

The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

I have often told Friends that I am incredibly lucky to have found Quakerism, because if I had to write my own religion, it would have consisted of exactly the ethos and practices that Friends now employ. I found the community I had been looking for. Had I have come to the Society for the first time twenty years from now, would the same elements - a Christian heritage, with core values articulated through procedures, and complimented by a diverse range of beliefs - be found? Will Quakers still embody the things that I, that many of us, aspire to? I was shocked to read that the 'deathdate' of The Society of Friends is estimated at 2038¹ (we're beating the Methodists, but this is hardly cause for celebration). This stark truth necessitates a process of self-examination and reflexivity, which Friends have already begun.

I wish to contribute to this self-examination: in this essay I will consider who we are and who we wish to be, how we can perpetuate Quaker values (if we wish to), and, ultimately, what we must do to survive. I think we've got a great deal to offer. We now need to continue our struggle to ensure people know it. I do not think 'survival' is too ruthless a note to begin on. I got a great deal from my attendance at July's Yearly Meeting Gathering. Some of the business meetings, in particular, were a joy to attend. However the knowledge that the Friends who were present at Yearly Meeting Gathering this year² actually makes up one twentieth of the sum total of all British Friends, is somewhat shocking.

I am relatively new to Quakerism. I accept that this means I am unable to make statements with the weight and gravitas held by more seasoned Friends. However, it does mean that I (hopefully) still have the ability to look at things through a secular and non-Quaker lens.

Secularisation theorists have long predicted the death of religion in Britain. Attendance and involvement have plummeted in all denominations in Britain post-

¹ Dandelion, P. and Collins, P. (2008) *The Quaker Condition: The Sociology of Liberal Religion* Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle (p.16)

² Approximately 1700.

war. The sociologist Grace Davie speaks of “believing not belonging”³, arguing that religion in Britain thrives (despite statistics detailing participation pointing to the contrary) because people still share creeds and values with the Churches, despite their lack of attendance. Quakers can make little use of this hypothesis as a consolation for diminishing numbers. Although our values are coherent, our beliefs are diverse. Whilst much of what makes a Quaker would be sustained without an involvement in the Society⁴, a significant swathe of the life of The Society of Friends exists solely in process and practice: waiting on the Spirit in business meetings, corporately discerning truths, being held in the light in Meeting for Worship and living out our values through Quaker organisations and institutions⁵. The loss of these elements would be a disaster. Although Friends may remain true to their values even if the Society were no more, in essence, our community is crucial to Quakerism⁶. Part of the latter part of this essay, therefore, will be looking at to whom we can appeal to keep our community flourishing.

British and global culture is changing around us. This is one reason for the decline in religious engagement in recent decades. It is not that the core URC or Baptist or Church of England doctrine has altered, it is that this core is no longer attractive. Most religions in this country are dying. Notably, the ones that are actually growing are the less liberal traditions such as Pentecostal churches, and Islam.

I mentioned earlier Grace Davie’s assessment of post-war religion in Britain. Although she recognised the decline in practice and engagement with religions, she does not think faith has been lost. Rather, ‘the sacred has...found other outlets’ (1994: 43). These alternative outlets include New Age religious movements, meditation and related spiritual practices such as Yoga and Tai Chi, and environmentalism (related to a renewed connection with the natural world). The

³ Davie, G. (1994) *Religion in Britain since 1945* Blackwell: Oxford

⁴ For example, a belief in pacifism and the desire to embrace a simple life.

⁵ By funding Quaker Peace and Social Witness, work in prisons and Woodbrooke Study Centre.

⁶ ‘To Quakers, the visible mark of being a ‘church’ is not conformity to a particular creed, or liturgical or sacramental practice, but the quality of communal life which reveals the extent of the community’s willingness to seek and follow the Spirit’s call to loving fellowship’ (reads the cover of *Quaker Faith and Practice*).

thing that many of these alternative vehicles for spirituality have in common is that they are much more to do with either lifestyle, consumption patterns, hobbies, ritual or identity – rather than a conviction-based metanarrative, which then shapes behaviour. What Quakers have that other alternatives to traditional denominations sometimes don't always possess is the ability to combine aspects: values, behaviour and activity. What Quakers have that many other organised faith groups do not, is the space to fit faith according to your own conscience. We simply do not claim to have the ultimate core of truth in the way that other groups do.

Quakers can attract many of the people that, for whatever reason, are attracted to unconventional sects to express their spirituality, like paganism or Bahá'í (those who seek a framework for their values, but for reasons of discomfort, negative experiences or disillusionment, cannot express these values through traditional institutions like the Church of England); we also appeal to those who are looking for a community of likeminded ethical campaigners. What Quakers can do that meditation classes, permaculture and the Stop the War Coalition cannot is bring all these aspects under one banner: an entire way of life that can, if taken to heart, direct all aspects of existence. We are the full package, but without the trappings of absolutism that many find autocratic and unappealing.

My first assertion, then, is that Quakers need to be seen not as a religion, but as a holistic approach to life. There are two strands to this: firstly, we need to strengthen our claim to be an holistic lifestyle, by giving Friends more ways of expressing our testimonies through our everyday lives; the second strand is to then make the knowledge that we represent 'the full package', known to enquirers.

In the Meeting for Leaving at Yearly Meeting Gathering in York, a Friend reminded the Meeting of ministry she'd heard many years ago at Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM): the essence of the message was that it was a great shame that after BYM, we all had to return to our 'real lives'; in fact, the Friend argued, this *was* real life, and other sectors of life in fact need to be made more in keeping with it. This is the spirit to which I'm referring: making our everyday lives more reflective of our Quaker lives.

One of the ways Quakers could make themselves attractive as a holistic society is to offer extended Woodbrooke-style courses around the country. Rather

than lessons, Friends would, I think, respond more kindly to discussion groups on a specific topic. The School of Economic Science (a charitable education society) has been running courses encouraging praxis – the practical application of beliefs and learning – around issues such as economic activity, (such as a current course entitled ‘Economics with Justice’), since 1937. Why not enable Friends to have the opportunity to fully appreciate the affects their Quakerism may have on all aspects of their lives? I would argue that this is exactly the sense in which the ‘Good Lives’ series has been already offered. Let’s roll it out! Let’s use Friends’ sense of their Quaker identity to relate to things that (perhaps regrettably) are not always viewed as quakerly, like money, finance and economics. A sort of ‘Hearts and Minds Prepared’, but for aspects of our lives that are not quite so obviously spiritual e.g. economics, political history, cooking. This need not be too centrally-managed: Friends House could provide facilitation training and outlines, but local meetings need to play to the strengths of their Members in choosing the topics⁷.

A further way in which Quakerism can become connected to other aspects of our lives is to reconnect with a part of Quakerism which has been largely lost: commerce. Our testimony of equality is primarily used in narratives layered with ‘that of God in everyone’ and ‘that’s why we meet in a circle, that’s why we don’t have priests’. Whilst these aspects of Quakerism are spiritually significant, and can tell the uninitiated much about Friends in a very short space of time, surely we need to regain somewhat the idea that equality means political and economic equality too. This is why Friends work so closely with asylum seekers and prisoners. It should also be the reason why Friends are closely associated with trade unions and workers rights, but this relationship has somewhat faltered.

Today ‘business’ seems inexorably linked in the minds of many Friends with exploitation, greed and a market system that isn’t people-centric. As one Friend who works as a business consultant pointed out to me however, the whole point about trade is that it should be about making both parties happy: you want what I have, please reimburse me for my time, skill and materials, and we will both be happy.

⁷ Many meetings run a ‘Quaker Questions’ or ‘Quakers in Focus’ series. Something more focused, for longer, upon one aspect of Quaker life is what I’m suggesting.

Quaker history is littered with inspiring examples of Quaker families that have been prominent in the business and trading worlds. Well known brands (Clarkes, Rowntrees, Cadburys, Lloyds, Barclays), as well as the villages of Bournville and New Earswick, remain as testament to this heritage. Education and learning is also important to Friends - this is demonstrated in the Quaker Higher Education Fund, supporting Friends to further their education. This is an admirable cause. If we wish to reinvigorate Quaker-based business, then a similar grant system could be provided to Friends with nascent social enterprise schemes. Many of us were thrilled by Richard Wilkinson's talk on 'The Spirit Level' at Yearly Meeting Gathering. I hope that this basis could be used as a springboard for reviving leftist concerns among Friends.

However, enquirers are perhaps more immediately interested in our approach to God. The introduction to this essay competition reads 'We are right to be inclusive, welcoming people from the widest range of backgrounds. But if we rest content to seem anything to everyone, we run the risk of ending up being nothing to anyone.' This is a sentiment heard regularly amongst some Friends, particularly those who have been around in the Society a long time, and have witnessed the slow swing from Christocentrism to universalism⁸ (not that it is this simple). I've witnessed some Friends suggesting that we actively need to dumb down our religiosity to attract people. I'd like to argue the reverse: I believe Friends would benefit from greater awareness of our roots and heritage. This does not necessarily mean either encouraging theism or rejecting liberalism, but a deeper appreciation of our original *raison d'être* (as a radical form of a monotheist faith) can only make us more coherent and unified as a group, and thus more able to demonstrate our corporate faith. This demonstration will appeal to others, but this isn't the only motive. I feel we lose a lot by not recalling the magnificent history we inherit.

We know that one-size-fits-all paradigms, like monotheism, and also grand political systems like communism and fascism, are unpopular in today's post-modern supermarket of lifestyle and belief. But this reality should *not* be confused with the idea that people aren't looking for meaning. They may not be happy with imposed

⁸ I am writing from neither perspective, incidentally.

teaching, or generic explanations, but they still want to recognise the significance or their own existence, be in awe at the beauty of the natural world, and make space for exploring spirituality. Consequently, being shy about the fact that we allow people room to delve into these issues would be an error. Anthropologists agree that spirituality is one element (one of the only elements), that all known societies throughout space and history share. This is not just going to die out! Although Britain (along with other European countries, such as Denmark), is moving closer to being entirely secular, individuals within the UK may be seeking a faith group to be a part of. Our tradition is strongly Christian; now we are open to experiencing light and meaning from other sources. The first part of that sentence does not need to be forgotten to make the second part true. One of the ways in which Friends can be made to more fully understand this tradition is explored later.

We have a radical Christian heritage. Radical Christians, progressive followers of Christ who want to put Jesus' manifesto into action in their own lives, are still out there in Britain (you may have to look hard to find them, but they are there). Some can be found in the Society of Friends; most cannot. Quakers could aim to become a unifying force amongst this group⁹, giving them a home when other denominations can not¹⁰. I'm not suggesting we 'poach'. We need to make it clear that we're not asking for exclusivity. Our door-open philosophy could be included more emphatically in our publicity. People from other denominations should understand from the first that they're free to spend time with Quakers, take time out from their own places of worship, and come back to Friends when they wish to.

Ecumenical working is one way of putting across the message that Friends are welcoming. 'Churches Together' groups could be used as a connection to ask local congregations to join us for a Sunday meeting, (perhaps with a shared lunch afterwards). We could investigate partnering (for campaigns and events) with groups like the Inclusive Church Network, Liberal Judaism, and the Student Christian

⁹ What I'd call 'Greenbelt' Christians - social justice-focused, liberal Christians who are open to various forms of worship.

¹⁰ This may either be because these denominations don't accept them e.g. Anglicans who are disenchanted with their communion tearing itself apart over 'secondary issues' such as homosexuality and women Bishops; or it may be related to their lack of capacity because of the dwindling numbers: progressive Mennonites, Methodists, Baptists and URC members whose own congregations are faltering.

Movement. Let's, rather than alienating people with a specifically Christian identity, makes ourselves known to those of an unashamed Christian nature. To some of these people, the 'absolute perhaps' that many Quakers embrace¹¹ will be distinctly unattractive. Our permissive relationship to belief doesn't currently encourage people to share their own beliefs, where those beliefs are exclusive. This may prove a problem for some Christians, but for some it will not, *if* they are fully aware that they are joining a Society, in Friends, that simply does not claim to have a conformity of belief.

In terms of ecumenical relationships, many non-Quakers see our decision to allow same-sex marriage as 'ungodly', or if not ungodly, certainly not Biblical. We need to shout forth the narrative, shared by many Friends, that it was actually a decision foisted upon us by the Spirit! The sense of the Meeting changed so significantly, it was as if greater forces than merely the power of verbal persuasion were at work. A metaphysical, divine presence, drawing us in. A Friend who was not in favour, at first, of making the decision we finally arrived at, spoke to me of "The finger of God pointing down at us, saying: 'It's you. The time is now; you've got to do it'". This may not be the experience that Christians (nor Muslims, or Jews) have of God, but we need not be ashamed in saying that it is ours if that is how, as individuals, we understand it.

In the early stages of YMG I had a conversation with one Friend about how much we were following precedent in making this decision: he wondered whether the fact that we were embracing the testimony to equality, lived out by Friends through history, made up for the outlandishly liberal step away from Biblical tradition. They were worried particularly about the total rebuttal of the words of the apostle Paul. This struck me at the time as a very strange dialogue for two Friends to be having. Whilst academically and theologically the topic was fascinating, it actually didn't matter. Surely one of the central truths held dear by early Friends was that a relationship with the Spirit does point one in new and exciting directions. We should be open to these challenges, waiting on God, not feeling a leading and then saying

¹¹ 'An attitude of absolute perhaps towards theology, whereby rationally, from outside the religious enterprise, Quakers know they can only be uncertain about their interpretation of experience within the religious quest' (Dandelion, *The Quaker Condition*, p.7).

“hold up - that’s not what you told Paul in 50 AD!”. We’ve never pretended to uphold *sola scriptura*. In fact, George Fox, and Friends since, have actively rejected it. Thus we cannot be accused of hypocrisy; to be open to the Spirit is to be open to change, and to react accordingly.

At the same time as boldly but gently asserting that the call to action in July came from something more than our own collective frivolities (for some, from God), we must simultaneously follow our calling to be open to light from wherever it comes. We are, and surely will remain, an inclusive body. We know that this puts us at odds with the majority of Friends worldwide. Whilst this may be a shame, it is not arrived at through sheer bloody-mindedness, but from a genuine wish to be warm and welcoming to all. Today’s Friends bow to the notion that ‘In the end, even the one who accepts the most traditional religion has nothing but his own experience to rely on’¹².

If we are going to attract more people outwardly declared as theist, those of us who haven’t got a monotheist perspective need to not be offended or troubled when people speak of their belief in this sort of God. The same openness needs absolutely to be applied in the opposite direction. Dialogue is a two-way process, and (as so often with Friends), there is so much more than just two ways (theist, non-theist), but a plethora of opinions and colours of faith in between. Being open however needs *not* to mean, not being able to say what we really feel. I’ve heard Christian Friends expressing the feeling that they need to temper, or watering down intentionally, their words in a Quaker context. A certain amount of this may be necessary – it is not the way of Friends to impose belief - but there is a difference between using context-appropriate language, and actively not sharing with others your own joy and sense of truth. If the latter is happening, this is a tragedy, whatever that truth is, and should be averted. This is an issue of self-examination and needs to happen at an individual level.

One of the taglines of Quaker Week 2009, ‘Thou shalt decide for yourself’ speaks of the range of feeling within Friends, in terms of belief. At first, in my journey with Friends, I assumed that the fact we don’t have a clergy guiding our

¹² English translations of passages in Welsh, Quaker Faith and Practice.

thoughts, meant we'd have to actively take responsibility for our own learning and exploration through nourishing each others' thinking i.e. there'd be many a conversation about God over coffee. I'm well aware that this may be only my own experience, but I've actually not noticed this happening. No doubt relationships exists within Meetings to facilitate another's' exploration, and there are of course opportunities through Woodbrooke courses, and also through groups like 'Hearts and Minds Prepared', but in a routine way as part of Meeting, theological threshings don't automatically take place. Consequently, Friends aren't being as challenged as they could be. More of this later.

A distinctive and peculiar facet of Quakerism is that many people, rather than talking of a conversion experience that led them to find Friends, speak of "coming home". There's actually a Woodbrooke course of the same name designed for just such folk. These Friends find a space in which they feel nurtured and at peace, one which reflects their already closely-held values. Whilst it is an hugely positive thing that these individuals, and I'm one of them, find a space to be themselves and share their ideals, it inevitably means that fewer of us actually undergo radical personal transformations when we become 'convinced'. This is unlike many other faith groups, whose devotees' conversion experiences are often more dramatic, involving 'Road to Damascus' or 'burning bush'-type experiences. For Quakers, it's more likely that we just "found what we'd always been looking for".

This is fantastic in one sense. It means there's a whole host of people for whom Quakerism represents who they are - we meet them where they're at. This means there is likely to be a great deal more people for whom this is true, who haven't actually found Quakers yet. On the other hand, this comfort, this way of being 'at peace' within a relatively short space of time, actually means that you're less likely to have your values contested and challenged. I believe Meetings need to take a greater responsibility for nurturing religious debate within their Members. People may be afraid of this because the diversity of faith within Meetings means certain conversations might cause offence. This would be a dreadful shame. Friends are made of stronger stuff! We are generally confident enough in our eloquence and kind enough in our speech, to allow for the sharing of ideas and stories of our personal faith. We do not wish to slip into a situation where the only way Friends

feel they can maintain a loving and inclusive approach is to be cautious, and tread on eggshells around people - this would represent a confusion of what being truly loving is.

The steps I have suggested, becoming more holistic, and taking more responsibility for each others' spiritual growth will, I hope, take us some way to greater fulfilment of our potential: a more spiritually rigorous, meaning-full Society. I hope that if this happens Friends won't be shy to realise that we have many of the things that people are looking for. As another example of this, some of our concerns e.g. our testimony to the Earth, *could not be more* in vogue. Given that I believe we would be more popular if more people had actually heard of, and understood, us, I'd like to talk briefly about outreach, and about the related topic: accessibility. That is, how people feel about us when they actually do find us.

I knew Friends House had stepped up its efforts on outreach when I saw a cyclist with a high visibility jacket with 'Quakers for Peace' on the back (an inspired connection - Friends are wont to cycle)! It's not about evangelism; it's about allowing ourselves to be found. As an under-25, I probably have more understanding of the lives of this age group than any other. Young people are a group who are bombarded on a daily basis with a variety of products, organisations and identities vying for their attention. Whilst Friends may regard joining this onslaught of advertising as cheapening, we have to acknowledge they're a group as yet fairly untapped by Quakers. We need to join the fray in putting ourselves out there.

As someone who's recently graduated, I've been fascinated by the style of Christian Union found at many universities. The Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship represents three-hundred Christian Unions in the UK. UCCF defines a Christian Union as a "mission team made up of students who are working together to evangelise their fellow students in their University or College". Their vision is to make disciples of Jesus Christ in the student world, having given every student in Great Britain an opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Our call is to partner with God in His rescue mission to students", they claim. I've come to appreciate the huge number of Christian students who come to university and feel far from at home in this fundamentalist, evangelical style of community. Organizations such as the Student Christian Movement offer an alternative space for

more progressive Christians, but they remain small. Young, more liberal students who are looking to explore their faith, not impress it upon others, may find solace, friendship and support – rather than answers – from Quakers. My Meeting at university nurtured, inspired, and loved me to a degree I could not have hoped for. They essentially, almost single-handedly, assured my lifelong connection with Quakerism. Appealing to people at this formative and difficult period in their lives is imperative. We have the opportunity to make ourselves useful to whole generations of young people, through universities, if we get ourselves out there.

I greatly enjoyed purchasing The Guardian for 25p whilst a student. The newspaper has understood that if you get people young, they'll stay committed, potentially for the rest of their lives. Consequently, they make their brand as attractive as possible (in this case, by selling it at a more attractive price). We have a network of university chaplains, who are active to varying degrees amongst the student bodies. Some Meetings have a 'Student Rep', whose role involves welcoming new students and arranging introductory sessions to Quakerism. Does Quaker Life have a responsibility for encouraging this in Meetings? If not, let's give it to them. One option is to support these student reps financially, give them distinct incentives to do as much as they can, within their busy schedules. Another angle is to get university and college chaplains into as many institutions as possible, placing these roles at the same level of importance as prison visitors and nominations committee names.

Quite apart from the issues of attracting young people, we know that many Friends, for example of a middle-age group, are 'refugees' from other churches. Many have come because they feel uncomfortable with some aspects of 'mainstream' faith groups. One of the things that makes people feel ill-at-ease in these churches are their stance on non-heterosexual relationships. We have recently made waves within the faith community by adopting the idea of same-sex marriage. We can take advantage of this breakthrough and actively invite people who have a concern about the way organised religions in Britain treat their LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer) members. I believe we can do much to heal the wounds that have been inflicted on many non-heterosexual people in religious contexts. We could advertise in Diva, The Pink Paper and The Gay Times. People may

not flock; but they will feel less excluded from religious communities. We were recently celebrated in a Pink Paper online article as 'one of Christianity's oldest strands'; let us use this as a catalyst of interest to reach out to the millions of other-than-straight people who are roundly repelled by organised religion.

Quite apart from the issue of sexuality, as a Society we have gone through a period of reflection, and it is clear that Friends are very, very middle class and educated¹³. Whilst this total lack of representiveness is incredibly regrettable, it does not mean that we should be shy in trying to attract more of such types. We have something that intellectuals, ethical consumers, activists and liberals want to share. Bashfulness won't do. We have recently advertised in The New Internationalist, and I'm sure our outreach officers are on to this already, but let's roll it out to The Big Issue, Amnesty International's News, Third Way, the Co-operative magazine, and any other publication we can think of that draws the desired demographic.

We need to be unabashed about the need to publicise ourselves. Friends have benefited from appreciating the difference between evangelism, and outreach. The former speaks of a level of self-belief and surety that's an anathema to most Friends; I believe the latter requires only a quiet self-confidence – and frankly, it's necessary if we're going to survive. There is time for a debate about methods, and it's important to find a form of action that Friends are at peace with. However, apposite and rapid expansion of BYM's outreach is crucial if we are going to sustain and grow our community.

We have had years of looking inwards. I am presuming that many Friends came away from this spell believing we have to make ourselves more accessible, more open. This can be achieved partly through our personal interactions with newcomers. I've found Friends incredibly welcoming and warm. However there are a few things that could be worked on...

- Please don't ask whether I know these 100 Friends who once lived in my Local Meeting's area, or try and work out how many 1000s of Quakers we know in common. It may give you a warm fuzzy feeling to feel so well-connected, but if I

¹³ I recently heard a Friend, whilst detailing Quaker foundations in the 17th. Century, argue that the typical Quaker in 1660 was also 'typically literate'.

don't know Ralph and Martin and the wonderful Lizzy, who used to make such delicious vegan soups, then you do nothing but extend my sense of otherness.

- Please don't assume that everyone likes lentils, or can afford organic food, or has the liberty and privilege to afford to be able to choose their career, and therefore make it one which is 'ethical'.

Something else that can be worked on is our jargon. Quaker language has long been associated with inaccessibility. We have already made changes in our use of 'Preparatory' and 'Monthly' Meetings, altering the terminology to the much clearer 'Local' and 'Area' Meetings. Perhaps 'Meeting for Sufferings' will come next. The language we use is often exclusive. As I found out when I first attended a Quaker meeting, you really have to want to find out. It's an effort, an uphill struggle. If you are intrigued and excited about the prospect of understanding Friends' ways, as I was, then this is a rewarding process. If you do not have this ardour, then it may make us appear a) foreign language speakers, b) exclusive, c) overly intellectual.

New visitors are faced with a barrage of idiom: phrases like 'ministry' and 'the testimonies' could be seen as fairly crucial to our framework. Anything else that is not crucial, but remains impenetrable, should be squeezed out. This can happen both at a structural level - changing the wording of Quaker Faith and Practice where necessary, but also asking local Friends at all levels to consider the way in which they utilise language to those they welcome into Meetings. I'm certainly not the first to mention it, but we could start by ousting the term 'birthright' from our lexicon immediately. It embodies much that is antithetical to contemporary Friends, seeming to go against our testimony to equality (in that it elevates the importance of what you were born, rather than what you've chosen to become). Even though this makes no difference whatever to the way a Friend is treated within the Society, the enquirer who hears the term 'birthright' for the first time has no way of knowing this.

For a person to come across this language however, they need first to have made it through the door. When people are curious, and want to come along to a Meeting, we need to remember that they may be nervous, apprehensive, and

confused. One way of helping people in this situation is to offer to meet them before they arrive, either to walk to Meeting with them, or to have a coffee and discuss what Friends are, and then attend Meeting. In this age of internet marketing, I imagine many interested parties explore their local Meetings online first. We could ask for a volunteer amongst every Local Meeting, so that their details may be posted online as a contact for newcomers. This is an idea stolen from my university LGBTa group. It may seem that these two organisations are vastly different, but actually the fear of coming together with a group of people who understand the accepted behaviours and norms of a setting, whilst you are totally ignorant, can be similarly scary in each circumstance. Many enquirers go along for the first time with f/Friends, but others wait for a long time before plucking up the courage to go alone. I would hope that such a scheme would give such people the courage, sooner.

The biggest assets Quakers have, obviously, are Quakers. I regard most Quakers as absolutely brilliant adverts! The best way of ensuring they remain as such is to better equip Members and Attenders with knowledge of the Quaker way. I've spent time in Kenya this year, and my Kenyan Friends told me about their form of induction. They call it catechism. Whilst such language is alien to British Friends, the message behind it – that Friends who have spent a set-aside period learning and exploring the roots, meanings, processes and spirit of the Society will get more out of their Membership, and act as better advocates in the wider world – is transferable. In Kenya, these classes occur before you are allowed to take up membership. Whilst I'm not advocating such a prescription in the UK, what I think would be useful is giving each individual who wishes to be considered for Membership the opportunity, as a standard, to investigate the Society of Friends much more deeply. This is what 'Hearts and Minds Prepared' was for. This type of exploration should be available to anyone who is involved in the Society, anywhere in Britain, but particularly for all who are coming to Membership.

Many Friends have gone through slightly awkward situations where Members or Attenders remain slightly unaware of due process and 'right ordering' (a good example of a lack of clarity would be in the meaning of such terms!). There's the person who feels awful when they don't know that one is expected to quietly uphold the Clerk whilst s/he formulates a minute (the embarrassment, near on shame, that

would be evoked in the 'offender' could be massive), or the Friend who feels led to speak twice in a Meeting for Worship, and has no way of knowing how this may be interpreted by others, so sits their stewing uncomfortably.

It would provide Friends with such a solid basis of understanding and comfort to offer the chance to truly explore the organisation that they are joining, to provide classes as a matter of course. To make it a condition of Membership would be unpopular, but to strongly encourage a true depth of understanding amongst both Members and Attenders can only be positive. One's already busy schedule would admittedly be further stretched by such a suggestion, but it is something that could provide a solid basis for one's future life within the society. Friends are generally against prescriptive directives, this need not be such. The advantages of such a programme would have to be made clear to all Meetings by Friends house and by Quaker life representatives in meetings nationwide.

A further way in which we enhance our advocacy of Quakerism is to live our testimonies, and reinforce them as core tenets of a Quaker life. Since our inception living out our beliefs around equality and simplicity have roundly marked us out, and set us aside:

"A knot of my old acquaintance [at Oxford], espying me, came to me. One of these was a scholar in his gown, another a surgeon of that city... When they were come up to me, they all saluted me, after the usual manner, putting off their hats and bowing, and saying, 'Your humble Servant, Sir', expecting no doubt the same from me. But when they saw me stand still, not moving my cap, nor bowing my knee, in way of congee to them, they were amazed, and looked first one upon another, then upon me, and then one upon another again for a while, without a word speaking. At length, the surgeon ... clapping his hand in a familiar way upon my shoulder and smiling on me said, 'What, Tom, a Quaker!' To which I readily, and cheerfully answered, 'Yes, a Quaker.' And as the words passed out of my mouth I felt joy spring in my heart, for I rejoiced that I had not been drawn out by them into a compliance with them, and that I had strength and

boldness given me to confess myself to be one of that despised people.”

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Our testimony to equality has been demonstrated superbly in the recent decision to use the same language in Quaker Faith and Practice for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. If our testimonies are going to become anew a symbol through which we may be distinguished, we must first be able to tell people what they are, which means knowing and understanding them ourselves.

Tales of Quaker persecution are integral to the canonical narrative that Friends’ weave in explaining our roots and history. We should avoid romanticising this pain and suffering, but equally should such occasion arise again, we should not shy away from the responsibility of living our values. Minute 25 from Britain Yearly Meeting this year included the line: “We will not at this time require our registering offices to act contrary to the law”, when discussing same-sex marriages. It may come to a point however, when this is exactly what we ask Recording Officers to do, and if this is the way BYM decides to take forward the concern, then Friends should not be reticent in adopting this action.

In conclusion, Friends may be optimistic that we have a lot to offer contemporary Britain. Whilst this will involve reinforcing some and tweaking other aspects of our processes and principles, we can be confident that our core values are ripe with a wisdom and meaning that many will find attractive. It is true that conventional religious in Britain are declining, but Quakerism, although long-established and organised, does not embody the negative trappings of convention that many now shy away from. Although it is important to demonstrate our light in the right fashion (a method that is true to ourselves and our values), we need not panic about dressing up our faith in a marketable manner.

There are alterations that would benefit us; some are fairly serious. We need to truly live out our claim to be a way of life. This means exploring the links between

¹⁴ Thomas Ellwood, quoted in Quaker Faith and Practice, 19.16.

Quaker values and all aspects of life, particularly our economic lives, which at the moment is a neglected topic. Reintroducing business as one way of expressing faith is one part of this. I also believe that it is integral to the health of our spiritual life that we reinvigorate debate around God, spirituality and theology. We also need to become ever more open to letting ourselves be wisely promoted, and to groups that would likely be receptive. To omit this advertising does those who would wish to find us a disservice. In the same way, it is an investment in our future and each other to let ourselves be found, rather than embracing the rather Quakerly tradition of modestly hiding our 'light...under a bushel'¹⁵ in the desire to avoid proselytizing.

Realising our full potential, and welcoming the work that needs to take place in advertising this potential through outreach, will lead to a rise in participation and membership. It is by responding to the need to more fully be ourselves, as opposed to reinventing ourselves, that the Society of Friends will thrive and grow.

¹⁵ 'Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.' Matthew 5:15 (King James Version).

