

The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

Introduction

Periodically, the Religious Society of Friends has had moments of decision; times when Quakers have taken a look at themselves and decided in which direction God is calling them to move. It happened at the beginning of the Society, when the new Quakers gathered together in reaction to existing religion and in search of a new way. It happened at the end of that early period, when the Society became more inward looking, adopting such novelties as formal membership. It happened again at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when we made a decidedly evangelical turn, and at the end of it when the 1895 Manchester Conference reflected a Society in transit to liberalism – reaffirming the truths discovered by early Friends but regrounding them in the context of a modern, scientific society. This process, of rediscovery, refocus and renewal, is fundamental to a faith which claims no foundational creeds and affirms the possibility of continuing revelation.

I believe that it is time to make this journey once again; to rediscover the spiritual power of our Quaker roots, especially the awesome power of well-held Meeting for Worship, to refocus our energies on that which is truly important, and to renew once again our attitudes, structures and membership. The prize essay written by John Stephenson Rowntree in 1859 was part of the process leading to the late 19th Century renewal; I hope that this paper can play its own small part in the current rekindling of the Quaker flame.

In that sense, this paper is both an affirmation and a call to arms. It's an affirmation of the value of Quaker thought, worship and work, particularly to younger people who are looking for a spiritual home which is welcoming, non-dogmatic and compatible with their understanding of the world. It's also a call for us to look carefully at what's vital to us, reform what needs changing and face the future with confidence.

My focus, as a young Friend, is on the insights from my own spiritual journey and those of others, and especially on how the Society appears to its younger members, attenders and enquirers.

Should Quakers have a future?

I was once asked by a Quaker whether I thought the Society still had anything to offer the world. She wondered if we had played our part and could, like the Muggletonians and other small religious groups, now quietly die. I believed then and I believe now that Quakers have hugely important things to offer the world, and our role is by no means over.

Firstly, the Quaker way has spiritual insights of great value: the ability of each individual to connect directly with the divine, without mediation by priest or ritual; our focus on the substance of the religious experience, not the use of a particular form of words or set of enumerated beliefs; and our openness to new light, learning from other religious groups, from science and from the secular world. Our presence in the public sphere is a reminder that religion need not be dogmatic, hierarchical or conservative.

Secondly, we have a place on the edge of the English Christian tradition. This is helpful for many seekers whose language and culture is also based in that tradition. I came to Quakerism as an adult and did so from a position of atheism. I certainly didn't identify myself as a Christian and I actively rejected many of the teachings of the Church of England in which I was nominally raised. Nevertheless, my cultural background is Christmas and Easter, the Scouts, and hymns at primary school. Whilst I have explored other ways, their cosmology, myths and language never sat easily with my upbringing. In the end, I found a religion in my own cultural tradition to be a better home. There are certainly many ways to the divine, but ours is also an excellent one and we should not forget it.

Thirdly, there is a hunger amongst the young for the reconciliation of life and spirit. There are many seekers, looking for either religious or secular ways to live a complete, harmonious and ethical life. At its best, Quakers are both deeply spiritual and groundedly rational. The Quaker way is compatible with the truths discovered through science. What is more, the Quaker approach to truth (affirm that which we have discovered experimentally, but recognise that there is more than one valid way to do it) is wholly compatible with the postmodern worldview. This leaves us very well placed to serve those young people who do not believe in the absolute authority of the written word and are reluctant to write off the beliefs of large chunks of the rest of the population as wrong in principle.

Our appeal is backed up by some professional survey work recently carried out by DVL Smith on behalf of Quaker Quest – the most ambitious survey work ever done on public perceptions of Quakers. It sought to find out what was known about us and whether our message has any resonance to people in the world today.

The short answer is “yes, we have resonance”. Levels of awareness were surprisingly high (77% of respondents recognised the name “Quaker”) although there was a lot of misunderstanding about what the Quaker way actually is. For me, though, the most interesting parts of the survey are the age breakdowns. Levels of awareness were much lower amongst the young (49% aged 18-34 were “aware”, 88% aged 35-60 and a staggering 96% aged 61+). On the other hand, when the Quaker way was explained, similar or slightly higher numbers of young people thought Quaker beliefs have “considerable relevance” or “some considerable relevance” to their lives (24% 18-34, 20% 35-60, 21% 61+).

This clearly shows that our message resonates with the young, as much or more than it does with those who are older. The difficulty we have is that the young disproportionately do not know who we are. There is a massive opportunity here to reach a cohort of Britain who are seeking for spiritual truths as much as other generations, but who the Quaker message has not yet reached.

Finally, I believe that Quakers have a role in the public sphere. In addition to our long-standing work on peace and social justice, I believe that we can offer an open-minded yet non-woolly religious voice, full of vibrancy, tolerance and truth, which can begin to reclaim the language of faith from the fundamentalists. To most non-religious people, the word "God" means the god of Jerry Falwell and the religious right (or Dawkins' "sky fairy") simply because they are the people using it most loudly in public. If we want to stop the marginalisation of religious discourse and reclaim our own linguistic heritage from the intolerant, we need to be a public example of a faith community that is confident in its convictions, open in its language and welcoming to others.

What should our future be?

"A meeting ought to be a way of corporate living so creative, so liberating, so solidly joyous, so sustaining in disaster that people who come within its radiance cannot help saying 'This is the kind of life people are supposed to live. Let us in.'

The meeting ought to be a pilot project, a magnetic example, of what the kingdom of God is like, here, now, available to people who believe it is just that, available." Tom Brown, in 'Do Friends have a message?' in Digging Deeper, papers for the FWCC triennial meeting 1985

Quakers are at our best when we are in liminal spaces: on the boundaries of established religion, in between worship and everyday life, and on the edge of our own comfort zones. Not for nothing are the Advices and Queries described as being for the "comfort and discomfort of Friends". This sense of adventurousness, of constantly seeking, is at the heart of our spiritual development.

Quakers are open to any who care to join us for worship, yet we unashamedly retain our own insights. We are rooted in our own lives, yet aspire to being led by the Holy Spirit. We are deeply mystical and yet immensely practical. We are firmly religious, yet able to engage with the world. This sense of creative tension, of both/and, not either/or, is at the heart of the Quaker way. That means that inevitably our future will be discerned as we go along.

Nevertheless, this is my vision: Quakers have the potential to be a sane, but deeply religious voice for peace, justice and spiritual understanding – in politics, in the media and in our everyday lives. We should live on the edge of possibility, with a sense of provisionality: that our structures and work are right for the time being, but that we are willing and able to let things go as the spirit leads us. We should not be clinging on to old projects and old ways of working. Quaker meetings should have more joy; deeper worship; fewer committee meetings.

I think the key to our future is focusing on the heart of Quakerism: a profound sense of worship and a tangible sense of the peace and spiritual justice that comes from it. At its best, a Quaker meeting is aflame with light. Sadly, this is not where the majority of meetings direct their energy; it should be. If a meeting's focus is on marginal concerns, especially on administering ever more baroque governance structures, our spiritual strength and living out our faith in practical witness will both suffer. It is our worship and the work that flows from it in a sense of genuine spiritual concern that is the wellspring of life in our Society. If necessary, we must be prepared to discard everything else – especially our comfortable committee meetings, Spirit-free Sunday

worship and stale and cozy consensus – in order to rediscover and reconnect to this radical but life-giving power.

Is this spiritual renewal too big a task? I think not. At the heart of our Quaker understanding is that extraordinary power is available to support work we have properly discerned as a calling from God. Our history shows time and again people taking on tasks far larger than their individual strength and succeeding, with support from the Light within and from their Friends in meeting.

Connected to the sense of being joyful and spiritually connected, I am also convinced that we should take ourselves much less seriously. From the outside, our foibles are hilarious. Not only do we have a singular approach to religion, but we are a joyfully weird bunch. As a friend said (in relation to dating Quakers) “the odds are good, but the goods are odd!”. A group which is able to laugh about itself is all the stronger for it. As well as making us feel better about ourselves, it might even help with outreach. In the recent Quaker Quest survey of attitudes to Quakers, 52% agreed with the statement “The Quakers are an orthodox religious group who interpret religion in a very strict way”. What better way to kill off the po-faced puritan stereotype than by being full of laughter, joy and welcome?

What does the future hold, if we do nothing?

The number of members and registered attenders of Britain Yearly Meeting has been slowly falling since 1992, though total numbers are only down 16%

since the first inclusion of attenders in the tabular statement in 1965.

Nevertheless, Bill Chadkirk and Ben Pink Dandelion cogently argue in the 2008 summary report for their "Present and Prevented" survey that the rate of decline is accelerating and that it will be necessary to take action if we wish to revert that decline. The most worrying trend in the tabular statement data for me is a steep decline in the number of children in recent years. Although this makes little difference in absolute terms to our numbers, it does leave us with a potential demographic problem of an ageing Society. It is compounded by the absence of the children's parents: without children or parents, a meeting can rapidly become the preserve of the middle aged and above only, which in turn can make it difficult to retain any younger enquirers who do come along.

This is not something we can fix overnight, though it reiterates the importance of our work with children and young people and the support of Friends with families.

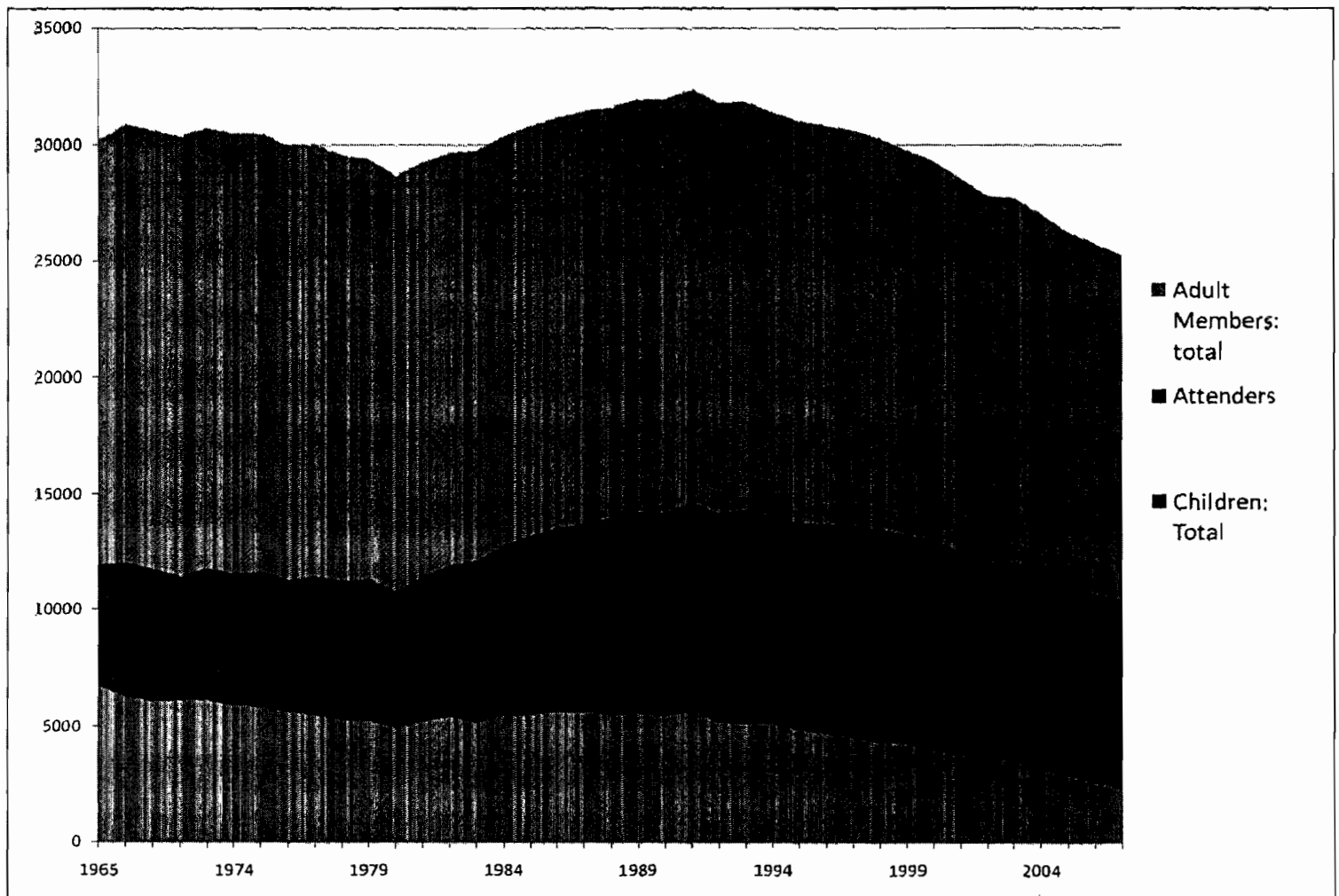


Figure 1: Adult members, attenders and children, 1965-1997 (data from the tabular statement)

Nevertheless, some of *The Friend's* letters page correspondents' wilder reports of the Society's imminent death are greatly exaggerated. There is little chance of us dying out completely within 30 years, if only because I am 28 and intend to be a Quaker for a long time to come! Our future may well be

smaller, but we will continue. There is a tremendous amount of life in the younger end of the Society; each of us has made a comparatively recent decision to either join or stay with Quakers, so we tend to have a powerful sense of the value of the Quaker way.

I also do not think we need to worry unduly about our ability to reach beyond our existing membership to different age ranges or social groups, despite the obvious white, female and middle-class biases. The makeup of the Society has tended to change over time: at the seminal 1895 Manchester Conference younger members were bemoaning the lack of middle-class Quakers!

We shall never know our full power if we appeal to the working classes alone. Why do we fail almost entirely to reach cultured and thoughtful people? [...] we must remember that our message is for all the world. True thought clearly and simply expressed reaches all men. It is a great mistake to imagine that what satisfies the simplest may not also be food for the most completely furnished minds. (John Wilhelm Rowntree (1896) "Has Quakerism a Message to the World to-day?" in Manchester Conference of the Society of Friends, pp.75-92. London: Headley Brothers)

The relative lack of middle-class members has now of course been rectified. In doing so the culture of Quakerism in Britain has necessarily been altered, as new adherents have brought their own experiences and attitudes and added them to the Quaker mix. If we are serious about renewing the Society, and seek to attract new, we need to be clear that the nature of Quakers will change. The ministry of a black Friend in Yearly Meeting a few years ago resonates with me: are we serious about wanting to be larger and more diverse? Because being welcoming is not simply a matter of opening our

doors. It also implies a willingness to be changed in our encounter with those who find us. A Society which is successful in reaching out will become a different Society. We have much to give up, but also much to gain in the process. We need to be willing to let our culture evolve.

While the future we seem to be heading towards is far from disastrous, it also seems to me unlikely to lead to the kind of radiant meetings identified in the vision in the previous section. What changes need we make to change our range of possible futures, which are far from pre-determined? Ben Pink Dandelion's thought-provoking 1993 thesis "A sociological analysis of the theology of Quakers" identifies the unity of Quakers not in a set of orthodoxies about faith, but in an orthopraxis – a behavioural creed based on our shared practice of worship and work. Many matters relating to the current organisation of the society have as a result acquired the status of dogma, at least amongst many of the Friends who administer them. I believe that some of these dogmas need to be challenged.

Issues to address: business meetings

I am a huge fan of the Quaker business method. One of my first experiences of Quaker ways was a business session at Young Friends General Meeting that was discerning a minute after a deeply emotional session looking at spirituality and sexuality. I had never experienced anything like it – no politicking, no jockeying to get your point in, just a deep sense of worship and an extraordinary quality of short, personal contributions. Twice another Friend stood up and said the point that I had been waiting to make, in a much better

and more profound way than I would have been able to. The final minute was extraordinary – rich, hugely personal, on risky territory and yet clearly “right”. I did not know then, and do not know now, if that experience of the Quaker Business Method was a direct experience of the discernment of the will of God, or simply an amazingly powerful way of making decisions in a consensual way, listening to each other. What I can affirm is that it is an great tool for discerning the right way forward, if done well.

Unfortunately, this experience of worship has been the exception for me in the Society’s business meetings, not the rule. Typically the same four people speak to each item, several times each. The tone is that of a desultory conversation, not a meeting for worship; the focus is on trivialities. It is sometimes difficult to remember that the purpose of Quaker business is to support Quaker worship and Quaker concerns.

Indeed, this is not just a local problem: many national Quaker bodies I have attended have a similarly spirit-free culture of getting through their business. Yearly Meeting itself has great clerks and sometimes hits real spiritual depths. Sadly, it also suffers from “popcorn” ministry, with Friends standing up en-bloc, straight after the previous speaker has finished, with no time for reflection or the movement of the spirit. This can leave Yearly Meeting in session feeling like a badly-structured argument, not an act of worship.

The low attendance at most business meetings is much bemoaned, but in truth most business meetings are not a good use of our time. At YFGM, it has

always been possible to attend business sessions or not, as individuals choose. Since we have tightened up the amount of business we do, attendance has improved – not least because what's left is inherently more important. I suspect that on the whole the Society gets the attendance at business meetings that we deserve. The Quaker business method as an empty ritual can hamper our life as a community, not support it.

Even when business meetings are well run and deeply spirit-centred, we sometimes spend an awful lot of effort to “discern” crazy things. My favourite experience of this is an exercise at YFGM to discern whether overseers could be allowed £20 to buy new kitchen knives. This eminently sensible and uncontroversial proposal ended up taking half an hour or so at a planning weekend, further preparation of a business session by overseers and then a desperately serious 15 minute discernment by 50 Friends that, yes, it was the will of God to buy new knives. Total expenditure on the knives: £20. Total cost in Quaker time: easily more than 15 hours. This way lies madness.

Issues to address: bureaucracy

This rigid adherence to the form at the expense of the spirit is true of much Quaker organisation. We have so much invested in our orthopraxis, and especially in the idea that the business is ours to do together, that we take some aspects of our organisation in a much more serious and rigid way than is compatible with being truly spirit-led.

One question that has been exercising me in recent years is the difference between three different ways in which Quakers take forward their work: by committee, under concern, or using management. In place of exquisitely slow committee processes, genuine concerns have a prophetic sense of "rightness". Instead of having to arm-twist nominees into service, a group of Friends will come forward and say "yes, this feels like something I am called to do". What can be accomplished by a small group acting under concern is also extraordinary. Quaker Quest, for example, has never been run centrally by Britain Yearly Meeting. It is probably the best outreach initiative in the last 100 years and the fact that it was initially a concern of a small group of individuals still amazes me. Many things are possible with divine help – I would like to see a rediscovery of the concern as a simple, spiritual and practical way of discerning what *really* needs to be done, and then doing it.

The other form of organisation I'd like to contrast with the committee system is that of management. Quakers used to be good at this – the success of Quaker enterprises in the 19th and 20th Centuries is well known. This is, however, an art we seem to have lost. My background is in project management, a discipline that aims to make sure that when you start a project you get what you wanted, on time and on budget. I've noticed that many Friends instinctively reject management language, as if our equality testimony meant that we had to be defiantly amateur in our organisation. This even seems to extend to those parts of the Society responsible for managing staff, be they wardens in local meetings or the BYM staff at Friends House. In contrast to a committee structure, where responsibility is diffused around the

different members of a committee, good modern management practice aims to empower individuals, within a framework of accountability to the whole body. This can be hugely liberating if properly used. For my own part, I believe that once we've discerned what we are being called to do, we have a duty to use all the tools we have to make sure we get what we discerned. The aims may come from God – the means must include our own best efforts.

Issues to address: nominations

If there is one single aspect of the Society that stands in the way of our spiritual and practical renewal, I believe it is the way we currently handle nominations. Young Friends General Meeting has about 70 posts on its jobs list, while only having an attendance of 50 or 60 at its gatherings. My own local meeting discerns the will of God for the annual appointment of a noticeboard tidier and leaflet rack organiser. It is no surprise that many meetings are in the vicious circle of over-burdening Friends with jobs until they burn out and withdraw, at which point the pressure gets even more intense on those left. In the words of Margaret Fell, "this is a silly poor gospel".

Part of the reason for this multiplicity of jobs is that Quakers are very good at taking up new concerns, but very poor at laying down old ones. Another is that, partly as a result of the size of our business structures, only those with jobs are seen as being "truly part" of the meeting. This inherently excludes from our community new attenders, who in most meetings are not considered for nomination. At YFGM, so many members were using the available free time to do committee work that there was no space in the weekend for

informal community building or getting to know newcomers. It can be awfully excluding to be the only one without a role, but the right way to deal with that problem is to release Friends from service, not expand the jobs list so that everyone is obliged to take part.

A second problem, perhaps linked to the number of different posts, is the extraordinary lack of authority that we give our appointees. Most responsibilities are diluted through committees and any sizeable decision is almost invariably brought back to a plenary business meeting. The consequence is that there is little opportunity for creativity in most jobs and serving the meeting tends to consist of a long series of rather dull meetings. The few tangible results of my two year stint on YFGM's outreach committee happened because in each case a couple of us had an idea and were simply authorised by the committee to take it forward. I look back at the rest of my service – of convening meetings in different parts of the country, of internal navel-gazing and of writing minutes that nobody else read, as something of a waste of time. Our "Live adventurously" t-shirts, on the other hand, are still being worn. It is only through our tangible outcomes, not through all the work we expended on managing the committee's business, that we have made a difference.

As Quakers, we assume that we have no authority. In fact, we have plenty. A properly discerned nomination, or a meeting adopting a concern, both carry with them their own divine authority. Quakers have no hierarchy of leaders – but the consequence of this is that we all need to be able to take the lead, as

needed. Our testimony to equality does not prevent us using the diverse talents we have. Indeed, it demands that we seek out the best in each individual and use it:

"It is the responsibility of a Christian community to enable its members to discover what their gifts are and to develop and exercise them to the glory of God" (from QF&P 3.22)

If we perpetuate a committee system with so much institutional inertia that it takes months or years of work to get the simplest of new things done, we are cheating ourselves of both our time and our spirit.

There are many other issues with nominations, beyond those mentioned here, but I think that is sufficient to illustrate the scale of our challenges. I hope that we can invest some serious time to rebuild our systems of organising ourselves in a way that helps make us the Society we want to be.

Issues to address: arguments about the nature of God

One issue that it would be good to put to bed is the ongoing battle between Friends of different theological leanings. At present, the main arguments are between some of those Quakers describing themselves as Christian and some of those describing themselves as non-theist. For a number of reasons, I am convinced that this debate is overblown. For a start, much of the disagreement is about language, not about substance. As Friends, our unity is in our shared spiritual experiences, not the language we use to describe it. In particular, the experience of a gathered meeting is common to us all; whether

we describe it as experiencing the Spirit of Christ, the light within or any other form of words is not important.

The simple truth is that attempts to describe the indescribable are always difficult; our metaphors are necessarily inadequate. We would do well to heed advice 12:

"Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others"

The subtext of a lot of the present debate is over who truly belongs to the Society and what its future shape will be. Some Friends who are Christian are worried that the substance of our belief is being stripped and that their faith is being undermined. Some Friends who are non-theists are uncomfortable with Christian language and find its active use threatening. In truth, Quakers have had disagreements about theology and language of one kind or another since at least the 19th Century evangelical revival. The pendulum has swung one way and then the other, but we have at all times been enriched by our diversity. Neither our Christian roots nor our openness to new light are going anywhere: Friends need to accept that a diversity of belief, and a diversity of language, is an important part of the modern Religious Society of Friends:

"The ferment of thought in this post-war period has produced a wide variety of beliefs in our Religious Society today and not a little misunderstanding on all sides. Intolerance has reared its head. Some Friends have voiced objections to the use of Christian language in meetings for worship and for business; others have been told that there is no place for them in our Religious Society if they cannot regard

themselves as Christians. [...] Obedience to the Light within, however that may be described, is the real test of faithful living." Alastair Heron, Ralph Hetherington and Joseph Pickvance, QF&P 27.04.

For me, the important split is not between those individuals who would define as Christian and those who would not. It's between those meetings which live their faith fully, with energy and conviction, and those which are in truth slightly soggy. We have no organised theological education as most churches do. Many of us (myself included) lack a deep understanding of Bible and other religious texts. In many ways, we rely for the written word on the experiences and learning that people bring in from their previous religious lives. We are particularly blessed to acquire a trained minister or two every now and again! For the rest, we rely on our own engagement with different texts and practices of worship.

In truth, our diversity can only be manageable if we feel secure and confident in our own faith. A solid sense of where we stand ourselves is the best way to be open to new light – if we do not feel threatened we have no need to be defensive about others' insights. We all belong to the Quakers, whatever our background, experience of God or choice of religious language. It is the quality of our shared worship, not our personal theology, that brings us together.

Opportunities: deeper worship and deeper sharing

It is entirely possible to attend meeting every week and never get a sense of the spiritual lives of your fellow Quakers. Outside of vocal ministry, there is little chance to get to know each other in the things that are eternal, within the scope of our normal arrival-meeting-coffee-departure routine. Beyond this routine, though, there are some fabulous opportunities for deepening our worship and spiritual sharing that we can try. Something as simple as an informal slot after worship for a Friend to talk about their own spiritual journey can help us realise how little we know about each others' lives and what richness of talent and experience we have within our meetings.

In my own meeting, Friends conscious that the conversation over the post-meeting coffee is normally fairly trivial regularly go to a local coffee shop for a "coffee after coffee" where any topic is open – how our work is going, what books we're currently reading, or a passionate argument about the primacy of the gospel of Mark. We make a point of encouraging newcomers to meeting to join us: it's a great chance to get to know Friends in depth.

In fact, there are huge numbers of options for deepening sharing and worship: an afterword session after meeting for the sharing of "not-quite ministry", Hearts and Minds prepared groups, a book club (with spiritual books or otherwise), attenders' groups, Bible study, the Experiment with Light – the choices are nearly endless. Why not start several and see what catches Friends' imaginations? It is easy to lay some of them down, once you've seen what's working and what isn't.

We must also resist the temptation to squander our lives carping about other Friends' theology. We have never been a Society of identical answers to religious questions. Use the different experiences of other Friends to explore your own understanding of the divine. Learn from the heartfelt experiences of others, especially those not from your own tradition – these kinds of explorations can help to bond individuals and meetings together as well. Finally, I recommend glueing together the letters page in your copy of *The Friend*. This will minimise your exposure to the kind of vitriolic theological navel-gazing that the Society can well do without, and also save you a few minutes a week in which to do something joyful.

Opportunities: towards a bonfire of the bureaucracy

“Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be great busyness” (Advice 28, part)

I think the central question around local Quaker organisation is this: *If you were starting from scratch, aiming to hold a regular Meeting for Worship and to take forward your meeting's deep religious concerns, what would your structures look like?*

Meditate on this question for a moment. What is your meeting doing that is neither worship-driven nor concern-led? My ideal structure is probably controversially small. Meeting for Worship can happen “whenever two or more are gathered together...” which is not in itself a big organisational task.

Pastoral care and community building is important, which implies some form of oversight arrangements (which could be combined with elders).

Many appointments, though, are much more marginal. I have a passion, and a special concern, for outreach. But if your meeting doesn't, it's pointless to appoint a committee of pressed Friends. When I have sat on dysfunctional committees I have never been terribly effective and have always found the experience demoralising. Lay your outreach committee down and concentrate your efforts where your concerns are. The same goes for peace committees, library committees, premises committees, flower rotas, website groups, finance committees, funeral arrangements committees, appeal organising groups, newsletter editors, catering committees and all the other paraphernalia of a modern Quaker meeting. Why do we appoint representatives to bodies which the meeting have not adopted as a current concern? Probably a clerk and a treasurer are needed, though neither job would need to be the size they are now as they both have a role supporting other committees (which have been laid down).

Without the rest of the apparatus of bureaucracy, other posts drop away completely: with so few jobs, nominations can easily be done in session by the whole meeting, so there is no need for a nominations committee. A huge amount of committee time is spent coordinating between different bodies. With far fewer committees, this work simply isn't needed.

Of course, the joy of this radical refocusing is not only that there's less work to be done, but also that a huge amount of time and energy is liberated. If your meeting feels called to action, you now have enough capacity to do it really well. Short-term working groups are a good model: set up for a limited period of time, made up of the willing and with clarity from the beginning about what is to be done. It is much easier to volunteer for a single task rather than a three-year term of service. Once the work is over, the group can be laid down and (if the meeting feels it is appropriate) a new concern can be taken up. This sense of provisionality, of structures being "good enough" for the time being and continually fluid, fits in very well with a Quaker sense of spirit-led discernment.

These proposals are not even as radical as you might think. Quaker Life, the central department of BYM which supports local meetings, has been moving in this direction for a while. The number of standing committees has been reduced, a looser Network of interested Friends has been set up and most service is now in working groups. Early results are positive. YFGM had a similar experience several years ago, when its "radical restructuring" exercise moved it from a crazy job structure (including seven treasurers!) to a merely heavyweight one. No-one wants to go back. Give it a try – it could work for you too.

Opportunities: improving our Meetings for Worship for Business

Once we've sorted out our nominations and bureaucracy problems, we can turn to our business meetings. Good Meetings for Worship for Business are

not inherently difficult: it is within all of our meetings' capabilities to turn business meetings into a shining example of Quaker worship at work. There are good clerks' training courses offered by Woodbrooke. Finding an excellent mentor is also a possibility.

Some parts of the solution are obvious: as a Meeting for Worship, business meetings need to be led by the spirit, not by our egos. We need to see the clerk in their true role – as servant of the meeting, not as its dictator. It's also important that draft minutes should be used sparingly and abandoned quickly if they turn out not to be the feeling of the meeting. Above all, Michael J. Sheeran's classic study *Beyond Majority Rule* makes clear that Meetings for Worship for Business work best when people understand the process and trust it.

We may need to take time to explore improvements to our business method as a whole meeting, if we want everyone to have ownership of it. If you are responsible for setting the business meeting's agenda, consider whether some matters could quite properly be decided by the members of the meeting that have been appointed to look after them. The shorter and the more interesting the agenda, the better.

Ultimately, I believe that it really is that simple. Meeting for Worship for Business is not rocket science – it's simply a specialised Meeting for Worship. If we bring the same spirit of calm, love and connectedness to our business meetings as we do to good Sunday worship, we will be well on the way.

Opportunities: the joys of outreach

Finally, we need to do more outreach. Not because we need more and younger members but because we have found something that is of great value to each of us. We are a Society of seekers, and of finders. I am convinced we have a moral duty to share that Light which we have found with others who are also seeking.

The easiest way of doing outreach is simply by being open about being a Quaker. When I had been coming to meeting for a few months, I decided not that I would advertise Quakers, but simply stop hiding what I was doing. When I went away to YFGM, I would say to colleagues that I was going to a Quaker weekend, not simply "seeing friends". Their interest in response was immediate and genuine. Since that day, I have been asked about Quakers many times – by friends, at parties as a result of being asked "what do you do", by strangers who have seen my "Q" badge and are curious. People are interested in us and are keen to find out more. Most will never attend Quaker meeting, but that's not the point: by being open about our own spiritual journeys we can have interesting conversations, raise public awareness of just who we are and just maybe help others in their own searches. Not bad for such an easy activity.

If you want to help younger people with their spiritual journeys, I am convinced that there is a great opportunity in university and college chaplaincy. Times of study are times of exploration in many things: personal,

intellectual and spiritual. Unfortunately, most of the religious voices on campus are quite unrepresentative of the whole. When I was a student at Leeds, the only openly religious students were the hardcore evangelicals in the Christian Union and the Jewish and Islamic societies, who weren't visible for their faith so much as for public arguments about the state of the Middle East. It wasn't until my final year when I was working as a union member on the campaign to become a fairtrade university that I discovered that there was actually an active body of liberal yet radically engaged Christian students. It turned out that they had been quietly running the Amnesty International society, doing refugee support work and collecting money for charity. Great service, but I would have loved to engage with them as a visible presence of faith, too.

Quakers are well placed to do this. We are open to all, distinctly non-threatening and yet (at our best) not too soggy. We have nominated representatives in a huge number of universities and colleges, though the level of engagement varies from being an active member of a chaplaincy team to simply being a name on a noticeboard. Whatever our current activity, each appointment is a potential opportunity to deepen our involvement with students, if that is where we feel called to work.

In addition to outward-focused work, we also need to make sure that we welcome anybody who sees our light and comes in to share it with us. While the most important thing is a properly-grounded sense of spiritual hospitality, there can be pitfalls. If your meeting is made up exclusively of people aged

65+, it might be tricky to help a seeking 25 year old fit in; you might consider focusing your outreach activities on those who are no more than ten years or so younger than your current youngest member. The 65+ year old meeting might well find it easier to relate to a new 55 year old enquirer and in doing so the meeting will itself have got slightly newer and slightly younger – with persistence, you should be able to edge your age range slowly down, rather than up.

In general, outreach is possible on all scales from the trivial to the spectacular, depending on your level of enthusiasm and energy. If you have little of both, why not simply wear a Quaker badge? Just make sure you're prepared to answer questions about us! On a slightly larger scale, Quaker Week is a great opportunity to get some outreach done, particularly if your meeting would rather do it in short bursts rather than continuously. Having a fixed date can nudge Friends into finally organising an event they've been thinking about for a while. What about something as straightforward as moving your regular meeting for worship from its usual place into the town square or onto the village green? This is very easy to organise, very Quakerly, and highly visible. If you have a lot of enthusiasm in your meeting, why not organise a cycle of Quaker Quest? It's a fantastic method of outreach and the experience of working together on something tangible is an effective way of helping the meeting to grow together. Good outreach is almost always good inreach too.

Conclusion: a call to action

It is easy for me to write this paper; it is easy for you to read it. We will not be effective, though, unless we translate our fine ideals into action. I've written of worship and tradition, of our comfort and discomfort, and of concerns, bureaucracy and outreach. If the vision that I offered at the beginning of this essay is appealing to you, I ask you now to consider what part you can play in making it happen.

I believe it is time for a periodical rediscovery of our radical spiritual roots. It is time to refocus on the things that are important and to start discarding the cultural and bureaucratic barriers that stand in our way. Most of all, I believe that we need to start talking in a spirit of worship and possibility about the kind of Society that we wish to see. Let us see what, together, we are called to do.