wish to reflect on how you have got on with this exercise at a future meeting with your Becoming Friends companion.

# Deepening 5

#### Reflecting on your local Quaker community

You might like to spend time on your own or with your Becoming Friends companion reflecting on your response to any of the following questions:

- How are you feeling upheld by your local Quaker meeting?
- Do you have an awareness of the other members of the local Quaker community?
- Do you have a growing awareness of the contribution you already make to sustaining the quality and depth of worship and community in your local meeting?

# Further exploration

If you would like to explore the subject of Quaker community, decision-making and structures further, here are some suggestions for reading, listening or viewing.

*Advices & queries* 14–15 and 17–22, in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02.

Beyond consensus: salvaging sense of the meeting, Barry Morley, Pendle Hill Pamphlets 307. This is included in the *Hearts and minds prepared* pack.

Beyond majority rule: voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends, Michael Sheeran, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983.

An introduction to Watford Quakers (DVD), part 1 'An Introduction to Quakerism', Just Film, 2007. Also available at: www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html or www.quakerweek.org.uk/intro (or at: www.youtube.com as 'Introduction to Quakers').

A light that is shining: an introduction to the Quakers, Harvey Gillman, Quaker Books, 2003.

Listening spirituality 2: corporate spiritual practice among Friends, Patricia Loring, Openings Press, 1997.

*Quaker faith & practice* 2.88–2.91, spirit of worship in decision-making.

*Quaker faith & practice*, chapter 3, 'General counsel on church affairs', especially sections 3.02–3.07 – decision-making and 'sense of the meeting'.

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 10, 'Belonging to a Quaker meeting'.

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 12, 'Caring for one another'.

Quaker speak, Alastair Heron, Quaker Outreach in Yorkshire, 2003.

*Quality and depth of worship and ministry,* Committee on Eldership and Oversight, Quaker Books, 2001.

Scottish Quaker website: www.quakerscotland.org/businessmeetings

Woodbrooke's website or brochure for details of courses about nurturing our meetings and training for Quaker roles: www.woodbrooke.org.uk

Many of these titles are available from the Quaker Centre bookshop:

Friends House 173 Euston Road London NW1 2BJ

Tel: 020 7663 1030 Fax: 020 7663 1001

Website: www.quaker.org.uk/bookshop Email: quakercentre@quaker.org.uk



Many of them will also be in your local meeting house library. You could ask your Becoming Friends companion to help you track down titles that interest you.

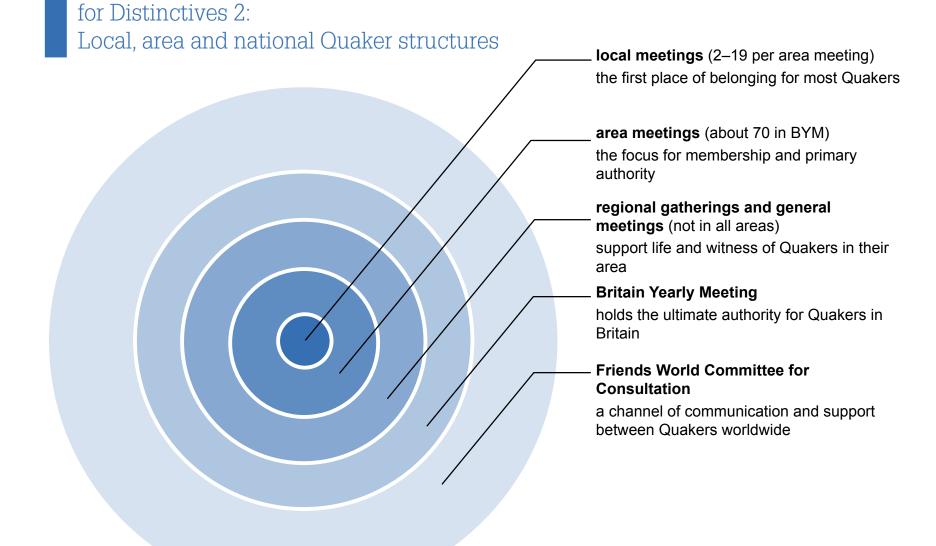
# Closing activity

As you finish your exploration of the Quaker experience of community, you are invited to reflect on what you have gained through this unit, how your understanding of both yourself and Quakerism has changed, and what areas you would like to explore further.

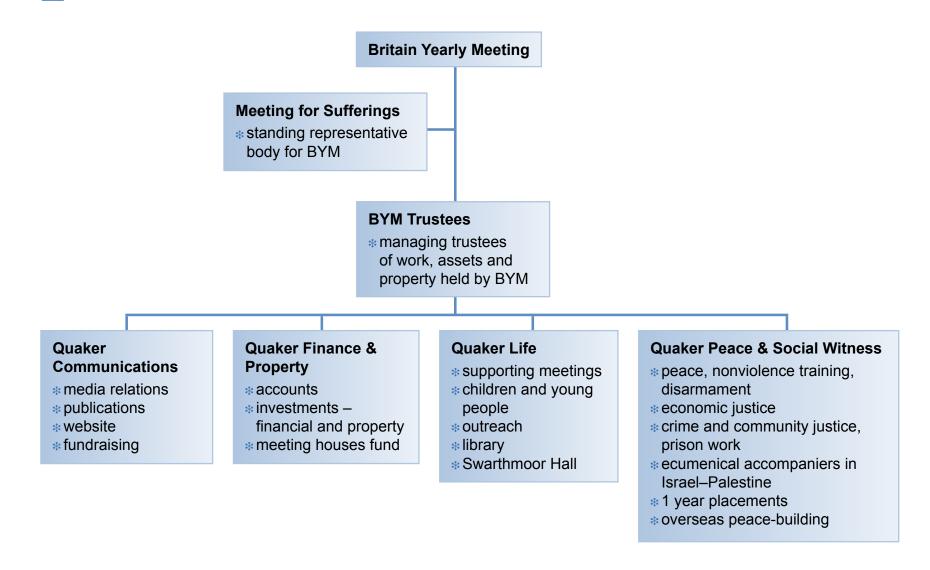
This closing reflection can be a very good opportunity for sharing with your Becoming Friends companion, or you may prefer to write in a journal or book of spiritual discipline (there's guidance for journalling in Appendix 2 – Guidance on page 282), or to reflect using creative methods such as drawing, collage, modelmaking or working with materials such as textiles or wood.

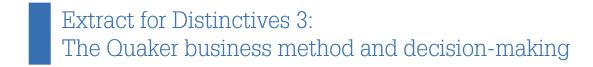
You might use one or more of the following questions as a focus for your reflection:

- What have you gained from your work on this unit, whether as a result of positive or more challenging experiences?
- In what ways has your understanding changed as a result of your work on this unit?
- Are there areas that you would like to explore further either as part of your own spiritual journey or relating to Quakerism?
- Has anything arisen that you would find it helpful to reflect on with your Becoming Friends companion?



## for Distinctives 2: Local, area and national Quaker structures





The following is the text of a leaflet published by Quaker Life.

## How Quaker meetings take decisions

This is intended as both a guide for newcomers and a helpful reminder to more experienced Friends.

#### What's special about a Quaker business meeting?

A Quaker business meeting is essentially a meeting for worship, except that it has a pre-arranged agenda. Whether it be a working party, a committee, a local, regional or national meeting, the process is the same: Friends coming together in silence in order to draw closer to God and each other, and to seek the guidance of the Inward Light.

#### What's going on in the meeting?

A meeting starts with a period of quiet worship. The clerk then opens the business part of the meeting. As in a secular meeting, someone presents an item, and answers questions of clarification. But rather than debating the matter, the gathering then tries to discern, in an atmosphere of worship, what love requires of us. Spoken contributions are offered as ministry and are wrapped in silence. If things seem to be getting heated, the clerk or another Friend may ask for a period of silence. A touch of humour often helps the process. No vote is taken, as we are not trying to reach consensus or establish the will of the majority, but to work in harmony with the Spirit. This approach can be very liberating, because it ensures that minority views are not dismissed or suppressed. A minute is drafted by the clerk and presented to the meeting; it is for all those present to agree the record of their deliberations.

# Can I come to a business meeting if I am not a member of the Religious Society of Friends?

Yes – attenders are usually welcome to attend open business meetings. You will need to let the clerk know in advance that you would like to come. You may be asked to withdraw for certain agenda items.

#### What is my role in the meeting?

As in any meeting for worship, your primary role is to listen respectfully to others and to 'the promptings of love and truth in your heart'. Even if you disagree strongly with another contribution, listen patiently to each to learn what you can, trusting that you will be heard in the same spirit. It is helpful if you prepare beforehand, read the papers and reflect prayerfully on the business, but

remember that responsibility for the outcome belongs to the meeting as a whole, not to any individual. Come to the meeting with heart and mind prepared – not heart and mind made up.

#### What is the clerk doing?

The clerk is rather like a cross between a chair and a secretary. Clerks prepare the agenda, do the necessary administration and guide the meeting through the items of business. The clerk has to try and discern the outcome of each item (often called 'the sense of the meeting'), and to prepare a draft minute to lay before the gathering. Although it is the meeting that is really in charge, clerks carry a lot of responsibility. We need to support them and do all we can to avoid making their job more difficult by holding private conversations while a minute is being drafted, for instance, or by quibbling over a good-enough minute.

#### Who can speak, and how often?

Once an item on the agenda has been introduced to the meeting anyone may speak, but remember, this is a meeting for worship. If you feel led to minister, test your prompting first. Equally, don't let shyness or a sense of unworthiness hold you back – you have a responsibility to help the meeting by sharing any relevant insight or information you may have. In formal meetings it is the practice to stand and wait to be called by the clerk; if another Friend is called or the clerk stands, you should sit down again. There is no need to repeat a point which has already been made, or to speak twice to the same matter unless asked to do so. Try to resist the temptation to be argumentative. The point is not to win an argument but to uphold our community as we work together for a better world.

#### Are minor matters dealt with differently from main items?

Some matters may be complex or controversial, and a wide range of views will need to be expressed. It may take more than one meeting to find unity; a rushed decision driven by the clock may well turn out to be unsatisfactory. Other matters will be routine or minor or relatively straightforward, so that they can be swiftly dealt with. Though the process remains the same, it is not necessary to consider every item at great length or in deep solemnity. That said, a matter that looks routine beforehand sometimes turns out to raise unforeseen controversy!

#### What if I don't agree with the minute?

If you feel the minute doesn't reflect the sense of the meeting, or is badly worded, there will be an opportunity to comment after the draft minute is presented. If you don't agree with the decision reached, try to set aside your disappointment and accept that the decision has nevertheless been reached collectively through the discipline of waiting together in the Light, in a sincere search for love and truth. The right decision is important, but no more so than reaching it by the right process – a process in which you played your full part. Remember that unity is not the same as unanimity. You may need to continue reflecting on the matter and talking it over with other Friends. Sometimes, at a subsequent meeting, it becomes clear to the meeting that a new direction is needed.

#### Isn't all this asking too much of people?

The discipline we have laid upon ourselves is a demanding one. Quakers are human, not saints. A more experienced or self-confident Friend may drown out a quieter voice that the meeting needed to hear. Strong feelings on an issue may make some Friends intolerant or even aggressive. But it is worth struggling with the challenge, for when the process works the reward is a powerful sense of rightness and unity.

#### **Further reading:**

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 3

Barry Morley, Beyond consensus: salvaging sense of the meeting

Patricia Loring, Listening spirituality

Michael Sheeran, Beyond majority rule

Further copies of this leaflet and information about the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) may be obtained from:

Quaker Life Friends House 173 Euston Road London NW1 2BJ

Email: ql@quaker.org.uk

Tel: 020 7663 1140

It is also on the website:

www.quaker.org.uk/how-quaker-meetings-take-decisions



## Ministry extracts

#### Friend 1

My ministry as a Quaker concerns how I live my life, sustain relationships and try to be open to the Light. In my local meeting it involves supporting the clerk, coming up with ideas and seeing them through if the meeting says that's what they'd like, and bringing some cheer in individual relationships as well as in business meeting. Currently skills I have which Friends are making use of include clerking a trustee body, line-managing a senior member of staff, and keeping the area meeting paperwork under control during a hiatus in finding clerks. I notice that some people in meeting really appreciate ordinary friendship: a postcard when I'm away, a phone call when I've missed seeing them. I also notice that this releases in them reciprocal signs of friendship which I find builds the feeling of Friends as a community. I feel very fortunate that retirement gives me availability for more actions which I regard as ministry. These actions are giving and receiving: the blessing of receiving ministry is as important to me as the giving of ministry.

#### Friend 2

I have come to experience all of my life as Quaker ministry, including the times that I do not live up to the Light, and maybe especially those times. The 'Equipping for Ministry' course has taught me that the most important thing is commitment to obeying the Light. I continue to feel called to be here in this city as manager of this meeting house but have begun to see that the task is to be myself in this place.

One of the other things that has become more important to me as a ministry is to uphold and love in prayer those Friends I have come to know in a deep spiritual way as kindred spirits. I have a sense that it is the manifestation of the Spirit within that person that I am called to help grow and that it will happen, perhaps in spite of me!

Silence, time alone and deep listening are increasingly important for my inner wellbeing. I have also begun to understand and experience decision-making in a different way. I need time now for decisions to be properly discerned otherwise they are likely to have consequences that I have not thought through and are wrong. It seems strange to talk about daily discernment as a ministry. But I come back to where I started: all of a committed life is ministry.

#### Friend 3

I wake up in the morning and consider the day ahead, the things I must do. Whether it is housework, or looking after guests, or visiting prison, or shopping for an elderly Friend, or spending leisure time with my husband, or talking to young offenders – whatever my activities, these I consider to be my ministry, the work God has given me to do that day, and I pray that I may do it well, with God's help. The 'Equipping for Ministry' course enabled me to form a daily spiritual practice which allows me to do this.

#### Friend 4

I think the only way I minister outside meeting for worship is the voluntary work I do at Claridge House\* and the meeting for healing I have at my home once a month. My poor health makes it difficult for me to do much for other people on a more personal basis. However, the work that is being done at Claridge House is really important as it enables people to have time for rest and relaxation which gives them an opportunity to take stock of their lives. So, although it is only a small contribution I am able to give, it does help.

#### Friend 5

(who is based in Russia and travels among Friends as part of his ministry)

One of Friends House Moscow's roles is as a resource to the Russian-speaking world. Seekers come onto our website forum and ask deep, difficult questions! BYM's Quaker faith and practice is being translated into Russian and gets posted there as sections are completed and then the discussion takes place on finding the right words to capture the meaning and then discussion of the meaning itself! Of course you cannot beat face-to-face encounters and so sometimes we travel. The advantage of Russia being so big is that it takes time to get there, and this helps to have heart and mind prepared, especially if you are on a train for a couple of days.

Two particular delights stand out in my memory: a Quaker wedding in Kazan in the worst blizzard for years; and holding a membership interview in Siberia in springtime. And you can't rush these precious personal sharings. Sergei and I spent a long weekend in Altai province high up in the mountains near the Chinese border. He got married at Friday lunchtime and in the evening, with his bride, we caught a plane to go and see Vadim. Travelling in the ministry brings untold pleasures but none more so than the intimate sharing of spiritual journeys and rites of passage.

<sup>\*</sup> Claridge House is a Quaker centre for healing, rest and renewal, associated with the Friends Fellowship of Healing.



## Reflections on membership and belonging

As a spiritual nomad who has pitched his tent amongst Friends, I am fascinated by the issue of membership. To some this is a theological issue, to others a social one, to yet others, a psychological question. What am I joining (and why not); why, how; and what is the meaning of the step anyway? These are some of the questions attenders may ask themselves when membership is raised.

Recently, in a meeting for clearness for someone contemplating joining Friends, it came to me in the silence that there were at least four concerns that might beset anyone reflecting on this. I shall put them in terms of four polarities (or paradoxes): exploring/finding; inner/outer membership; acknowledging the real/aspiring to the ideal; and giving to/taking from the life of the meeting. A fifth paradox occurs to me as I write this: leaving behind/taking up. And there is something else which unites all these concerns.

Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting do not see membership in terms of salvation, although we might say that in a sense we are saved from isolation into community. We do not equate membership with having found the truth. We do not proclaim that here alone truth may be found. For me membership has been a matter of finding a milieu in which exploration is validated, where finding is rejoiced in, and where not finding is accepted as part of the journey – even losing is not seen as a disaster. We find because we have explored; we explore because we have found. What I have explored and found is relationship with fellow seekers and with that power to which, symbolically, I give the name God or Spirit. This is usually expressed as discipleship. We are learners, sometimes humble, in the school of Christ.

To be alive is to be on a spiritual journey as we seek for connection, meaning, and ways of being and acting in the world. Why then limit as it were this spirituality to membership of one group? If being alive and being self-aware were sufficient for deepening one's participation in the family of God, why then the need to make public something which is already present, why make outer what is already inner? And if one is already committed to the Quaker way, why the need to put a name on a list to prove it? Again to write personally, I have found in my own life that I cannot split the inner from the outer. Indeed the division seems to me to be an artefact of the mind. Where does the inner end and the outer begin? Membership among Friends seems to me to be more about making a public commitment. Just as in a relationship, we know that a public ceremony is a statement both of present joy and future commitment, with change as an inevitable part of human existence, so it seems to me that membership is an outer ratification of a state of being and of growing. However being committed

to one person does not deny friendship to others. We belong to the universal by being part of the small local scene. It is hard to embrace the whole of creation if you have difficulty with the small patch of soil on which you are standing. For me, being a Friend is a way into being a mature human being. Being mature is something about acceptance of self and an awareness of the needs of self for interconnectedness.

This leads me to the real/ideal polarity. I once met someone who told me that he had no partner because no one was ever good enough. With that sort of desire for perfection, he probably never would. The contemporary flight from membership of all sorts is partly a result of our disenchantment with the religious and political ideals that have been held out before us and have led to the mass destruction and oppressions of the twentieth century. We do not want to be hurt again. But there is a time when we may realise that the neurotic pursuit of ideals is harmful, that elements of beauty and truth may still be found in the details of existence, that maturity is, in the lovely words of the American Quaker John Jungblut, a hallowing of our diminishments. Most of us have experienced the irritations of church politics even among Friends; we have heard and seen behaviour that is not Quakerly; we have most of us been disappointed to find bigotry and unkindness amongst those we worship with. For me my association with Friends has led me to expect less and hope for more. In spite of my vexations, I still want to remain part of the human race; in spite of what I find an intense selfintrospection among Friends (of which no doubt I am a part), I still feel I want to proclaim my membership to this small band of travellers. And I cannot live out my life in reaction to the hurts of the past.

For some, membership of Friends is about 'having made it'. Indeed there is something in the history of Friends which suggests membership is a recognition of virtue: a church of the saved, not of the sinners. No wonder our perfectionism has led several people to talk about not being good enough. And then to realise that you do not have time to commit to this and that committee or group or go to this place or that meeting adds to the sense of guilt. I know people who have resigned from Friends because they have felt guilty about not having time for the organisation. There are times in our lives when we have time; there are times when we need to take and times when we can give. Such is the dilemma of being human. Membership is about aspiration and turning to the light; it is surely not about getting everything right.

The fifth of the dilemmas may be seen in terms of leaving behind/taking up. In the evangelical schema of salvation the wicked self is put aside in the new life in Christ. I would prefer to talk of the self being transcended, transformed, but not dismissed. We are all we have been; we are the result of all those we have met. Our path is made up of lots of side roads, diversions, ends which seemed to be dead but which have brought us to new life. There is much in my own life I am sorry for, ashamed of, but I am where I am because of having been there, and having become aware (more or less) of what I have done. I have to accept my past journey, even repent of parts of it, but not let the future be bound by it.

In conclusion it seems to me that membership is about grace and forgiveness; about hope and about accepting reality. About worshipping together and being vulnerable together. It is fraught with dangers, not least the one which makes people see you in a false light – no, I am not a bible-basher; a fundamentalist; a wearer of a broad brim hat; a virtuous paragon; an exemplar of minimalist frugality. I am a human being who reaches out to others and to the Spirit within. I have a holistic understanding of the spiritual life; I have joined these other human beings who are equally frail and sometimes misguided and who sometimes dream dreams (and have nightmares) and have visions of a divine commonwealth. They dare to think that everyday life is where this commonwealth is being established.

Harvey Gillman 2008

prayerfully supporting individuals in meeting
service on committees and other Quaker bodies
coming regularly to meeting for worship
a call to political action or witness
writing articles or stories for Quaker or other publications

# Cards for Deepening 1: Your own sense of ministry

		$\times$
spiritual friendship	going to Quaker business meetings	
bringing flowers or food to meeting	encouraging others to develop their gifts	
visiting sick or needy people or prisoners	participating in or leading study groups	•••••
joining in public vigils or local faith activities	working with other churches	
letter writing	voluntary work	

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	helping with tea and coffee after meeting for worship	helping with children's meeting
	making time to attend Quaker social events	being a parent or carer
	visiting other Quakers	telling Friends about good Quaker courses or events I've attended
	calling in on or doing shopping for a neighbour, or member of my meeting	my job
	campaign work	