

THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

As I sit in my local meeting house and ponder on the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, my immediate concern turns to our own small meeting. For some time we have been reduced to meeting only twice a month, often with only four or five present. When last we tried to plan a meeting for learning we had to postpone the session because there were not enough of us to make it worthwhile. Recently we decided that we cannot do anything for outreach week this year because the demands from family, business or health matters are occupying those of us who would take on most of the work. For now our service belongs elsewhere.

Numbers in our small meeting have been low for many years reflecting a downward trend in the rest of the Society. In 1991 there were 17760 adult members of the Society and 8997 adult attenders, and figures have declined steadily since then to 14,569 adult members in and 8017 adult attenders in 2008 (Proceedings 2009). Indeed, if numerical decline continues at its present rate, there may be no Quakers left at all by 2032 (Dandelion and Collins 2008, 6). When John Stephenson Rowntree wrote his essay in 1859 he pointed inward to the Society, particularly to the rigorously imposed 'peculiarities' of the day as a reason for numerical decline at the time, but today there is no clear behaviour by the Society to account for the fall in numbers. In this essay, I will argue that activity within the British Quakerism is not greatly responsible for numerical decline, but changes outside of it undermine involvement in Quakerism, three of which are most prevalent:

1. There has been an overall decline in church attendance in Britain, including a marked generational shift away from religion
2. Individualism and a secular family life is now the norm
3. An abundant choice of activities has emerged for people to follow their secular individualism

Nevertheless, I will show that, although the continued decline in numbers of adults in the Society at the beginning of the twenty first century deserves attention, British Quakerism itself is thriving and well placed to sustain itself and to reach out to the world.

The strength of Quakerism lies in the methods by which the Quaker story is transmitted and upheld within the Society and I suggest that the potency of the transmission indicates that the Society will continue to thrive, though it may be with reduced numbers. A liberalised British Quakerism offers plenty of choice for those who seek a supportive but spiritual path either to explore wide ranging issues or for quiet reflection. The Society is a network of communities, and I believe this networked communitarianism holds the key to a confident future that can be easily accessed by newcomers and retain a Quaker voice that can be held in high regard in interactions with the world.

Firstly I will explain the challenges the Society faces, but I will go on to show that some, such as the changes in work and family, yield opportunities for commitment to the Society's work. I

will also describe how Friends commit to the Society and what they get from involvement with it whilst, at the same time, I shall acknowledge shortcomings that need to be overcome.

Social change and its impact on faithful involvement

Most Christian churches in Britain and, indeed, in the United States (Putnam 2000, 71), have experienced numerical decline, in part because there has been a general downward trend in religiosity (Brierley 2003/4) in recent years. Further, there is a clear generational shift away from religious activity in Christian churches in the west. So far, there is no conclusive evidence of the proportion of children from twenty first century Quaker families who become Quakers themselves (Frith 2009, 165). Dandelion suggests that 'the freedom of belief and participation means that a Quaker teenager is likely to withdraw from participation' (1996, 306), and Frith's research indicates that children, too, are drawn away to participate in other Sunday activities, sometimes leaving the Quaker group too small to be attractive to remaining or new children and therefore not viable (Frith 2009, 167). Chadkirk and Dandelion (2009) report a severe decline in the numbers of children associated with meetings between 2006 and 2009 and suggest that meetings might not attract Friends and attenders with families, making the meeting itself appear older and less attractive to younger people whether or not they have families.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some young Friends find it hard to integrate into a local meeting once they leave the intimacy of the peer group (Frith, field notes 2004). Best's (2008, 313) work with adolescent Quakers suggests they network both within Quaker time, time spent as a Quaker with other Quakers (Dandelion 1996, xxvi), and outside of it, but features of the group separates them in practice and spatially from other Quakers and they form a Community of Intimacy that serves as a 'social glue' for them. Those young people who take their faith forward as adults clearly value and share their experience (Frith 2009, 173), but the Society would do well to investigate what happens to the young people when they leave and to find out how many return later in life.

Voas and Crockett (2005, 11) claim that only about half of parental religiosity, whether it is belief in a faith or belonging to a church, is passed on to the children. Where both parents attend church at least once a month (whether or not they both attend the same denomination), there is a 46 per cent likelihood of the child doing so, but if only one parent attends, the figure is halved (2005, 21). They claim that two non-religious parents are likely to have non-religious children, two religious parents have a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith and one religious parent has only half the chance of passing on the faith to the children (2005, 22). Figures from Chadkirk and Dandelion (2009) suggest that the numbers of children in children's classes at Quaker meetings in Britain fell severely between 2006 and 2008, and over a quarter (28.3 per cent) of the of the total number of the children listed in their questionnaire

responses were attached to meetings that made no provision for them, or an 'as and when' provision taken by the authors to mean never.

Garnett *et al* believe that the influence that brought about change in the last half of the twenty first century were incremental (2006, 22) and indicate the shift came not from a single identifiable factor, but from several. Of these, the transitional changes in family and relationships are described below. So, too is the impact of choice on the nature of belonging. Brown (2001) is more specific, and claims that it was during the 1960s that 'the structures of cultural traditionalism started to crumble' (2001, 176) and set secularisation underway (2001, 180). Thus British Quakerism at the beginning of the twenty first century reflects the cultural and generational trends towards decline in religious affiliation and an increase in secularisation that has been developing since the mid-twentieth century.

In common with other Christian churches in Britain at the beginning of the twenty first century, the Religious Society of Friends has its share of infrequent or irregular attenders, lapsed members and people at its periphery who are not so involved:

Regarding practice or active membership of religious organisations such activities involve a relatively small proportion of the population (just under fifteen per cent on average) (Davie 1994, 74).

In a BBC poll of 1,019 respondents (2005, 1), more than two thirds said they were Christian, but only seventeen per cent regularly went to church, whilst Brierley's (2002/3, 2.3) figures indicate that sixty three per cent make the same claim. At the same time, between seven and ten point

nine per cent of the population attend church weekly (Brierley 2002/3, 2.15). Thus, even attending meeting is to go against the norm (Rowlands 1996, 73). Of those who do attend, the ratio of members to attenders in Quaker meetings is 2.3 based on Chadkirk and Dandelion's most recent figures (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2009), confirming a widespread view in the Society of attenders being in the majority at some meetings and of them not wanting to join.

Heron's (1992) research with attenders supports the findings of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (2003) and shows that newcomers to the Society are increasingly unchurched (Heron 1992, 50), from a secular home setting (Frith 2009, 211) and imbued with an increasing ethos of individualism (Heron 1992, 52). These trends contrast sharply with Quaker life at the time of Rowntree's essay. In the mid nineteenth century young Quakers grew up entirely within a Quaker context. At home, the family shared worship each morning, when the father of the family read a passage from the Bible, followed by a silence (Jones 1921, 191). The families traded with each other (Windsor 1980, 16) and the young were apprenticed with other Quaker business people. From the late seventeenth century there was an established practice of educating children in Quaker day or boarding schools to keep them from 'the world's way' (Braithwaite 1961, 525), and marriage outside of the faith brought about disownment from the Society until the practice of endogamy came to an end in 1859.

When the reforming group of the nineteenth century came to review the causes of their shrinking Society, they perceived there to be spiritual and educational weaknesses (Kennedy

2001, 168) both within the Society and in the ministry despite the closeness of the community. Learning, whether by family example or from the visitation of elders and other members of the Quaker community, was not encouraging involvement and Friends set about establishing the Summer School Movement and the Woodbrooke Institute to address the problems. Later in this essay I shall expand on my belief that the continued provision of learning opportunities for Quakers and for those coming to the Society is an enormous benefit for the future of British Quakerism.

The protective and distinctive 'hedge' of the peculiarities, a wholly Quaker family and a daily life undertaken largely in a Quaker environment are long gone (Heron 1997, 29) and Quakers are at risk from what Bruce (1999, 186) calls the 'cancer of choice' in which religion has lost its authority and has become a leisure activity. Dandelion (1996, xviii) posits that non-Quaker private life, over which the Society has no authority, has become dominant since the 1860s.

The nature of choice is well illustrated by changes in family and friendship. Family life in Britain is in transition (Frith 2009, 141) but Friends have adopted a liberalised attitude to marriage, although family remains central to the lives of those involved with the Society (Frith 2009, 143) Families today are formed in many variations and over a lifetime a Friend may live alone, cohabit, marry, divorce, parent with a partner or alone or any or all of these things (Williams 2004, 6), and a child's life may be formed by its parents, step parents, grand parents, step and/or half brothers and sisters, close friends, same sex partners or ex-partners (Frith 2009,

141). These were not options available to Quaker families in Rowntree's time, when marrying a non-Quaker was a disownable offence (Marietta 2007, 24), as were other misdemeanors, including violence (Marietta 2007, 24), indebtedness (Marietta 2007, 23), and fornication (Marietta 2007, 28). Now, the diversity of living arrangements and family form or groupings has largely gained acceptance both in the wider community (Phillips 2003, 1) and within the Religious Society of Friends (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995, Chapter 22). Other economic, social, cultural and demographic changes have shaped family life and key personal relationships. More women are working either full or part time, and the United Kingdom's population is ageing. According to the Office of National Statistics (2008), sixteen per cent of the population is over sixty five.

Friends have not been immune from these changes. Whether there is one Quaker in the family or more, the weekend is the time for household chores, for visiting family members (sometimes a considerable distance away), or taking children to see ex-partners, step and half siblings. The challenge for twenty first century Friends is not the risk of disownment, but of keeping faith when family and friendship ties, however structured, are likely to include non-Quakers and to be unfamiliar with church practices of any kind. The workplace, too, is a secular setting, and in some organisations there is a taboo on talk about religion (Frith 2009, 68). The ethos in such workplaces adheres to the notion of privatised religion in which people can believe what they like as long as no offence is caused (Davie 1994, 76). Thus, even going to meeting is going against the trend for some Friends (Frith 2009, 155 – 158) and needs explanation. This

becomes more difficult as fewer of those around them have experience either of worship elsewhere or even enduring commitment to an organisation (Heron 1992, 5). Belonging to any group requires explanation, but belonging to a religious group in a non-believing world probably requires more.

How family change can benefit faithful involvement

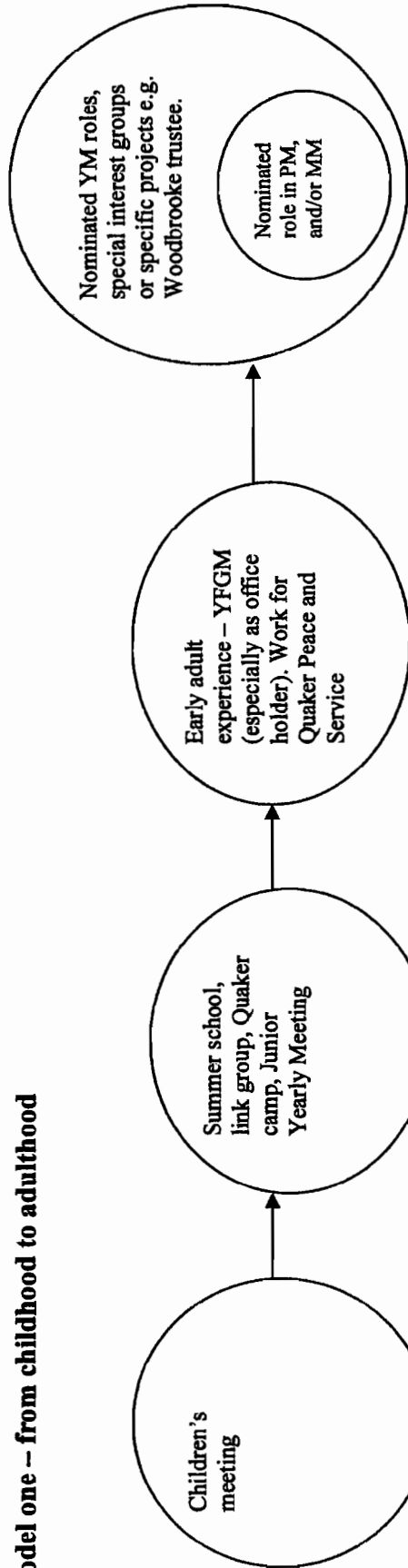
Despite threats from secularization and social change, those committed to the Religious Society of Friends in Britain yield a high level of activity and strong statements of belonging. Laying the blame for reduced numbers and participation at the door of changes in family structure and working patterns might seem appropriate, but there is a more optimistic view. At the time Rowntree was writing, women were the property of their husbands or fathers and children were without rights (Giddens 1999, 2), but from the 1960s onwards, couples have built increasingly democratised (Giddens 1998, 92 - 93) relationships based on communication and intimacy. The democratised form of relationship of the twenty first century has elements of equality and justice which can evolve from them, and that are easily embraced by Friends as continuing revelation. Having to negotiate time for involvement in Quaker activities with secular friends, partners and other relatives may be difficult, but it does not seem a deterrent for Friends, particularly when conviction and friendships with other Quakers are strong (Frith 2009, 155).

The democratisation of relationship has created a change in balance in the significance of friendships and family, and committed Friends thrive in the Society's network of communities where friendships can be nurtured and a variety of interests can be accommodated. Although some writers have suggested friends are the new family (Phillips 2003), most people are embedded in a complex set of intergenerational familial and chosen relationships (Williams 2004, 24 and Gabb 2008, 4), and the old is in with the new. In his work with adolescent Quakers, Best claims they form close bonds, both as a group and through individual friendships (Best 2008, 192). He argues that they form a community of intimacy in which their shared values and behaviour create a sense of belonging and affiliation to the group. Frith (2009, 168) found committed adult Quakers to have close and valued friendships within the Society, and Whitehouse found 'an energetic and outgoing friendliness towards one another' between participants of convivial Quaker groups (Whitehouse2008, 130). Friendships in Quaker groups matter to British Friends, whether or not they are married or partnered, and whether or not they are the only Quaker in the family (Frith 2009, 156). Friendship is significant for single Friends as well. Overall in Britain, greater longevity, relationship breakdown and a longer period of delay before marriage or partnership has resulted in 6.5 million people in Britain living on their own (Inman 2005, 2), but the level of activity by single Friends in the Society indicates that living alone does not necessarily equate to being alone (Frith 2009, 159), though Friends welcome active inclusion by the group, especially after loss.

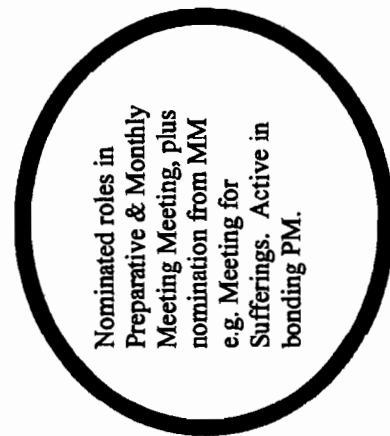
Frith (2009, 173) describes the Religious Society of Friends in Britain as a network of communities that provide both potential and actual places for sharing, confiding and equality in

Figure 1 - How Quaker Friendship networks grow (Frith 2009).

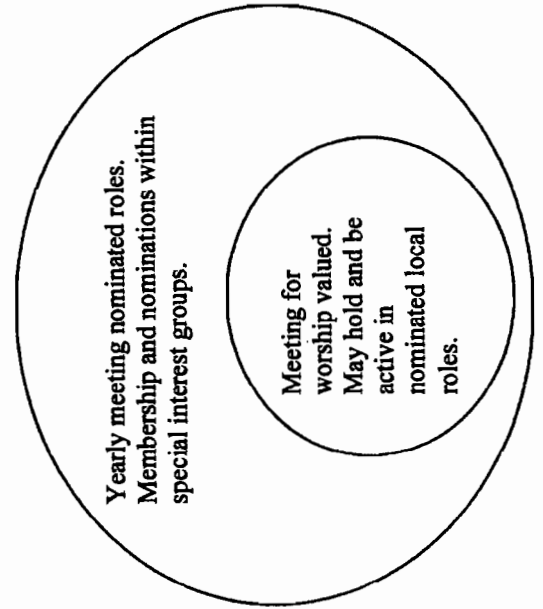
Model one – from childhood to adulthood



Model two – convinced as an adult, local involvement



Model three – convinced Quakers with local and national involvement



which networks of intimacy can develop (see Figure 1). Further, this is true regardless of the life stage of involvement or commitment. Those adult Friends who are brought to meeting as children, either born into it, or brought when parents are convinced form friendships that roll from one life stage to another, some moving on with them, and others being left behind as new friends are made (see model one in Figure 1). Experiences gathered at different ages are moved on into adulthood where they hold local, regional and national roles, and have a number of specific interests (Frith 2009, 175). Friends who became convinced as Quakers in their adulthood develop their Quakerism in either one of two ways. Some confine their Quakerism to their local and/or area meetings (see model two in Figure 1). They have close friendships from these groups and see their Quaker friends outside of Quaker time. They are involved in learning activities within the meeting, and may go to Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre to increase their ability to do their work with the meeting, for instance by undertaking an Equipping for Ministry course, but they are not involved nationally, except by area meeting nomination, for instance to Meeting for Sufferings or to conferences at Woodbrooke. Other convinced Friends value their local meeting for the purpose of worship (Frith 2009, 85), but they may or may not hold nominated roles there and, they are unlikely to instigate activities in the group. Instead, their main energy and interest is national, either in the yearly meeting or listed informal groups or a selection from both and it is in these groupings that their friendships and identities are affirmed.

Family change itself does not prevent involvement with the Society, and neither do the contemporaneous changes in working patterns that have happened since the mid-twentieth

century. Despite the struggles Friends have with overwork and busyness (Frith 2009, 126 - 127), Quakerism influences Friends work in one way or another. For some, the work itself is service or witness and others take skills learned from Quaker courses and networks into their work (Frith 2009, 129). Notably, some Friends choose to work part time, or take early retirement or become self-employed in order to free time for service in the Society and/or to witness their faith in the community (Frith 2009, 132).

How adult Friends come to the Society

As family and work changes are not in themselves barriers to involvement with the Society, the main challenges to preservation of the Society would seem to be the decline in religiosity and the plethora of alternatives available to a secularised population outside of it. In this section I shall outline some routes by which adult Friends come to the Society and the difficulties they face in becoming a part of the communities.

Knowing or meeting a Quaker or an attender at a Quaker meeting is a significant route to Quakerism for many. In 'Making New Friends' (2003), Philadelphia Yearly Meeting found that seventy five per cent of Friends who were not raised as Quakers came to the Society as a result of personal contact with a Quaker. Heron's (1992, 15) survey of Yorkshire attenders found thirty six point eight percent had come because they knew another Quaker or attender, but it can take some time for Friends to make the decision to come to meeting, even when the friendship with the Quaker is deep and of long standing (Frith 2009, 187). Sometimes attending a Quaker event (such as a Quaker wedding or memorial service) with their companion (Frith

2009, 187) provides a seminal moment in their decision to come along. Indeed, access to a Friends Meeting House for non-Quaker purposes is another tested way by which new Friends along to meeting (Heron 1992, 15 and Frith 2009, 189).

Some Friends who later find a place in the Society do not do so by going directly to a local meeting. For instance, not all those who go to Young Friends General Meeting do so because they were children in the Society, but go with another young Friend, or attend a university group that proves a formative experience for them. Other adults find their way to an affirming listed informal group, and, although these groups have not been found to be the first or only place where people met with Friends, they did prove significant in cementing the Society as a place of belonging for them (Frith 299, 190). Heeks (1994) found Friends who spoke warmly of the 'stimulus and enrichment which came from membership' (1994, 21) of such groups. It is in these places and by involvement in the Society's structures that Friends meet what Handy describes as a 'golden seed' (Handy 2001, 8), an aptitude or talent that is commented upon, in this case by a respected Friend, and later recalled by the recipient and then flourishes within them.

Surprisingly few people come to Friends as a result of reading Quaker literature as a result of direct advertising. Heron found only six point one per cent of his attenders came after reading an advertisement, and eight point five per cent from reading about Quakers (1992, 13), but he did find that those who came to the Society as a result of knowing another Quaker followed up their interest by reading about Quakers (Heron 1992, 51).

Quaker Quest and Quaker Week are two outreach projects that have been run nationally since 2006, but evidence of a positive effect is tenuous (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2009). Quaker Quest invites enquirers to open meetings to discuss aspects of Quakerism with Friends. There are opportunities to meet informally on a one to one basis and to join in discussions over a period of a few weeks, and a series of pamphlets on themes that have frequently arisen in Quaker Quest meetings has been published, each expressing the views and personal journeys of twelve Quakers. Meetings decide for themselves whether and what they want to do in Quaker Week, but it is supported by literature from Friends House and has its own website. British Quakers are actively involved in engaging newcomers, offering them access to meetings and sharing the diverse views of existing Friends but there is no sign yet of measurable success in an increasingly secular world.

Although I chiefly place the blame for falling numbers on changes outside of the Society, there are still matters to be addressed if a viable group is to be sustained. For example, negotiating Quakerism and its communities is not always easy for newcomers, and Heeks suggests participation needs a degree of robustness as it is demanding and risks exclusion (1994, 18). Responsibility for inclusion in the group lies with the incomer and with the community itself, and is not necessarily easy for either. Too small a group can be find difficulty accommodating the newcomer as those who are already established in it have to adjust, whilst larger groups were not always successful in their attempts at inclusion, even where attempts were made to create smaller 'sub-communities' within in them (Heeks 1996, 19). The complexity of Quaker practice can be difficult to assimilate Collins and Dandelion (2006) describe 'wrapped' Quaker

practices that are distinctive and difficult for new Friends to understand (Dandelion 2005, 108). For example, silence is an active entity in which the newcomer has to learn the correct use of silence and speech. As a result, the risk of self-censorship arising from fear of wrong use or abuse constrains access to the sacred (Collins and Dandelion 2006, 13). Nevertheless, I believe the Society has in its plural and much valued communities (Frith 2009, 181) a great strength and tools to be drawn upon to sustain it for the future.

Keeping the faith

Once the reforms of the mid to late nineteenth century were underway, British Quakerism became liberalised with an emphasis on continuing revelation (Dandelion 1996, 18) and on openness to change. More Friends come to the Society as adults, bringing with them diverse interests and faith backgrounds, reflecting the fragmentation of social concerns in, for instance, the voluntary and campaigning sectors in the western world, where, large traditional charities compete with smaller self-help groups for volunteers and income (Frith 2009, 12). British Quakerism accommodates some of these diverse interests in small listed informal groups, but these have no particular status in the Society (Dandelion 1996, 365). Nevertheless, along with the groupings of meetings and committees that compile the structure, they are part of the networked community that the Religious Society of Friends has become. I will argue that it is the plurality of its networked communities that holds its strength and hope for the future as these communities sustain, reinforce and transmit the Society's social capital. I will show that it is in these communities that the faith story is told, retold and exchanged, continually rehearsing the core practices of Quakerism and negotiating any changes in preparation for Yearly Meeting.

Hervieu-Léger argues that the imaginary grasp of continuity is continually reconstructed by the social bonds as compensation for the symbolic vacuum brought about by change (2000, 141 and 142), and I suggest that this is the process undertaken within the Quaker communities, and is stronger because they are interlinked with one another. Repeatedly, within each of the networked communities, the practice of Quakerism is rehearsed to a greater or lesser degree dependent upon the experience of the members of the community, but because Friends tend to experience (and for some, positively enjoy) several communities, their understanding of Quakerism builds. It is the shared practices that hold the groups together, not belief, especially the act of silent worship (Woodhead 2008, ix), and it is through those conservative behavioural practices (Dandelion 1996, 106) that the Quaker story is continually retold. Dandelion describes these behavioural and organisational practices as a behavioural creed that might be changed, but there is conformity to the results of change, despite a conservative attitude to it. Hervieu-Léger claims that when memory is part of everyday life there is no need to call it up, but shared memory is an essential resource for identity (2000, 141 and 142). For British Quakers the sharing takes place in the multiple communities, sometimes passively by visiting or observing, and sometimes actively in worship or in service to the Society, but adherence to the practices remains consistent throughout.

As my main argument for sustaining the Society hinges on the significance social capital has in enthusing the group and building its confidence to share its purpose, both corporately and individually, I shall briefly explain what I mean by the term social capital. Putnam (2000, 19) describes social capital as the connections among individuals that normalise reciprocity and

trustworthiness. In a healthy community, it mobilises such forces as trust, belonging and mutual obligation (Hay 2003, 7) when individuals have formed ties with others and internalised the values of the group (Field 2003, 139). I believe two types of social capital strengthen the Society, and work discreetly within and between the various groupings. They are bonding social capital that can build solidarity within the group and bridging social capital that connects diverse groups in a generalised reciprocity (Putnam 2000, 22). Although I am mindful of Robson's work on conflict among Quakers (2005) and Frith's description of fractured bonds within groups (2009, 86), I believe the model of networked communities in British Quakerism is a source of hope for its future and its strength in a fragmented and secular world. My emphasis is on looking inward, not to preserve the purity of the 'gathered remnant' (Dandelion 2007, 60) as eighteenth and early nineteenth century Quakers sought to do, but to demonstrate how vibrant communities can accommodate diverse and disparate interpretations of faith and yet sustain a core identity and shared practice with which to face the world.

Despite recent changes to the names of meetings within the structure (preparative meetings have become local meetings and monthly meetings have become area meetings), the Religious Society of Friends in Britain retains the structure introduced by George Fox in the 1660s known to Friends as Gospel Order. The Society's membership is a priesthood of all believers as part of the disdain for the intervention of priests between the individual and God, and the Society has only a small paid core of staff. As a result, the Society is reliant on its membership to organise and care for it, largely in committees to which Friends are nominated for service to the Society. These committees become sub-communities in their own right, where learning is nurtured:

It's undoubtedly true that through Quaker service, people are changed. Sometimes they acquire new skills they can even use in their careers. Sometimes they learn things about the world that energise and radicalise them; and sometimes they find their relationship with the Divine is deepened, that it enters a new and unexpected phase (Stephenson 2004, 6).

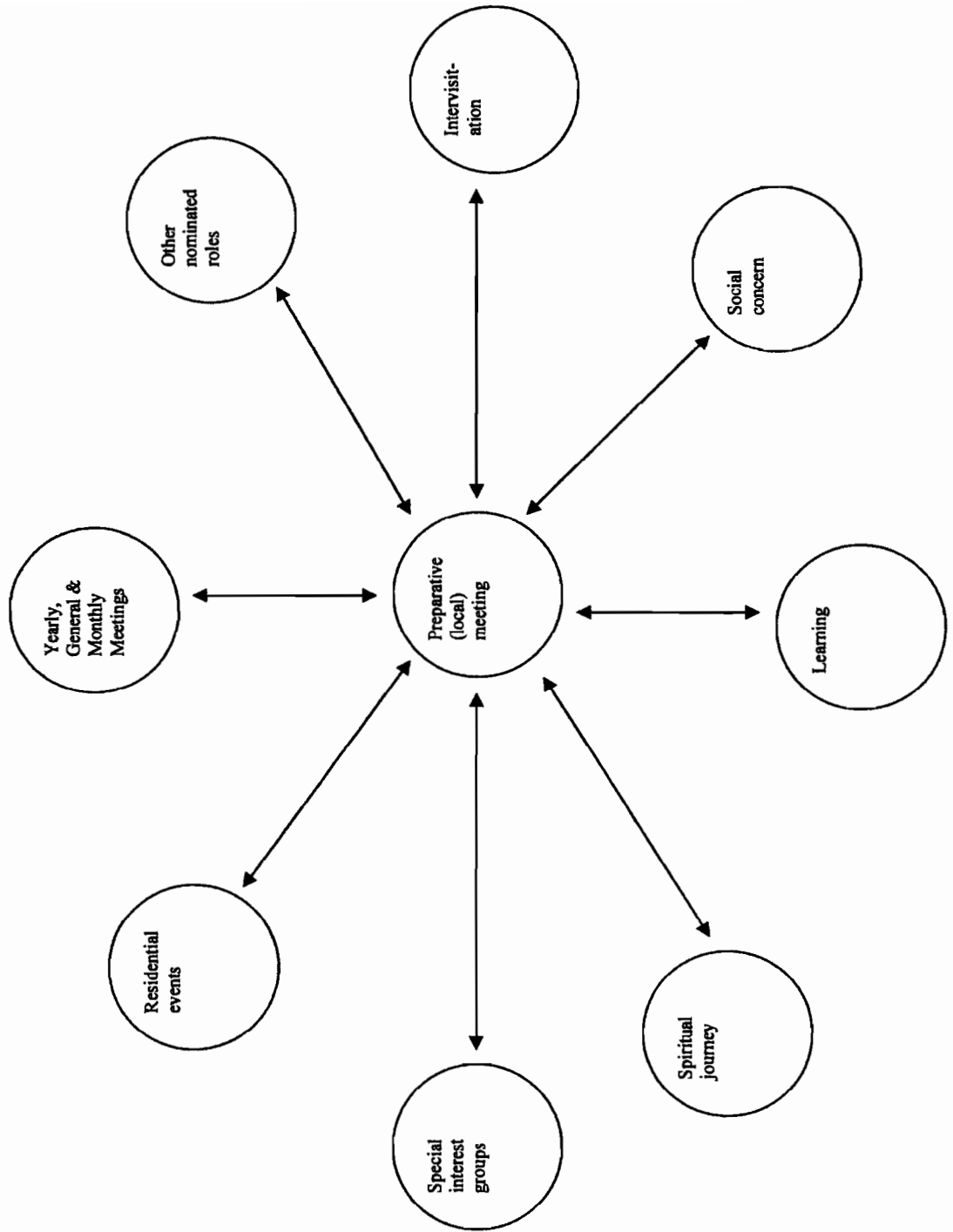
Certain regular jobs help sustain the life of the Quaker community and are not necessarily appointed by a nominations committee. Much of the work is about ensuring the activities of the Quaker groups run smoothly by opening up the building, making sure it is clean and small repair tasks are completed. Other informal activities include facilitating shared meals, or visiting sick Friends. Friendship and friendliness matter to Friends, who often meet as friends for non-Quaker social activity (Frith 2009, 93). These 'superglue' tasks, as Putnam (2000, 23) describes bonding social capital, often stand outside the structures, even avoiding them (Frith 2009, 93). Quaker bonding social capital requires a high level of commitment drawn largely, at present, from the membership for whom it is embedded into their faith and practice. In local meetings, it potentially brings a diverse group together to socialise, eat, visit, care and support each other. The process by which this is done is built into the Society's structures. For instance, elders and overseers are responsible for the pastoral care of the members and attenders of the meeting, but their work requires skill as failure can cause hurt (Frith 2009, 91). Quaker values are shared through learning opportunities (at courses, gatherings, conferences and so on) and by information passed on via the administrative processes. Some Friends, unable to contribute to all they know needs to be done, feel guilty at the level of time required to do the work, but success is translated into lasting friendships and social activity beyond the meeting.

Bridging social capital occurs where various sections of a community are brought together in order to bring about change, and possibly only where there is already a degree of trust and mutual obligation. It enables people to access resources outside their immediate circle (Field 2004). Although it can be fragile and ephemeral, it can also be flexible, better able to contend with disruption and an opportunity for sharing skills and knowledge between the groupings (Field 2004) and Putnam calls it the 'WD40' of life (2000, 23). All major faiths have core principles capable of motivating bridging social capital as well as commitments to peace, justice, honesty and service (*Findings* 2006, 3), and British Quakers are no exception. *Advices and Queries*, for example 1.02.7 summarises it well:

Do you work gladly with other religious groups in pursuit of common goals? While remaining faithful to Quaker insights, try to enter imaginatively into the life and witness of other communities of faith, creating together the bonds of friendship (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995, 1.02 – 1.07)

Thus, bridging social capital is used by British Quakers to pursue Quaker principles with groups beyond the Society, but I will show that participation and activity in the Society's structures and in the listed informal groups works to bond the Society as a religious body, yet simultaneously bridges the social capital for members and attenders in its local meetings and between the networks. Although each grouping is bonded by its purpose, and by the Quaker practice within it, the group or committee member often bridges their experience to their local and other meetings. Putnam affirms that some groups bond along some dimensions, whilst at the same time bridging across others (2003, 23), and in Figure 2, Frith's diagram demonstrates how this is done within the Society (Frith 2009, 100). Just how much of the experience individuals gain by their participation remains in the separate communities, and how much is shared with the

Figure 2 - Involvement in the structures and interest groups as bonding and bridging social capital (Frith 2009)



person's other communities, particularly their local meeting, is uncertain (Frith 2009, 191). Best (2008, 192 - 215), found his adolescent Quakers were physically and psychologically separate from the from the rest of Quakerism but Meads work on the Experiment with Light shows that, whilst experimenters were bound closely together by the intimacy of their Light community they did not share their experiences with their local meeting (Meads 2008, 216).

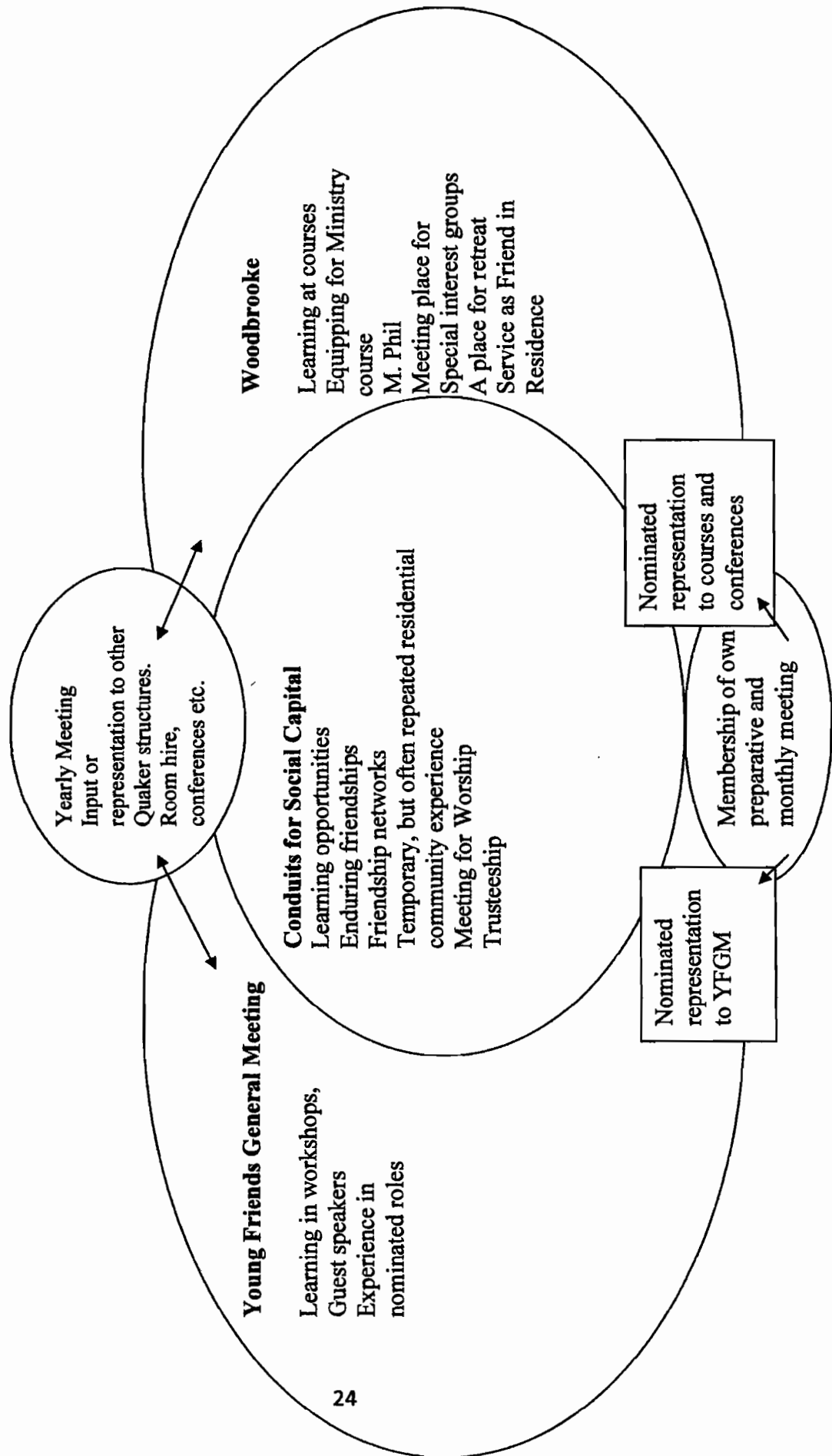
Figure 2 begins to show the range of choice available for those who want to participate in the Society and, indeed, such is the range of choice that Punshon speaks of a 'supermarket Quakerism', open to the risks of individualism (1990, 23). Nevertheless, the diagram does not illustrate the complexity of the interconnected networks, nor have I so far fully discussed the variety of social capital to be gained from them. Although linking individualism and communitarianism together would seem contrary, they inevitably run together in a fragmented age (Frith 2009, 206), for, as Frazer and Lacey (1993, 111) purport, people are 'fundamentally connected with each and the world they inhabit'. Despite threats from secularisation, liberalisation, choice and social change, those committed to the Society yield a high level of activity either as service to the Society or as witness outside of it, and strong statements of belonging.

Frith (2009, 199 – 206) uses two contrasting examples of networked Quaker community, Young Friends General Meeting and Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, to demonstrate Friends' ability to make and uphold complex connections even though some might be small in number.

Drawing on her field research with Quakers, she shows the similarities in the social capital the two generate (see figure 3). They are used here to illustrate one very recognisable and traditionally structured community works as a network, but also to show how in other instances fluid and wide ranging networks come together to be multiple communities in one place where they are not necessarily sub-communities of that space. Nonetheless, they have substantial strengths upon which the Society can build in order to sustain a confident but flexible Quakerism for the future. Many other networks exist and new ones are emerging. The Quaker Life Network, for instance, is a network of Friends who are willing to give time to support meetings and Friends in order to deepen the life of the yearly meeting. Other networks take advantage of technological developments, including websites and blogs. Young Friends General Meeting and Woodbrooke are researched and show the benefits of different types of interaction.

Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) meets three times a year to conduct their business at a residential weekend and create a distinctive, if temporary, space for themselves – a community of intimacy. The meeting takes the same structure as other Quaker meetings, and young Friends are nominated to posts, including those of clerk, elders and overseers, though nominees do not need to be members of the Society. Thus young Friends learn about the workings of the Society's structure by example.

Figure 3 - Two examples of how networks of belonging foster social capital (Frith 2009)



Woodbrooke serves as a community in very many ways. When its director, Jennifer Barraclough, asked Yearly Meeting 2009 asked who considered themselves to be a part of the wider Woodbrooke community, practically the whole hall raised a hand (Loverance 2009, 5). Friends attend Woodbrooke for courses, conferences and use its rooms for meetings of committees or listed informal groups. They serve as Friends in Residence, gardeners and trainers, and Woodbrooke visits meetings within Britain under the remit of Woodbrooke on the Road. Friends who are engaged in several networks might use Woodbrooke repeatedly, but in circumstances that are contextually different. Thus there may be chance meetings with old Friends in other areas of service or interest, or planned meetings with current Friends.

These two examples are juxtaposed by Frith to show how individualism is potentially upheld and moderated in places where spirituality and social capital flourish. In the centre circle of Figure 3, some of the shared conduits of social capital that arise from these two different types of community are identified. Each of them provides residential opportunities. For Young Friends, catering for themselves and sleeping on the floor of the host meeting house builds fellowship and cooperation. Interviewees of Frith's (2009, 200) who had been Young Friends described how these friendships endured, often beyond the age at which they had moved on from YFGM. Learning occurs in each example, either formally in courses, or from guest speakers, or by observation, or modeling. Networked communities can generate reciprocal trust between those who take part in them and between the participant and the community to which they belong, and, in this case, the broader Society itself. These two examples are not alone in the Society as places of temporary meeting, friendship renewal and brief but

reinforcing events. Local and area meetings hold events, including business meetings that bring people together, some the listed informal groups hold residential weekends, and some busy meeting houses, including Friends House in Euston, act as a thoroughfare for exchange, and strengthen identity both corporately and individually for Friends.

Bruce (2002, 104) believes that spirituality will not withstand the stress of individual autonomy, but in his Swarthmore lecture Dale (1996, 99) claims that 'community is an antidote to the cult of the individual and the worship of individual. The extent to which we are able to practise it is a sign of how seriously we take the challenge our faith'. The networked communities validate the Quakerism of those involved and utilize their individualism. The paradigm shift (Frith 2009, 212) from the familial communitarianism with which John Stevenson Rowntree was familiar to the networked communitarianism of the beginning of the twenty first century stands the Society in good stead for the future. It is not perfect, and there are issues of access, such as difficulties with child care, the length of time required and travel problems to overcome, as well as, for some, a perception of self-righteousness, exclusivity and bureaucracy (Frith 2009, 212), but I believe these imperfections are challenges that can be overcome by the Society and are not threats to its existence.

What Friends want from participation in the Society

Figures 2 and 3 are idealised and hide the internal risks and challenges faced by the Society. For some time, Friends have been concerned about a trend towards congregationalism, for

example, fearing that local worshipping groups may make mistakes and fall away from the Society's ways (*Interim Report of the Local and Regional Groupings Working Party 2002*, 5). Chadkirk and Dandelion (2008, 262), Frith (2009, 94) and the Local and Regional Groupings Working Party each found that the Quaker business commands only a minority interest from the membership. Both Frith and the working party found that age of the membership, family duties and travel difficulties prevented attendance, but cumbersome procedures and dull items of business were off putting too, and Chadkirk (2004, 117) suggests that meetings may have problems finding officers as membership numbers fall.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of how and why those Friends who choose to give their time to the Society do so, particularly in nominated service (Frith 2009, 215 – 252). It is true that numerical decline in the Society means that there are fewer people to undertake its work and this may well become a problem in the future, so understanding what keeps Friends volunteering and enthusiastic has considerable implications for the retention of a committed volunteer core to do the Society's work. Friends' needs are not so very different from those of volunteers elsewhere in the community (*Findings 2005* and *The Institute of Volunteering Research 2005* and 2003) but they are underpinned with spirituality (Frith 2009, 66– 70). Whether and where they choose to volunteer is not an either/or practice for individual Friends, and both spiritual and the secular processes and values play a part in the outcome of the decision (Frith 2009, 215). A sense of duty (the ethical legacy that *Findings (2005, 3)* found in older volunteers in the wider community), though prevalent regardless of age in Frith's Quakers, burdens some Friends, as does guilt when a job is too much to take on. But, although

Neither guilt nor duty were perceived as a good basis for taking on a role, and often managed it, for instance by laying down a piece of work before taking on another one.

Friends want to be able to balance their volunteering, either with their work in the wider community or within the Society or between both, for example, by working as a Quaker prison minister and working with a mediation group within the community (Frith 200, 107). It is not unusual for Friends to draw some of their inspiration for their volunteering in the wider community from their involvement with Quakerism, where they feel they gain support and shape their values through Quaker courses, workshops or literature (Frith 2009, 107). Friends have a long tradition of working for peace and social justice (Brown and Masters 1989, 35 – 42 and Heron 1997, 9), and Friends find no difficulty in moving between Quaker nominated work and volunteering elsewhere. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Quakers who were socially concerned and active would have been recognised by others as Quakers either by their dress or speech, but not so in the twenty first century, and Friends themselves are unlikely to mention their Quakerism. Firstly, there is a societal taboo, mentioned above, on talking about religion, but there is also a perceived illegitimacy on proselytising by Friends (Dandelion 1996, 305). Although there is no overall outreach benefit for the Society from encouraging Friends to balance their volunteering time between their Quaker service and their volunteering elsewhere, both types bond Friends to their Quakerism, build confidence to the benefit of both, and contribute to Friends' Quaker identity.

Voluntary sector research with young people (Institute of Volunteering research 2005) shows a need for incentives amongst volunteers. Fun and laughter from the shared activities, and, as we have already seen, friendship, are valued by Friends in the Quaker work, but so, too, is the opportunity to deepen their spiritual understanding. Skills acquisition is valued by young and old in the voluntary sector to enhance their career paths or find an unexpected opportunity in later life (Institute of Volunteering research 2005 and *Findings* 2005, 3 and 5). This was the case for one of Frith's interviewees (2009, 236), and, although there is no evidence to suggest the Society would gain from offering nationally recognised training qualifications to active young Friends, some certainly do sufficient and suitable work for accreditation. The Society does not offer formal training, and often those who volunteer feel inadequate for the service to which they are called (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1996, 12.08 and Frith 2009, 236), but there are courses at Woodbrooke for trustees, clerks, elders, overseers and treasurers and opportunities to observe and shadow good practice.

Quaker Faith and Practice advises a time limitation on appointments, and this is welcomed by Friends (Frith 2009, 228). Some workloads can be onerous. Using a team of volunteers can make the demands seem less unrelenting (Gaskin 2003, 4), but where demands are too intense there is a risk of 'burn-out' and subsequent loss of the volunteer to the role (*Findings* 1995). Time limited service allows Friends to feel they are better able to cope and encourages meetings to build apprenticeship periods into the service for successors. It is clear that Friends corporately and individually are aware of the benefits of time limits, but although limiting

periods in office works for both the well-being of the individual Friends and for the role, but the practice is not always, and sometimes cannot be, observed, especially in smaller meetings.

British Quakers have been exercised for some time as to how to engage Friends in the work of the Society, yet there is clear evidence of learning, spiritual development and enjoyment to be had from participation. Where Friends' needs are not being met, they overcome their busyness in order to see the work is done, but the reduction in numbers lays a heavy burden on small groups of people who increasingly undertake multiple tasks (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2008).

Chadkirk and Dandelion's analysis of data from meetings in 2006 and 2008 claims that meetings have more posts to fill than there are Friends available to fill them, and they suggest that the loss of a small number of members in each meeting has been sufficient to tip 'smaller Meetings over the edge' (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2008). The explanation above of what Friends want from their volunteering with the Society is a potential contribution to increased attractiveness of volunteering opportunities.

A faith for the future

So far I have concentrated on current research about British Quakers' behaviour as a networked community reliant on a large volunteer workforce. I have stated my belief that the interaction in and between the networks sustains the faith story between often disparate Quaker meetings and groupings. Such is the extent of the networks and the importance of the friendships formed within in them that I believe they are sufficiently resilient, flexible and tensile to protect

the Society beyond the end date of 2032 forecast by Collins and Dandelion (Dandelion and Collins 2008, 6).

There is no denying the continuing numerical decline. The reduction in the number of children associated with meetings is of particular concern, not least for the young people themselves, who will potentially miss out on the valued and enduring friendships described in Best's and Frith's work and cited in the content of this essay. Stroud and Dandelion suggest there might be a critical level of membership beyond which Britain Yearly Meeting would be unable to sustain itself (Stroud and Dandelion 2004). Meetings would close, but the sale of the buildings would boost the fixed assets of the Society, but people would be employed to look after the affairs of a wealthy but dwindling group.

I have no doubt that the vibrant and engaged Yearly Meeting that met in York, July 2009, and whose extensive activities are described above will survive beyond dates suggested by numerical analysis alone. Although there are internal structural matters the Society needs to address, such as ensuring newcomers are welcomed and equipped to partake, there is clear evidence that it is willing to do so. Quaker Quest thrives and serves as both inreach and outreach (Frith 2009, 98) for existing Friends and new enquirers, Woodbrooke delivers courses at the study centre in Birmingham and responds to requests from meetings to run workshops and courses throughout the country. Friends House has opened the Quaker Centre for those in London which it hopes will entice visitors in to visit the cafe or bookshop or for reflection

(Robertson 2009). Websites, blogs and internet forums illustrate that Friends are aware they are connected in places and spaces other than their local meeting.

The emphasis by liberal Quakers in Britain on Quaker practice through what Dandelion describes as a behavioural creed (Dandelion 1996, 106) and in the networked community illustrated by Frith (2009, 199 – 214) will ensure that Quaker practices will continue, even if some smaller meetings close. These practices will oversee and moderate any changes required. For instance, given the importance of the networks to committed Friends, the nature of membership of the Society, which currently lies with the area meetings, may need to be reviewed. Reaching out to a secular world is an enormous challenge for Britain Yearly meeting, but there are many places within the Society to nurture confidence, cope with change and support a sustained faith in the future.

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