

Faithful Diversity

Exploring the diversity of beliefs
among Quakers, and how we live
with this in the modern world



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This unit invites you to find out more about the diversity of beliefs among Quakers in Britain (and elsewhere in the world) and how we hope to find unity in that diversity by being open to different people's expressions of truth: Quakers try to connect with 'that of God' in everyone, by embracing a deliberate spiritual practice of openness and listening to those who are different from us.

Faithful Diversity unit aims

This unit aims to help you:

- become aware of the diversity of faith perspectives among Quakers in Britain and beyond
- understand how Quakers try to respond to both the gift and challenge of being a diverse faith community
- reflect on your own experience of and response to diversity of belief

Overview

Quakers share a way of life rather than a set of beliefs. We seek to experience God directly, within ourselves and in our relationships with others and the world around us. Our unity is based on shared understanding and a shared practice of worship, not on our beliefs all being the same.

The Quaker way has its roots in Christianity and finds inspiration in the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus. Quakers also find meaning and value in the teachings of other faiths; we acknowledge that ours is not the only way.

This Quaker openness to ‘new light, from whatever source it may come’ (*Advices & queries* 7, in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02) has led to a growing diversity of faith among British Friends over the last century. Our community now includes Friends whose faith perspective is based in traditional biblical Christianity, alongside Friends who describe themselves as Buddhist Quakers, Jewish Quakers, non-theist Quakers, pagan Quakers and humanist Quakers.

This diversity of faith perspectives is experienced by Friends as both a challenge and a gift: it calls us to listen to one another with ever deepening awareness.

Beyond Britain Yearly Meeting, in the world family of Quakers, there is also a rich variety of experience, some of which is unfamiliar to Friends in Britain. Some Quakers make frequent and joyful use of song and Bible study, and may be led by a pastor; for others silent waiting on God is the basis of worship, from which spoken ministry develops. Many Friends from around the world have a vivid experience of personal salvation through the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; many hesitate to express their deepest spiritual experiences in words. It is important for many British Friends that we see ourselves as part of the world family of Friends, learning about and connecting with Quakers in other traditions as well as our own.

George Fox advised early Friends to

be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations,
wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all
sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over
the world, answering that of God in everyone.

Quaker faith & practice 19.32

The Quaker spiritual insight into the fundamental equality and worth of all people – seeing ‘that of God’ in all people – springs from deep experience and has been re-affirmed by successive generations of Quakers. We have a fundamental commitment to equality and inclusion in our own Quaker family and the wider community, affirming the love of God for all people, whatever their age, sexuality, race, religion, state of health, disability or gender. (You can explore the Quaker commitment to equality further in the [Faith in Action](#) unit).

Quakers try to connect with 'that of God' in everyone, by embracing a deliberate spiritual practice of openness and listening to those who are different from us. This affects how we relate to one another as Quakers, how we build relationships with other churches and faith communities, and how we relate to the people that we meet in our daily lives.

Quaker distinctives

Distinctives 1

Quaker faith & practice on diversity of belief

You could read any of chapter 27 'Unity and diversity' in *Quaker faith & practice*, or you may prefer to read some of the following sections for a quick overview:

- Quakers and other faiths: *Qf&p* 27.01 and 27.03
- Jesus: *Qf&p* 27.09–27.10
- Quakers and the Christian church: *Qf&p* 27.18
- creeds: *Qf&p* 27.25
- the Bible: *Qf&p* 27.34
- priesthood: *Qf&p* 27.35
- sacraments: *Qf&p* 27.38
- being a 'bridge people': *Qf&p* 27.44

Distinctives 2

A Quaker faith in transition?

In 'Tradition and transition: opening to the sacred yesterday and today' (see [Further exploration](#) for details), modern Friend Alex Wildwood writes about the Quaker faith in a time of transition. He discusses the pluralism of belief among British Friends, and how he sees this as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

You'll find an extract from 'Tradition and Transition' on pages 134–135.

Distinctives 3

Are Quakers Christian?

You might like to watch the video 'Are Quakers Christian?' made by Friends at Watford Quaker Meeting. It includes reflections on how different Friends relate to the Christian tradition and Quakerism's roots within it. You can access the video in a number of different ways:

- online at
 - www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html
 - www.youtube.com as 'Are Quakers Christian?'
- on the DVD *An Introduction to Watford Quakers* available from the Quaker Centre bookshop (see [Further exploration](#) for contact details).

Distinctives 4

Quakers around the world

Robert Vogel, an American Friend, writes about 'Quakers around the world' in an extract from *Searching the depths: essays on being a Quaker today* (see [Further exploration](#) for details). You'll find this extract on pages 136–137.

If you are interested in finding out more about Quakers around the world, you could also:

- read sections 9.01–9.02 of *Quaker faith & practice*, which discuss the world family of Friends
- look at books of faith and practice from other Quaker Yearly Meetings around the world online at: www.quakerinfo.com/fandp.shtml
- check out the information about different kinds of Friends on the website of the Friends World Committee for Consultation at: fwccworld.org/kinds_of_friends/index.shtml
- view a graph showing numbers of Quakers worldwide in 1937 and 2007, also on the FWCC website, at: fwccworld.org/kinds_of_friends/index.shtml

Distinctives 5

How do Quakers relate to other faiths?

The video 'How do Quakers relate to other faiths?', made by Friends at Watford Quaker Meeting, includes reflections on the approach that Friends take to interfaith work and diversity within our own community. You can access the video in a number of different ways:

- online at
 - www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html
 - www.youtube.com as 'How do Quakers relate to other faiths?'
- on the DVD *An Introduction to Watford Quakers* available from the Quaker Centre bookshop (see [Further exploration](#) for contact details).

Discovery

Discovery 1

How are Quakers approaching ecumenical and interfaith work?

The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) works on ecumenical and interfaith work at a national level.

You could have a look at a recent issue of QCCIR's newsletter 'CIRcular' and discuss any issues raised by it with your Becoming Friends companion. You can download recent editions of CIRcular at: www.quaker.org.uk/newsletters or you could look in your local meeting library for recent copies.

You could also look at the inter-church and interfaith information at: www.quaker.org.uk/inter-church-and-interfaith or read any of the leaflets at: www.quaker.org.uk/inter-church-and-interfaith-leaflets

To find out more about ecumenical and interfaith work going on locally, talk to Friends in your local or area meeting who are currently serving on ecumenical or interfaith bodies about their work (you could ask your Becoming Friends companion to help arrange this).

Discovery 2

How diverse is belief in my local meeting?

You might like to ask your Becoming Friends companion or an elder to discuss with you the diversity of belief in your local meeting, and how this comes out in spoken ministry in meeting for worship. It is important to keep this conversation general, rather than naming names of individuals in meeting.

- How does this compare with what you and your companion know of the diversity of belief in Britain Yearly Meeting generally?
- Are there aspects of this diversity that you find challenging, or welcome?

Discovery 3

Reflecting on the grounds of our faith with a group or companion

You could ask your Becoming Friends companion or an elder in your meeting to help set up a small group session exploring the faith perspectives among local Friends, using the questions below as a focus (or you might prefer to simply discuss the questions with your Becoming Friends companion).

Share the following questions with the group as starting points for reflection, and perhaps ask your companion or an experienced Friend to lead this. It might be helpful to write or print out copies of the questions.

- Do you describe yourself as Christian?
- How do you relate to the Christian roots of Quakerism?
- What is the ground of your faith as a Friend?

After people have had a brief opportunity for personal reflection on the questions, spend some time in worship-sharing mode as a group, sharing with one another any responses, insights, experiences or challenges relating to the questions.

Guidance for worship sharing is found in [Appendix 2 – Guidance](#) on pages 283–284.

Discovery 4

Discussion about what diversity means to us

You could consider the introductory questions below, then go to the [Faithful Diversity unit forum](#) and post your own thoughts on the issues raised. You might like to comment on other posts on this forum too.

Alternatively, you could discuss the introductory questions with your Becoming Friends companion, or others in your meeting: you could do this informally over coffee or ask your companion to help you set up a group session.

Introductory questions:

- What does diversity of belief mean to you personally?
- What have you experienced as a blessing and a challenge of diversity?

Deepening

Deepening 1

Your own faith journey

You might like to consider the different approaches to faith among British Quakers that you have encountered during this unit, using these questions:

- Where would you place yourself in relation to Christianity and other approaches to faith found among British Friends?
- In what ways has your faith, or faith identity, changed during the course of your life?
- How is your relationship with Quakerism affected by your faith identity?

You could

- respond to the questions in writing
- respond by drawing or using another creative method
- go online and blog about them
- discuss them 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 [Faithful Diversity unit forum](#)
- share some of your reflections with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

Deepening 2

Reflect on *Advices & queries* 16 and 17

Advices & queries 16 and 17, found in section 1.02 of *Quaker faith & practice*, focus on diversity and answering 'that of God' in others. If you prefer to listen to *Advices & queries*, there are mp3 audio files available in this unit of the online Becoming Friends course.

- You could spend time reflecting on these advices and queries, allowing them to speak to you at a deep level.
- You may find it helpful to respond to the advices and queries in writing or using creative methods.

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

Deepening 3

Your own response to diversity

What is your own response to diversity of belief among Quakers and in the wider community?

You can use the Diversity cards on pages 138–140 as a prompt for your reflection. Copy or print the cards and cut them up. Then spend some time ordering or sorting the cards to reflect which kinds of faith positions you are more comfortable with, and which you are more challenged by, or want to know more about.

- Reflect on what this sorting process reveals to you, both about yourself and your own response to diversity
- Do you feel led to respond in any way?

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

Deepening 4

Reflecting with your Becoming Friends companion

You might like to spend time with your Becoming Friends companion reflecting on how each of you responds to the challenge of diversity among Quakers.

- Are there aspects of being part of a diverse faith community which your companion has found especially challenging or welcome?
- Does this reflect your own experience?

Further exploration

If you would like to explore the subject of faithful diversity further, here are some suggestions for reading, listening or viewing.

CIRcular, Quaker Committee for Church & Interfaith Relations newsletter.

Available in local meeting house libraries or to download at:

www.quaker.org.uk/newsletters

A faith to call our own: Quaker tradition in the light of contemporary movements of the Spirit, Alex Wildwood, Quaker Home Service, 1999 (Swarthmore Lecture).

Friends World Committee for Consultation website:

fwccworld.org/kinds_of_friends/index.shtml#

Interfaith pilgrims: living truths and truthful living, Eleanor Nesbitt, Quaker Books, 2003 (Swarthmore lecture).

An introduction to Watford Quakers DVD, Just Film, 2007. Also available at:

www.watfordquakers.org.uk/videos.html includes: 'Are Quakers Christian?' and 'How do Quakers relate to other faiths?' (also on www.youtube.com as 'Are Quakers Christian?' and 'How do Quakers relate to other faiths?').

New Foundation Fellowship website :www.nffuk.org

Quakers in the UK seeking fresh understanding of the radical Christian vision of George Fox.

Previous convictions and end of the millennium Quakerism, Christine Trevett, Quaker Home Service, 1997 (Swarthmore lecture).

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 9, 'Beyond Britain Yearly Meeting' including ecumenical and interfaith links.

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 26, 'Reflections'.

Quaker faith & practice, chapter 27, 'Unity and diversity'.

Quaker identity and the heart of our faith, Quaker Life Study Materials,

Quaker Life, 2008. Includes sections about diversity of faith perspectives among British Friends. Available online at:

www.quaker.org.uk/sites/default/files/Faith-and-practice-proceeding.pdf or in hard copy by contacting Quaker Life on 020 7663 1140 or email: ql@quaker.org.uk.

Quaker Universalist Group website: www.qug.org.uk

Universalist Quakers in the UK.

Rooted in Christianity, open to new light: Quaker spiritual diversity, Timothy Ashworth and Alex Wildwood, Pronoun Press & Woodbrooke, 2009.

Searching the depths: essays on being a Quaker today, edited by Harvey Gillman and Alastair Heron, Quaker Home Service, 1996

To Lima with love: the response from the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain to the World Council of Churches document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Quaker Home Service, 1987

'Tradition and transition: opening to the sacred yesterday and today', Alex Wildwood, *Woodbrooke Journal*, Winter 2001, No 9. Also in *Hearts and minds prepared* pack.

What canst thou say? Towards a Quaker theology, Janet Scott, Quaker Home Service, 1980 (Swarthmore lecture).

Young Quaker Space website: www.yqspace.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 faithful diversity among Quakers, 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, model-making 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?

Extract for Distinctives 2: A Quaker faith in transition?

Extracts from 'Tradition and transition: opening to the sacred yesterday and today' by Alex Wildwood

Throughout our history Quakers have been non-credal in the sense that belief in propositions is not what defines our faith. But today a growing number of British Friends make the unwarranted leap from this fact to the statement that belief is irrelevant or unimportant to Quakerism. I have heard it said that you can believe what you like as a Quaker, and I think that this is a serious misrepresentation of our faith and the real root of the 'problem' which some people see in our diversity today. Clearly any group needs to have some sense of a common practice and identity, a shared belief system. Even a group such as liberal Friends, with a strong emphasis on experience, must recognise that experience never exists in a vacuum. We are always trying, through dialogue with others, to make sense of our shared identity of being 'Quaker'. This is especially important in a time of transition such as our own.

Ben Pink Dandelion identifies three implicit 'articles of faith' in the theologically 'liberal' phase of Quakerism which became dominant by the early twentieth century and continue to be influential to this day:

- Faith is rooted in experience
- Faith has to be 'relevant' to the age
- We are open to new light (and revelation is progressive).

[...]

I see the growing awareness of the preciousness and fragility of our planetary home and a developing sense of the awesome mystery of the universe we inhabit as signs of ... emergent spiritual awareness. Today increasing numbers of people are seeking not dogmatic formulations of faith and morality or doctrine imposed from outside but an authentic way of life in which values and meaning arise from within. They are hungry for a living experience of Spirit, something which points them to the Reality beyond and all around themselves, our embeddedness in the greater-than-human world. Hence the growing interest in 'Green' Spirituality, in paganism and shamanic and other nature-based religious practices.

There is a growing realisation (or perhaps it is better described as a remembering, for it was there in the earth-centred cultures which our industrialised civilisation has all but eradicated) that the dualism inherent in much of Western religion – the separation of body–mind, flesh–spirit, male–female, heaven and earth, human–animal – is at the very root of our problem.

[...]

As we explore what has meaning for us today in the 'previous convictions' of earlier generations of Friends we will have to marry these with both our scientific understanding of our evolving universe and with our painful awareness of the very real threats to our world. In doing this it is helpful to see faith as a verb, to appreciate faithing as a process we engage in both individually and collectively. We are constantly 'faithing the future' in the light of greater knowledge and awareness.

Seen as a process, it is important to acknowledge that there are stages to faith development both for the individual and the collective. My sense is that we are today facing a collective rite of passage, a coming of age of truly global proportions, as humanity moves from its spiritual infancy to a growing realisation that we are, in Matthew Fox's phrase, 'co-creators' with the divine. We are moving, in other words, to that place predicted by early Friends 350 years ago – when religion would be something known 'experimentally' rather than as a dogmatic formulation of belief.

[...]

Traditionally the basis of our unity in meeting for worship and in our business meetings – and therefore of our discernment of call and our witness 'in the world' – has been the sense of Christ as 'the Presence in the midst', the Guide who led us in our 'seeking the will of God'. Yet today this fundamentally Christian basis of our unity as Friends can no longer be assumed. I believe what is most important is that we are conscious and explicit about this, that we name this as a transitional time.

I believe that we are now being invited to embrace both what Quakers have advocated as a relationship to Christ in our hearts, and an evolutionary sense of a new inclusive spirituality rooted in the earth, the body and the feminine – and that at the deepest levels of experience these two are not in contradiction. I also believe that Friends, unencumbered by dogmatic formulations of faith, have much to offer the many seekers of this age. Our Quaker meetings and experimental worship could indeed be laboratories for William Penn's 'experiment upon the human Soul'. I believe there is again 'a great people to be gathered' as we clarify and maintain our distinctive Quaker experience of the Christian revelation and combine this with a wider, more inclusive sense of Spirit.

[...]

A pluralist Quakerism only works if each of us feels free to speak at a deep level of our encounters with the Spirit – both within and beyond the traditional 'frame' of religious experience. If we lose either polarity of our Quaker heritage – our distinctive sense of being 'rooted in Christianity' or our sincere willingness to be 'open to new light' – then we will have lost what our evolving tradition has valued as the Truth.'

from 'Tradition and transition: opening to the sacred yesterday and today' by Alex Wildwood, *Woodbrooke Journal*, Winter 2001, No 9

Extract for Distinctives 4: Quakers around the world

Extract from 'Quakers around the world' by Robert Vogel

In most countries there is only one expression (or mode of worship), with the notable exception of the USA. In Canada, the continent of Europe, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, Quakers worship in silence-based unprogrammed meetings. In most parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America where missions were established, Friends hold programmed worship services. Only in the United States does one find all expressions of Quakerism; from 'liberals' to 'conservatives' to 'orthodox' to 'evangelical'. [...]

One common element is that virtually all these groups claim George Fox as their founder. Reading his *Journal*, one can find statements that support different emphases. Fox's first deeply spiritual experience was that 'There is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition' (1647). Later in his ministry, Fox counselled: 'Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in every one' (1656).

Then in 1671, Fox wrote a letter to the Governor of Barbados which is essentially a near-repetition of the so-called 'Apostles Creed'.[...] Today Liberal (unprogrammed) Quakers emphasize the phrase 'that of God in every one', while Evangelical Friends find Fox's early experience and the Barbados letter important for them. [...]

It might help to remind ourselves that the first Quakers thought of their movement as a revival of primitive Christianity: today, the question of whether one is a Christian or not would not occur to the majority of Quakers, considered worldwide. During the 1991 World Conference of Friends, Duane Comfort of Evangelical Friends Mission said, 'We are Christians first and then add our Quaker distinctives.' Zablon Malenge, former General Secretary of the Africa Section of FWCC [Friends World Consultation Committee], put it this way: 'In Kenya, A Quaker is one who has graduated from a Christian level to something more than Christianity. Christianity then forms the basis of Quakerism.'

It is largely due to the missionary efforts of programmed and pastoral Friends that their message has spread to the Middle East, and parts of Asia, but especially to eastern Africa and to Latin America. This missionary work has brought into the Society a large number of people in the technologically 'less-developed' countries who are poor in this world's goods. FWCC estimates that there are

122,000 members in Africa, 51,000 in Latin America and about 4,000 in Asia. The numerical centre of the 'Quaker world' has shifted to the South Atlantic area, and this will surely affect the future of the family of Friends.'

from 'Quakers around the world' by Robert Vogel,
in *Searching the depths: essays on being a Quaker today*,
edited by Harvey Gillman and Alastair Heron, Quaker books, 1996

Cards for Deepening 3: Your own response to diversity



A traditional Christian who believes Jesus Christ died to save us from sin

A person who describes himself as a 'neo-classical Graeco-Romano pagan'

Someone with no particular set of beliefs but who finds meditation practices helpful

A Buddhist

A Muslim

A Buddhist who voices strong views about karma and reincarnation, such as 'suffering in this life is the result of bad karma from a previous life'

A non-theist (someone who does not believe there is a God)

A secular humanist who considers all religious belief to be superstition

An evangelical Christian with conservative moral views (eg about abortion and homosexuality)

A person for whom participating in sacraments is very important

Cards for Deepening 3: Your own response to diversity



A Baptist	Someone who describes herself as 'post-Christian'
An Anglican	A modern Pagan
A Roman Catholic	A Hindu
Someone who says the only religious label they want is 'Quaker'	A Christian priest or minister
A member of the reform tradition of Judaism	A Christian who questions the language and imagery of traditional Christianity

Cards for Deepening 3: Your own response to diversity



A person who is both a Quaker and a member of another faith community

A Pagan who worships the triple goddess and the horned god

Someone who describes herself as 'a spiritual seeker'

Someone who is opposed to the main elements of Christian belief

Someone who describes himself as a non-denominational Christian

Someone who describes themselves as "spiritual but not religious"