

THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF
FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

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In 1859, Joseph Rowntree's essay *Quakerism Past and Present: An Enquiry into the causes of its decline in Great Britain and Ireland* was published. Rowntree estimated that in 1680, at the Society's peak, there were approximately 60,000 Quakers out of a population of 5 million, a proportion of 1 in 83. By 1800, membership had declined to 19,800 (1 in 470) with 8,000 attenders and by 1856, there had been a further decline to 14,530 (1 in 1100) with 7,000 attenders. Rowntree commented that "in a healthy community, losses will generally be counter-balanced by the accession of new recruits". He also noted an attitude of complacency. The focus of the Society was upon philanthropy and the view was expressed that "numbers are not a current test of strength". As the population had trebled in the previous 180 years and the Society had declined by two-thirds in the same period, Rowntree asked "Has Quakerism a future ---- is it doomed to a progressive decay involving its untimely end at no very distant period?" The decline continued until 1864 when the number of Quakers in the UK reached the lowest point ever recorded; 13,755 members and 3,609 attenders. Rowntree had written in 1860 that, if Friends had maintained their relative numerical position, their numbers should have exceeded 300,000 in his day.

Rowntree identified many reasons for the Society's decline. Birthright membership had resulted in a type of club formed by an exclusive elite, who did not like admitting new members; the Society had become "almost hereditary". There was little attempt at any form of outreach and many birthright members were passive and nominal. He also identified a sharp decline in the vocal Ministry offered at Meetings for Worship, a lack of teaching and a failure to help young birthright members. In Rowntree's view the main reason for decline was the rigid discipline that resulted in a large proportion of Friends being disowned. Members were expelled for paying tithes and for becoming bankrupt, whether or not they were at fault. The largest

number of disownments, however, were for marrying a non-Quaker, known as “marrying out”. In 1752, new marriage regulations had been introduced which stipulated that not only the parties marrying out were to be disowned but also their parents, if the latter had not actively discouraged their children. Between 1800 and 1855 there had been 4,499 marriages in Meeting Houses but 4,000 members had been disowned for marrying out. Many of these continued to attend Meetings and were recorded as attenders only. In Rowntree’s view, the Society no longer permitted freedom of conscience as disciplinary rules interfered with individual liberty. The Society had become “dominated by its own internal workings” and was “living for itself”. Rowntree’s essay received a mixed reception. Widely read, it was welcomed by many but aroused indignation in others for its perceived attack “on our beloved Society”. Eventually, the work of this young man of twenty-five proved to be seminal.

What is the state of our Society today? What does the future hold? If Rowntree was alarmed at the decline in numbers 150 years ago we should perhaps be even more alarmed today. The latest Tabular Statement for 2008 reveals that the present adult membership is 14,569. The membership is 39 less than in 1856 and only 814 more than the lowest total ever recorded in the entire history of the Society. There has been an enormous increase in population since Rowntree’s day, making the decline even more marked. The proportion of Quakers in the general population has declined from 1 in 1,100 to 1 in 2,700. In the last 152 years the proportion of Quakers in the population has, therefore, more than halved. The high point of 18,918 members was reached in 1974; since then there has been a slow but steady decline year by year for the last 34 years. From 1992, this has accelerated; membership has declined by 3,082, an average of 192 per annum. In 2001 the loss was 559, in 2002 membership reduced by 577 and in 2005 a further decrease of 511 was recorded. In 2008, the 475 Local Meetings only attracted 304 new members; Liverpool, with a population of 750,000 has only 40 members although in 1961-62, when I was an attender, the weekly attendance at Meetings was well over

100. If this rate of decline continued there would only be 11,500 members of Britain Yearly Meeting in 10 years time. After 35 years membership would have reduced to 5,000 and the Society would be virtually extinct. (See Appendix 1). Today there are 475 Local Meetings but 82 have less than 11 members, 199 have less than 21 and 306 have less than 31. Only 49 have more than 60 members. We do not know how many of these members are active. The 82 Local Meetings with no more than 11 members must be considered to be vulnerable. (See Appendix 2).

The statistical analysis of institutions, however, suggests that this type of gradual decline is unlikely. In reality, a point of no return is reached, followed by a rapid collapse. This should cause widespread alarm in the Society, but it does not appear to be receiving much attention. When the Tabular Statement was presented to Meeting for Sufferings recently, the reaction of some seemed to be of indifference, actually asking why we bothered to collect such statistics. The attitude appeared to be that numbers are not everything and there is plenty of life in the Society.

In 2008, 74 Local Meetings had special pastoral arrangements for Eldership and Oversight. What is the significance of this? It may be the result of experimenting with new approaches to pastoral care but the special arrangements for Eldership (with 6 Meetings having no Eldership provision) suggests that the smallest Meetings are struggling to meet the basic needs which enable them to remain a going concern. In a Society without professional paid ministers, Elders play a vital role in holding together the structure of a Meeting and without their presence the Society would be fatally weakened.

To put our membership into perspective I refer to a survey of active Church membership which was conducted in Lincolnshire in 2005. In the 2001 Census, 79% of Lincolnshire's population described their religion as Christian whereas the 2005 survey recorded only 5% as active Church members. Of these 47,988 active Church members, Quakers constituted only 155; 1 Quaker to 6,299 of the county's population.

My experience of the Religious Society of Friends spans nearly 50 years and it seems to me that it has never been more vibrant. We are not dying because of apathy. Every edition of *Quaker News* illustrates that there is a tremendous amount going on. Why do we have this vibrant Society and continue to experience a decline in membership? What can we do about it? All the major factors identified by Rowntree have long since been addressed. Why is it that we have difficulty in recruiting new members today? I intend to look at this under 3 headings; membership, ministry and marketing.

MEMBERSHIP

There is something odd about a society which has 14,569 members and 8,017 attenders, with the meaning of the latter term undefined. It is apparent that the number of attenders who subsequently become members must be less than the number lost because of termination or death.

Prior to 1737, there was no formally recorded membership. You were a Quaker if you were “professing with Friends” (ie you habitually attended Quaker Meetings for Worship). At a time of persecution attendance implied considerable commitment as nobody would have gone to Meetings, with the risk of imprisonment, unless they were “convinced”. If you worshipped with Friends you were a Friend, “in the light working and abiding”. In 1737, Britain Yearly Meeting issued the following advice - “that all Friends shall be deemed members of the Quarterly Meeting or Two Weeks Meeting within the compass of which they inhabited or dwelt on the first day of the fourth month 1737”. The first definition of membership, therefore, was those attending Quaker Meetings. The advice goes on, however, to state that the exception is anyone who had received financial relief from another Meeting, in which case they belonged to that Meeting and not the one in which they were residing. Quakers had decided on formal membership as a method of establishing who was eligible for poor relief and in doing this they copied the current Poor Law practice. Our system of membership still reflects this Poor Law origin. We belong to

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a local Area Meeting (the Parish) and not a national body. We have to apply for a certificate of transfer if we move to another Area Meeting (the Poor Law used the same terminology) and the receiving Area Meeting can decline to accept the certificate of transfer (as with the Poor Law regulations). We no longer have a Quota system, we live in a Welfare State in a very mobile society and yet, despite this, one can only become a Quaker by belonging to a specified Area Meeting. A member of the Church of England belongs to the whole Church and not just a local Parish Church. If he has a disagreement with the Parish authorities he is still a member of the Church of England. There are many instances of sincere, committed Quakers who have felt obliged to resign their membership over issues relating to their Area Meeting and who continue to attend their local Meeting faithfully but no longer as Quaker members. This is reminiscent of Rowntree's account of disowned Quakers who continued as attenders. We have a hangover from the past which does not reflect our true spiritual beliefs; Quakers should be members of Yearly Meeting and not a local Area Meeting. It should be possible to say "I am a Quaker" with the same meaning that it has for someone saying "I am a Roman Catholic", which is not defined by the particular Church they attend. In 1856, there were, in effect, three classes of Quakers, first class being birthright members, second class being convinced members and third class being attenders (the majority of which, according to Rowntree, were the disowned). Today it still feels as if there are two distinct classes, namely formal members and regular attenders, whose numbers exceed 50% of the total worshipping body. Why are so many attenders reluctant to become members? Why do some remain attenders for many years? It seems possible that it may be the concept of "membership" and the process of acquiring it that puts people off taking this step. It is an important issue for the survival of the Society as normally only members can be Elders, Overseers, Clerks, Registering Officers, Treasurers and Trustees. Prior to 1737, most of our attenders would have been accepted as Quakers since the criteria for membership as stated was simply habitual attendance at Meetings for Worship. Applying for membership can feel like

trying to join an exclusive club; Am I good enough? What do they expect of me? Will I be accepted? However much reassurance is given it can still seem like an exam without rules.

Early Friends perhaps gave the best criteria for being a Quaker -

“For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do but because I feel the same spirit and life in him” (Isaac Penington)

“ The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion” (William Penn)

“ There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind ---- it is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion ---- where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows ---- they become brethren”. (John Woolman)

None of this suggests “formal membership” by application. To early Friends you were a Quaker if you were recognised as such by members of the Society. It would be disturbing if Elders and Overseers today could not identify those who take a real part in the life of their Meeting, those who feel they belong and who are in sympathy with Quaker values and concerns. In a Society which does not have creeds and catechisms, fellowship is the key attribute. If this is the case, why should the onus be on an attender to apply? We should no longer expect attenders to apply for membership but should return to the position prior to 1737 and offer the opportunity to become a Recorded Quaker of Britain Yearly Meeting by Invitation. The process could be as follows -

- Local Meeting Elders and Overseers would identify, after a suitable period of time, attenders who they already feel to be Quakers. This would apply to those attenders who had reached an age of discernment and free choice (possibly over 16 years of age). There would be no applications for membership.
- Attenders being considered for recording as Quakers would be discussed at the Area Meeting of Elders and Overseers in order to ascertain whether an invitation should be given.

- If this is agreed, the attender would be approached by a local Elder and asked whether they wish to be recorded as a Quaker at the next Area Meeting. There would be no need for a visit or a report to Area Meeting although the attender would be offered the opportunity to discuss the implications of their decision with an experienced Friend if desired.
- If the attender accepts the invitation, Area Meeting would record him or her as a Quaker of Britain Yearly Meeting and would notify Friends House where a national list would be maintained. The Area Meeting would keep its own administrative list and a letter from the Clerk of Area Meeting to the former attender would confirm that he or she had been recorded.
- Attenders, as such, would no longer be formally recorded.
- Recorded Quakers of Britain Yearly Meeting would remain as such until they died, asked for their names to be removed or were disassociated for bringing Quakers into disrepute.

We live in a society where 300,000 people are over eighty years of age and 8,000 over one hundred. In the next few years there is expected to be a huge increase in these numbers and also in elderly people suffering from dementia (20% over 85) and other disabilities. Many of these might have given long service and remain Quakers at heart, but no longer play an active role or even have contact with a Meeting. Contact may have been lost by moving house or lacking relatives to notify the Society of changes. Quakers such as these should not be removed from the list of Recorded Quakers anymore than they would be by any of the other Churches; to do so would be reverting to the idea of club membership. It is not attendance at Meeting which defines a Quaker. Area Meetings should keep a list of non-active Recorded Quakers. Friends House would find it more useful today if it had a list of active and non-active Recorded Quakers rather than a list of members (active and inactive) and attenders, with the latter being ill-defined.

- As a Recorded Quaker of Britain Yearly Meeting, there would be no need for a certificate of transfer. Area Meeting would simply notify the appropriate new Area Meeting and Friends

House of the Quaker's change of address and the new Area Meeting would add them to their administrative list. At present, most Area Meetings have many Friends who have moved to other parts of the country but, for various reasons, do not wish to transfer their membership to a different Area Meeting. This would no longer be a problem.

If the new process were adopted it might be hoped that a substantial number of present attenders would become Recorded Quakers and be able to share more fully in the life of both their Local Meeting and the Society in general, with a deeper sense of commitment. In our present system, most applications are accepted virtually without question by Area Meetings, while a few are rejected as being premature or unsuitable on the grounds of the applicant not being in true sympathy with Quaker beliefs. These rejections can cause unnecessary pain and could be avoided by recording Quakers by invitation. At present we have no right to prevent anyone from applying for membership and Local Meeting members sometimes find it difficult to prevent an application being made even if they feel uneasy about it. Local Meetings may not even know that an application has been made.

MINISTRY

Rowntree identified the absence of vocal ministry and teaching as one of the major factors in the decline of the Society. He was present at Yearly Meeting 1856 when the Quarterly Meeting of Bristol and Somerset, which comprised 1,000 members, reported that "two-thirds of the Meetings had no acknowledged minister" (and therefore almost no vocal ministry). In an article in 1904, Rowntree wrote "there is no evidence of any Friends congregation having flourished for any considerable length of time, or having effectively fulfilled the objects of Church fellowship, in the absence of living Gospel ministry". In his essay, he speculated that too much emphasis had been placed on unpremeditated vocal ministry. The "Divine Spirit" was not listened to before Meeting and as a consequence "ministers took their seats in Meeting with minds like a blank sheet". There was a great reluctance to speak as the Society expected

“extraordinary revelations worthy of a Hebrew Prophet” to be offered within this artificially set time-span. The Meeting for Worship is the heart and spiritual centre of the Society; if there is going to be growth or decline it will begin here. We can recruit attenders but if the Meeting does not fulfil their needs they will drift away. This must be of vital concern, but there is no overview of what is happening at local level; perhaps there is a tendency to think that vocal ministry can take care of itself. Woodbrooke has 87 listed courses, including those for Treasurers, Trustees, Elders, Overseers and Clerks but there is nothing specifically dealing with vocal ministry. An expectant silence in an appropriate setting is the bedrock of our Meeting for Worship where we seek an enlightened conscience, transformed minds, inspiration, new insights, deepened empathy, and new truths which might lead us to the revelation of unrecognised evils and motivate us on to action. To live a life of faith we must hear the silent cry of the afflicted, the lonely, the marginalised, the poor, the sick and the powerless and respond to it, but Meeting for Worship is also the first step towards community, communal experience and action as opposed to merely personal experience. We can only do this by communicating and sharing. Vocal ministry helps the unity of the Meeting and helps us to share our personal experience, which gives extra depth to the worship. Words are our means of communication and they can stimulate, encourage and support. We live in a secular society and cannot take it for granted that new attenders have any religious knowledge or experience.

It would be worthwhile to do some research into Meetings for Worship and, in particular, the quality of vocal ministry in the Society. Are Friends satisfied? Are some Meetings struggling to keep attenders? It may be that Woodbrooke could usefully offer a course on “Vocal Ministry”. Some Friends are gifted ministers but all could be helped by sharing experiences and thoughts on coming to Meeting “with heart and mind prepared”. Should we not be recognising the importance of the gift for vocal ministry, developing the latent power of Friends and encouraging them to use it? What is the best preparation? If Woodbrooke could

provide such a course, each Area Meeting might consider appointing a “travelling minister” with the following responsibilities:

- To have a personal knowledge of the spiritual health of all Local Meetings.
- To provide an example, encouragement and aid to vocal ministry
- To be aware of the needs of Children’s Meetings
- To work closely with Elders

If the Society had 70 such ministers it would have an invaluable standing knowledge of all its Meetings which could be shared with Meeting for Sufferings. We would have a much better idea of the spiritual state of the Society and the direction in which it was travelling.

MARKETING

This may seem to be an inappropriate concept for a religious society, but if we have something to offer and want people to be aware of it we need to reach the people most likely to respond. We have to get people through the door. We are not likely to appeal to the people who find security in ritual and safety in talismans, holy places and objects. We do not offer an extreme emotional experience or a ceremony which delights the senses, nor do we offer the comfort of a priest, the certainty of salvation or the promise of a life hereafter. For all of these reasons, we are likely to remain a minority religion. However, it is interesting to compare us with another minority religion, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, founded in the 1870s, as there are some surprising similarities. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not have paid ministers, they are totally pacifist, do not have creeds and hold meetings in a Meeting Room which is devoid of religious symbols. They do not have a formal service and have a Governing Body, not unlike the centre at Friends House. They do have membership, but in their case it is acquired automatically by “ministering” (ie doorstep visiting). There is an annual yearly meeting ,open to all members. The differences, of course, are enormous but despite their extreme beliefs Jehovah’s Witnesses have 15 million members worldwide and claim 500,000 in the UK. Whatever one’s views on their beliefs it must be

acknowledged that they do have a much higher profile with the public than Quakers despite being prepared to be unpopular. It is interesting to realise that, if Rowntree's projection that there should have been 300,000 members in his day was carried forward to the present time we also would have 500,000 members. Our numbers really are pitifully small and reinforce the public stereotype that if a religion has very few adherents then it must be peculiar or cranky. Many place us in the same category as Jehovah's Witnesses, Plymouth Brethren, Christian Scientists and Mormons. In our own Meeting House, we have tried to counteract this assumption by displaying a booklet of famous Quakers which includes many well-known and respected modern Friends and which also includes the full text of the citation for the Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 1947. Since the 1980s we have also had on display photo albums recording the ongoing life of our Meeting, including Local Meeting Friends, events, children's activities and celebrations which have proved to be worthwhile as they have aroused genuine interest. We constantly try to stress that we are ordinary, normal people but this false public perception is a problem which the Society needs to address. During Quaker week 2009 it was apparent that most of the visitors to our Meeting House events knew very little about Quakers. Some visitors were even surprised to learn that they could attend Meetings for Worship without an invitation.

We live in a multi-cultural, diverse and individualistic society which is undergoing rapid changes. Public attendance at Church services is in sharp decline. Christian Research, the statistical arm of the Bible Society, has claimed that, by 2050, Sunday attendance at Church of England services will have fallen by 90% from just under 1 million to 88,000. Scientific discoveries have had a positive effect in cleansing religion of some of its superstitions, but, by explaining away former mysteries they have had a devastating effect on religious belief and observance. If religion is to survive, it will have to adapt to these circumstances. Religious language is increasingly seen as symbolic rather than literal by many church members but the general public is rarely aware of this. The evidence of people's need for a spiritual element in

their lives is all around us, not least in the growing interest in New Age philosophies, astrology, crystals, magic and angels. Clearly, conventional religion is failing to address this need.

Are we, as Quakers, prepared to take up the challenge or are we content to nail our colours to a dead tree?

Quakers do not proselytize. If anything, they are more likely to worry about imposing their faith upon others, but if we are to survive we must be prepared to share our treasure - "If this speaks to you, then please take it as our gift". Instead of declining, the Quaker movement should be growing as we have features which should appeal to contemporary society. For example:

- **UPDATING** - *Quaker Faith and Practice*, our book of advice and counsel, is revised in every generation. Quakers have always believed that their religion must be relevant to the time in which they are living. We have always held to our testimonies of truth, honesty, equality, simplicity and peace but language is modified so that it is more meaningful. Each revision has also reflected new insights and concerns; in the 1906 edition there is emphasis on temperance and gambling, in 1959, passages on marriage, education and animal welfare become prominent, while in 1994 we see new thought being given to the issues of sexual equality, ecumenism and the environment.
- **NO CREEDS** - The individual conscience is all-important - "What canst thou say?". Quakers do not have creeds or catechisms and do not question an individual's personal religious beliefs, which are considered to be private. No-one is told what to believe or asked to believe anything which their reason cannot accept. They are not asked to deny scientific facts.
- **DUAL MEMBERSHIP** - Quakers are inclusive and tolerant. They do not claim that they have sole access to the truth, an attitude of superiority which has resulted in persecution, massacres and wars. They would agree with the Jewish writer, Martin Buber, that life is

about encounter and relationship - "how we meet each other", Quakers accept dual membership; as well as other Christian denominations there are Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and other faith groups in our membership. "The true ground of love and unity is not that a man walks and does just as I do but because I feel the same spirit of life in him" (Isaac Penington).

- NOBEL PEACE PRIZE 1947 - Quakers are the only Church to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. They have a rich heritage of achievement confirming that their beliefs lead to positive action - "by their fruits ye shall know them". Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written that when a faith joins hands like a body with one soul it is a formidable force for good. Quaker relief work between 1940 - 1948 resulted in the following achievements; at home, the establishment of 43 evacuation hostels for children, 5 evacuation hostels for old people and 16 evacuation hostels for families. Abroad, they established 17 welfare centres in Austria, 9 in France, 25 in Germany, 10 in Greece, 3 in Holland, 8 in Poland and 4 in Palestine. A remarkable achievement for such a small religious body. An eminent international historian has written that the Society of Friends, although very few in number, has had, by its witness and action, "more influence on how human beings treat each other than any government". The Society has not moved mountains but it has caused them to crumble. Perhaps we ourselves are too modest and hide our light under a bushel. Indeed, some Friends at Meeting for Sufferings expressed the view that the Quaker Tapestry was irrelevant or merely a piece of history, and yet it is a magnificent record of our achievements. Tens of thousands have seen it and had the opportunity to meet and talk with stewarding Friends. Our Meeting House has a permanent display of all the Tapestry panels as postcards. It has always stimulated a great deal of interest from visitors and has been the starting point for many discussions about Quakers and their beliefs.

Who are the people we might actively seek? Who are most likely to respond to what we have to offer? Many are people who would describe themselves as either disaffected Christians,

universalists, social activists or agnostics/non-theists. There are also many who seek a quiet place in a world full of noise and busyness who could be drawn to the deep refreshing silence and healing calm of a Quaker Meeting.

1. Disaffected Christians Until the 1970s, it is likely that most new attenders came from this source. The Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong calls them “the intellectual doubters who cannot intellectually accept language that is no longer relevant to them”. He gave the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed and the Articles of Faith as examples. People in this group may find it impossible to accept later orthodox Christian theology such as original sin, vicarious redemption, salvation, damnation, heaven and hell. Others cannot accept the Bible as the infallible word of God and some no longer feel that the traditional Church service meets their needs. To many in this group, it is the teaching and life of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount which matters most. They can be attracted to the Society of Friends which, although allowing personal and private views on theology, still has strong roots in less orthodox Christianity. It should appeal to the independent free thinker.
2. Universalists Mahatma Gandhi once said that he was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian and a Jew, and that to reach to the heart of the truth was to reach to the heart of all religions. Gandhi always claimed that the Sermon on the Mount had the greatest influence on his life. He wrote: “The Sermon on the Mount went straight to my heart. If Christians will simply cling to the Sermon on the Mount, which was delivered not merely to peaceful disciples but a groaning world, they would not go wrong and they would find that no religion is false, and that if they act according to their lights and in the fear of God they would not need to worry about organisations, forms of worship and ministry.” It could be argued that Gandhi, a Hindu, in his attempt to put the Sermon into practice, proved to be one of the most faithful “Christians”. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written that so much organised religion these days seems to function as a divisive force supporting rigid dogmatism and even fanaticism

rather than love, inclusiveness, tolerance and spiritual evolution. In 1762, John Woolman risked his life to visit a tribe of native Americans giving as his reason “that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them”. A non-Quaker has written that Quakers have been the most successful in experimenting with mixed friendship. Their historical experience of tolerance between themselves has been outstanding. They have shown that there is no need for Friends to think alike if friendship is seen as an exploration rather than a search for agreement and if each Friend is perceived as having an equal dignity. Universalists can feel deterred from the mainstream Churches which emphasise exclusive theology, sacramental services and a perception that they have the sole access to the real truth. Quakers should be able to provide a natural home for Universalists because they do not have any of these impediments to tolerance and inclusivity.

3. Social Activists There are many people who have spiritual values which motivate them to “mend the world” but who see traditional Church worship as irrelevant. They should find an affinity with Quakers who have a long history of challenging the status quo and who have always tried to respond to “the tears of mankind”. Quakers are involved in many areas of contemporary social action for the betterment of humankind and, as they do not impose theological beliefs and have a simple form of worship which is accessible to all, they should have a natural appeal to these people. In the words of William Penn: “True godliness don’t turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it.”
4. Agnostics/Non-Theists Until a few years ago Quakers would not have felt in sympathy with those who appeared to be anti-Christian or anti-religion, but understanding and perceptions change so that even the Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong has written two books attacking Theism (*Why Christianity must change or die* and *A New Christianity*) As early as

1945, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer proclaimed a “religionless Christianity”. To be agnostic or non-theist does not, of itself, imply a lack of spirituality or a belief in a materialistic philosophy. It is often a rejection of religious language which seems meaningless. A great deal of theology is about the meaning of words and Beginnings. Many people believe in a theistic personal God who cares for them. For others, “God” is a shorthand word for conveying the mystery of all the wonders that we do not understand, such as the “origin” of life, consciousness, conscience; inspiration, creativity and love. In the Bible itself, God is described as Life, Truth, Spirit, Light, Creator and Love. (Divine?) inspiration is a mysterious happening which can improve the conscience so that it becomes an Enlightened Conscience, increasing empathy and love and resulting in the recognition of new truths which lead to action (a transliteration of St Paul). This sudden inspiration, at its highest level, can result in new evils being recognised which are not apparent to the rest of humanity. Our Meeting for Worship (listening to God?) in stillness is conducive to this and, judging by the history of the Society, some notable Quakers have experienced it. John Woolman was inspired to be among the first to recognise that slavery was intrinsically evil, causing him to devote his life to opposing it. Slavery had been accepted as normal and even desirable for centuries; even in the late 18th century some Bishops were still defending it. Our Society is open to all who are seeking after truth and spiritual progress and we should welcome agnostics or non-theists who share with us the same life and spirit. As we allow private theology and do not have a sacramental mode of worship we should be able attract people with these views (see Appendix 3). Some may fear that the Society may be weakened if it moves too far away from its Christian roots but there can be enormous strength and vitality in diversity if we have the courage to accept it. In our Meeting House we have displayed the following welcoming statement which comes from a seaside Parish Church in Norfolk:

- You are welcome whatever your beliefs, even if you find organised religion irrelevant.

- You are welcome whatever your lifestyle.
- You are welcome wherever you may be on your faith journey, believer or agnostic, conventional Christian or questioning sceptic.
- You are welcome as an equal partner and we look forward to the ideas and experiences that you bring.
- We welcome the infinite variety of human beings and have no wish to promote one particular approach to Christianity.
- We think that the way we treat one another is more important than the doctrines we hold.
- We think that religion must be concerned with injustice and suffering and we see ourselves as a community helping to build a better world, bringing hope to those whom Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.
- We recognise that our ignorance exceeds our understanding and that there is at least as much value in asking questions as in finding answers.

In reality, the “categories” suggested are artificial as there may be considerable overlap between them. Disaffected Christians may also be Universalists, Non-Theists may also be Social Activists and so on. If we accept that all of these are people that we should be trying to attract to our Society, then how do we go about it? It will require a good deal of discussion and further research before any progress can be made. Preliminary thoughts suggest that the following may help:

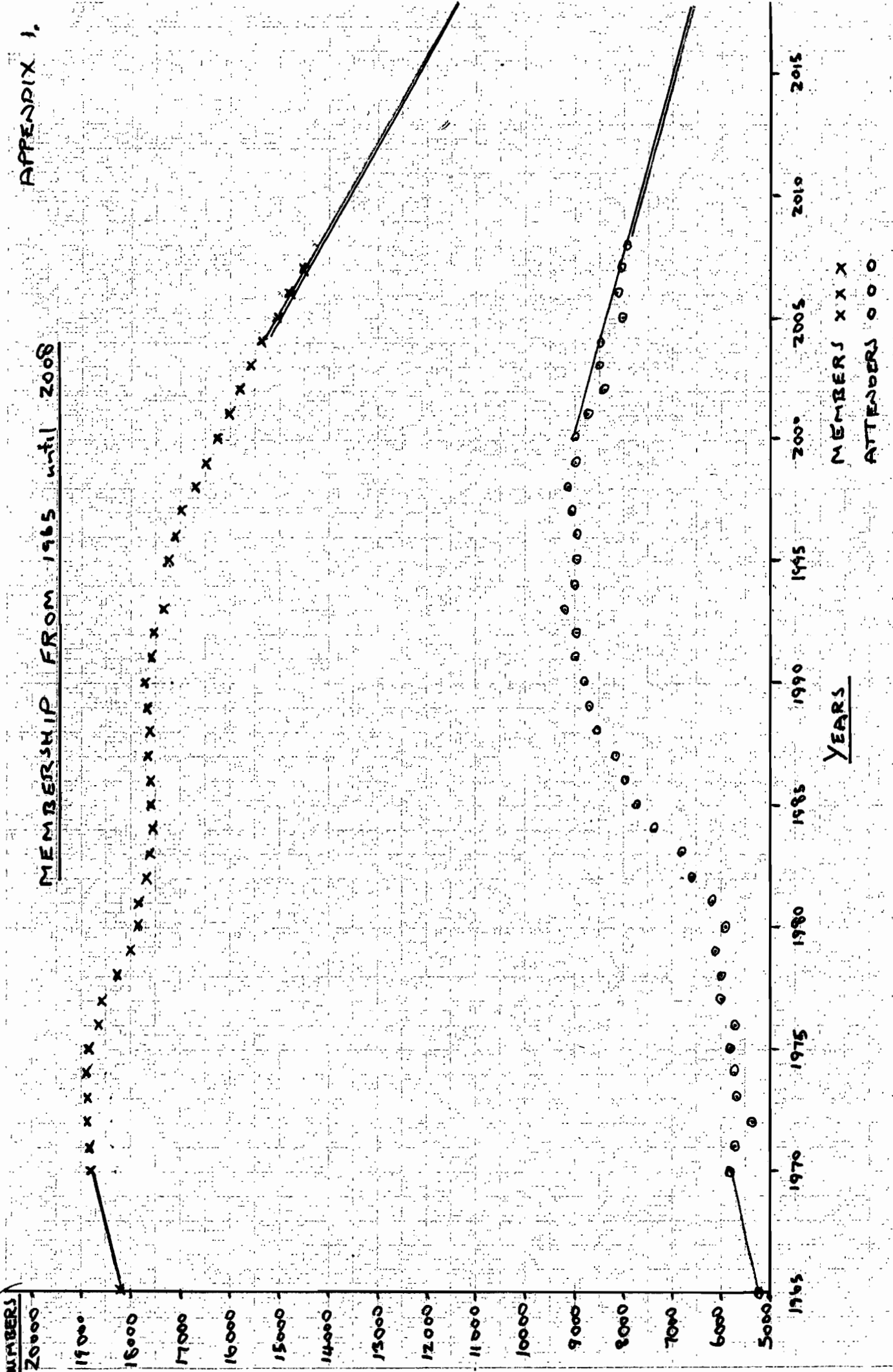
- The appointment of a temporary marketing consultant from outside the Society to advise the Quaker Life Outreach section at Friends House.
- The production of a free booklet specifically written with the purpose of attracting new attenders. Perhaps a suitable title would be “ Why you should be a Quaker”. It would be an attempt to “sell” the Society and should answer every imaginable question. At present, we rely on some books relating personal experience and a multitude of pamphlets.

- Advertising in appropriate professional magazines such as those relating to teaching or social work from where many of our enquirers are drawn.
- Making full use of the Internet both at a local level and further afield; websites, blogs, forums, YouTube and Twitter all reach thousands of interested readers.

In considering the future of the Religious Society of Friends, we must face the reality of the world in which we live now. We have in our possession something which we know to be precious, which has radically changed our lives and which could do the same for others. We must make the choice; do we cling so tightly to our treasure that we are prepared to let our Society wither and die in our attempts to preserve it as it is, or do we reach out and welcome in the many thousands who seek the spiritual riches that we enjoy? Although their spiritual journey may often seem alien or difficult for us to understand, by sharing our insights and measure of truth with them we could eventually be rewarded in ways which are unimaginable now. The world is constantly changing and the exclusively Christian-based society which earlier Friends inhabited has been replaced by a secular environment with much greater influences from other sources and religions. What remains the same in the world is the desire in the hearts of those who sense an emptiness in their lives and seek to fill it. These could be the future Recorded Quakers of Britain Yearly Meeting if only we have the courage and vision to “answer that of God in everyone” and provide for them a spiritual home in a secular world.

APPENDIX 1,

MEMBERSHIP FROM 1965 until 2008

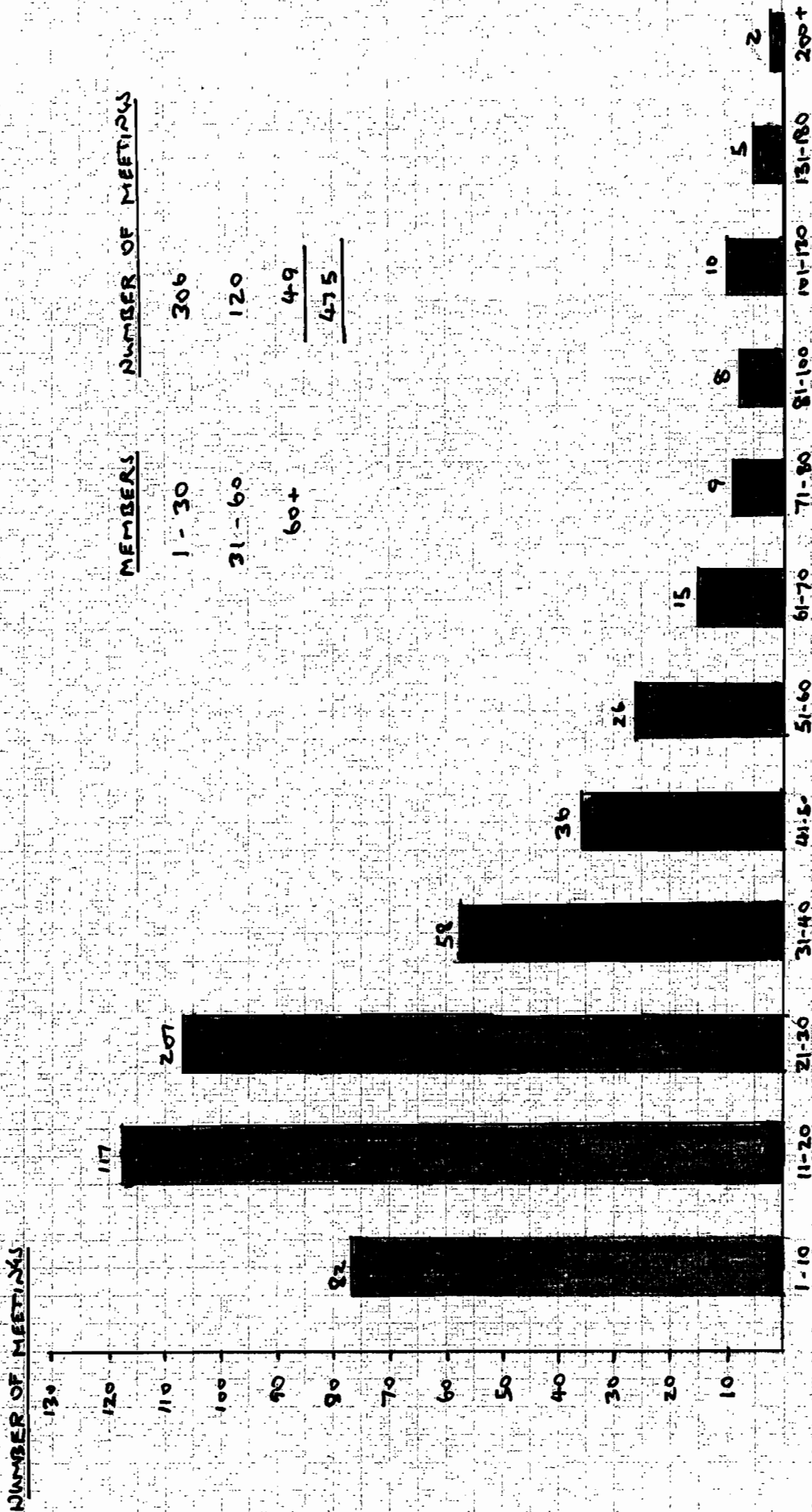


MEMBERS x x x
ATTENDERS o o o

YEARS

NUMBER OF MEETINGS IN SIZE BANDS

APPENDIX 2.



MEMBERS NUMBER OF MEETINGS

1-30 306

31-60 120

60+ 49

475

SIZE OF MEETING (MEMBERS)

A contribution made to our Quaker week 2009 by a new Attender

One sunny day I was wobbling around on my motorbike when I happened upon Meeting House Lane. As it reminded me of another place I had intended to explore I stopped to have a look at the text on the gate. A Quaker Meeting House?

Well, obviously I had heard of the Quakers. And there had been a Quaker place near where I used to live. Those two sentences about summed up my knowledge.

It was an elegant old building. I like old buildings.

There was a folder on the table containing a download from the Internet. There were also lots of books on the shelves. I like books. But what struck me most was the quiet. I like quiet.

A lovely quiet old building with books in it. And to top it off it was painted a simple white inside.

I sat down and started to read. I'm not really sure how long I sat there for. All I knew was that I loved it there. There were tears streaming down my face and I was comfortably calm. And very at home.

Then I met John and as we chatted I felt even more at home.

Some time passed and I investigated the Quakers on the internet and via books. The more I read about the Quakers the more I knew that I was one and had been for most of my life. Just a shame it had taken me nearly 50 years to walk into a Meeting House!

The thing that struck me most is that I don't have to be a Christian to be a Quaker. I can be a Christian, a Pagan, a Jew, a Muslim or even an Agnostic. I think I am an Agnostic.

I can be a bewildered Quaker, a conservationist Quaker, a humorist Quaker; in fact any Quaker I want to be. I firmly believe that when I read that Victoria Wood is a Quaker I knew that these guys were 'good guys'. She is a person I firmly admire. One of our National Treasures; an intelligent and genuinely funny person.

That the Quakers tend to be radical thinkers, intelligent, liberal, equalise and gentle people told me that I was in the right place to learn. It seems that I am a 'natural Universalist Quaker'.

The Introduction Pack from Friends House focuses on the religious and Christian element of Quakerism and I don't remember reading much stating about Universalists. In fact, I was rather put off by the Introduction Pack and I was already an Attender. What might others whose first port of call be the Introduction Pack think? Are the Quakers losing potential 'recruits' as a result of their own literature? There must be many natural Universalists out there who would make wonderful Friends if only they could be reached. I do think that knowing something about the Quakers 'bedded me in' before I attended Meeting but I am glad I didn't read the Introduction Pack first.

I have not yet attended a meeting in the town in which I will be living but I certainly noticed that at ~~the~~ hand Come to Good that there were only a very few of my own age; most were older or a lot older, and I am no spring chicken. Does this mean that within a generation the Quakers will die out? Unless the message gets out there that the Quakers are not Bible thumping, ignorant, fascist, puritanical fanatics George Fox's vision could soon be lost in this country. To me Quakerism is not about religion, it is about ethics.

If someone like me took to this like a duck to water then Quaker Quest should be targeting people just like me for new recruits. There must be lots of people 'just like me'. And I wasn't even looking for a spiritual outlet; those that are must be crying out to find the Quakers. They just don't know the Quakers are there. I didn't.

The strange thing is that I realised in this time when organised religion is becoming increasingly unpopular the logical spiritualism of the Quakers could be the natural home for many who are spiritual but secular. If only people actually knew what and who Quakers are, as opposed to what they were or others thought they were. I also realised that many of my friends and ex-colleagues were 'natural Quakers'. But it would seem that the message just isn't getting out there. Quakers natural reluctance to foist opinions upon others, along with society's suspicion of religion and theologies has meant that the 'good guys' are drastically reducing in numbers on an annual basis.

To sit in contemplative silence with likeminded people, knowing that although my thoughts might not actually be world changing, that I would leave an hour later feeling that their presence had helped me be a better person is a gift that I am so glad to have found.

I have tended, by nature, to be cynical and wisecracking; generally disappointed by people but these people and their predecessors have helped bring about a change in me. I want to thank them.

As yet I am only an Attender. I aspire to be a Quaker.

