



Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers) in Britain

Responses to Meeting for Sufferings on the question of membership

Banbury & Evesham AM

Bournemouth Coastal AM

Brighouse West Yorkshire AM

Minute 23.07.05: Discernment on membership.

In December last year Meeting for Sufferings posed four questions regarding membership of the Society of Friends, and asked Area Meetings to consider these. The questions were: Why do we have membership? What is it for? Is it still necessary? If so, what form(s) could it take? We have received minutes on this from Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford and Hebden Bridge meetings, which are attached and which were circulated ahead of this meeting.

Having considered the minutes from local meetings, the clerks have identified a number of themes emerging from the local responses, namely:

- Membership as a personal and shared spiritual journey
- Membership as an outer sign of commitment to testimonies and radical causes
- Membership as a tool for governance
- Questioning of the current distinction between member and attender

The following is a summary of our discernment at today's Area Meeting:

Membership as a personal and shared spiritual journey

The process of applying for membership can be a significant part of one's spiritual journey, a rite of passage, a way to say : 'I think I have crossed a threshold'.

'Convincement' is as important now as it was for early Friends, and convincement and the commitment of membership can take place at all stages of life, including as we encourage younger people in their own spiritual journeys . In joining the Quaker family we are part not just of our local meeting, but also the wider family of friends. At

its best a membership visit is a deeply spiritual process for all involved. However, we are reminded that the sharing of aspects of our spiritual journeys need not be restricted to membership visits. we can all – members and attenders – look for increased opportunities for deep sharing.

Membership as an outer sign of commitment to testimonies and radical causes
We live in times when many of our rights to free speech are being eroded. Alongside a wide range of faith bodies as well secular organisations who have a history of ‘speaking truth to power’, identifying as a Quaker can be an important and radical statement, reflecting our corporate witness for a more just, peaceful and loving world. Being a Quaker is an outward sign of our commitment to Quaker testimonies and to the work carried out in our name. The question has been asked: ‘if being a Quaker was banned, would you still join?’

Membership as a tool for governance

All organisations need some form of governance. We need to know who we are, how many we are, including in relation to money, property and charitable status. We noted the importance laid on governance by George Fox, as a way of keeping the Quaker movement from splintering in the early days. Membership can be a cohesive force, reinforcing our shared ethos and values. However, we live in in a fast changing world of online meetings and increased mobility especially among younger people, and we hope that Meeting for Sufferings can look at new and varied ways of recording ‘who’ and ‘where’ we are as Quakers. The importance of equality in all our structures, processes and ethos is a central aspect of who we are as Quakers.

Questioning of the current distinction between member and attender

We have varied views on the formal aspects of membership. For many, membership is at the core of their sense of belonging, whereas others see the spiritual journey as more fluid, a continued process of ‘seeking’. Many of us feel that the distinction between members and attenders is not helpful in its current form. There are long-term attenders who contribute greatly to the life of our meetings through energy, money and spiritual commitment. In seeking to fill roles in our meetings and the wider Society, we should be looking for the ‘best person for the role’, whether member or attender. The meeting is a community encircling all and to which we all bring different gifts. We may be at different stages of our spiritual journeys, and we express our commitment differently. Friends – whether members or attenders - live in a range of financial situations, and many may struggle to commit financially. Money is crucial to the workings of the society and the work done in our name; but money should not be a barrier to anyone applying for membership, and there are a range of ways in which Friends can contribute in service in the Society, as they are able at different times in their lives.

We will forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings, along with the minutes received from local meetings. We hope that our minute will be helpful to Meeting for Sufferings in their further discernment on the question of membership.

Bristol AM

Cambridgeshire AM

Central England AM

2023.066 Responses from local meetings and individuals on membership

Further to Minute 2023.040 we have received numerous responses from our local meetings as well as some individuals. Meeting for Sufferings asked us to consider four questions before reporting back to them by the end of July and we have held these questions before us today:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take.

In our discussion we have mostly concentrated on the first of these questions, seeing it as fundamental. We have been told that it may not be legally necessary to have membership, and this could be clarified, though we may need it for personal reasons. If there is no membership we may find it harder to disavow those who speak as a Quaker or on behalf of Quakers but whose views are not representative. Some members feel that their membership is a demonstration of commitment rather like a marriage. We have heard that some Attenders feel that membership is divisive and they feel outside the Religious Society of Friends even when being comfortable in their Local Meeting.

We need to talk about membership and its meaning more often so that it is properly understood. There are many roles which do not require membership. In the last analysis membership may be a personal matter of saying “In this faith I wish to live and die”.

We agree to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings, along with the accompanying papers.

Central Yorkshire AM

Chilterns AM

Minute on Membership CAQM 29.07.23 (amended following post-AM consultation)

We live at a time of great global challenges – climate change, wars, historical injustices, etc. As a Society we believe we have something important to contribute to enable us to tackle these challenges. We need therefore to organise ourselves to be maximally effective. This includes having clear ways of discerning what we need to say and do as part of our Quaker witness. An aspect of this process is our membership arrangements.

- Becoming a member can be transformational for the individual.
- It demonstrates publicly one's commitment to the Society and its values.
- There is a reciprocal arrangement that implies acceptance of responsibilities by the individual and the Quaker community.

Membership is not a simple directory of names, but a reciprocal spiritual commitment among groups of Friends who know each other in matters of the spirit. We believe such a concept of membership is important to the continued existence and integrity of the Society. However, membership in its current form is not working for everyone. It is clear from the survey carried out by Meeting for Sufferings that:

- many Local and Area Meetings are not following the guidance in QF&P regarding membership and roles because they cannot find suitable members to fill them.
- others are apparently put off by misapprehension as to what application for membership entails.
- at the same time, our current Membership procedures are putting up barriers to Young Friends who are passionately and energetically committed, but whose connection with the Society is not rooted in a particular Local or Area Meeting.

We suggest that, for example, Young Friends groups could be offered the opportunity to devise their own procedures so that membership would be of that group and not be based geographically to an Area Meeting.

In 2019 Chilterns Area revised their membership procedure aiming to simplify the process; it includes offering an applicant a choice in their path to membership. They can choose between having the traditional visit or simply having a conversation with Elders. In either case, a record of the visit or conversation is passed to Area Meeting. The applicant has full control over what details of their spiritual life are shared at the Area Meeting when their application is under consideration.

Friends should consider how the process could be made more flexible, creative, simple, streamlined and not off-putting whilst remaining true to our existing concept of membership. Such a form might mostly be grounded in Area Meetings, but also extended to other Quaker bodies such as Young Friends General Meeting.

Cornwall AM

8. Responses to the Membership Questions for Meeting for Sufferings

We have received in advance of this Meeting collated responses from Local Meetings in response to the questions about membership asked by Meeting for Sufferings in January.

We note, with little surprise, that there is a wide range of thought. We found it difficult to separate out questions 1 & 2 particularly.

We ask our clerks to forward this minute, along with the collated responses received today, to Meeting for Sufferings by August, as they requested.

We thank Rachel Bennett for her work collating the many responses.

For Cornwall Area Meeting 9.07.2023.

Some responses – with some collation - from our Local Meetings on the questions from Meeting for Sufferings about Membership.

Collated by the clerk to last Area Meeting - see CAM 13.05.2023 minute 5

As might be expected, there was divergence on responses to these questions among Friends in our Local Meetings and we have not tried to find unity on any overall response to each question.

In our discussions, we have found it hard to separate out responses to the four questions – they are interlinked, especially 1&2, (so our responses have been amalgamated).

1. Why do we have membership? 2. What is it for?

Personal

- To allow individuals to make a commitment along their spiritual path, and to make clear the responsibilities involved in that commitment.
- There is a commitment to 'see it through' – a bit like marriage.
- To give opportunity to connect one's inner spiritual life with the outer and be recognisable and bear witness.
- To feel and show that we belong (other denominations have baptism and confirmation)
- To provide a home base during our continued spiritual journeys, to provide some stability.
- Membership is a process of becoming and evolving.
- The process of moving attenders into membership is not always fully understood or followed.
- To allow attenders to get all they want from Meeting and feel a sense of belonging without feeling that they have to take on a role.
- Membership does not mean that you are a 'better' Quaker.

As an organisation

- To define a group who have a shared understanding of core Quaker practice in relation to Meeting for Worship, the business method and discernment, our Testimonies, and commitment and responsibility, although spiritual beliefs may vary widely
- To prevent Quakerism being just an idea, without substance or grounding.

- Some disquiet about seeming ‘pronouncements’ from BYM about the form our Faith in Action should take – Advices and Queries is so helpful in stressing the responsibility to think for ourselves.
- To allow Quakers to speak to the ‘outside’ world with a collective voice

It should help in giving a statement about our ‘strength’ (e.g. when speaking with other groups), although attenders are included in statistics too – and there are many passive members.

- Heritage – originally for support when persecuted
- To filter out people for whom the Society of Friends is not the right place to be.
- At Area Meeting, we record the deaths of members, in part for our records (and those of BYM) but this can feel divisive.

3. Is it still necessary? (this needs to be seen alongside the responses to Q1&2 above)

- Membership should not be a requirement for holding Quaker roles, as long as the role holder understands the principles of Quaker practice and has the skills needed.
- What is the alternative? – without membership, anyone could say that they are a Quaker and that this is what we believe.
- Membership involves acceptance of all our testimonies and letting our whole lives speak, not just our particular interests.
- Some people prefer to be involved but ‘on the edge’.
- These days, people feel able to self-identify and many chose to do that as Quakers.
- The idea of the responsibilities of membership in terms of service (and workload) may put some people off. But more tasks and roles are now taken by attenders and those attenders who wish to serve should be welcomed. There will still be discernment about whether they are suited to take on the service.
- There is an expectation of financial contribution from members, but this can be difficult.
- It can produce a sense of ‘us and them’ - a two-tier feeling, which can be divisive and not in keeping with our testament to equality
- In many ways within Local Meetings, attenders are no different to members.
- We do use the term ‘Friends’ to cover both members and attenders, although some use Ffriends.
- The term ‘attender in good standing’ (as opposed to ‘member’) is difficult to discern.

4. If yes, what forms could it take?

- Membership can continue to evolve and support a wider constituency of Friends.
- Originally, organisation on an area basis made sense, but communication opportunities are now very different.
- At present membership of the Society of Friends in Britain is based on location, i.e. membership of an Area Meeting, but there is the model of FWCC's [International Membership Programme](#) which acts as a support for both isolated Friends and newly-established worship groups where there is no established monthly or yearly meeting.

Given the time constraints and geographical mobility of many younger people, we discussed the possibility of a different kind of membership in addition to the traditional form. A membership along the lines of international membership might be considered, with the same kind of application procedure as outlined on the International Membership Programme website, i.e. a letter of application and a 'visit' which may be online. This might be linked to an online introductory programme which covers the Quaker basics. This route into membership could be publicised through, for example, Woodbrooke online courses or through the many existing Zoom worshipping groups. Once accepted into membership, the individual might be linked to a virtual 'home meeting' to provide an ongoing sense of community and support.

- Membership of one Area Meeting can preclude involvement with other AMs which might be nearer and more accessible.
- Should we consider attenders as those on the way to membership?
- We need to welcome attenders to Meetings for Worship for Business at Local and Area Meetings. Asking attenders to identify themselves to the clerk may be off-putting.
- Those in membership and who wish to retain that membership but who do not relate in any way to a Local or Area Meeting are hard to support and include administratively.

Craven & Keighley AM

2023/31 Membership

We have been asked by Meeting for Sufferings to consider the issue of membership – why do we have it? What is it for? Is it still needed?

We are a community united by our spiritual experiences and within that context all are equal. Doing things with and for each other within that community and out into the world is an expression of that spiritual experience.

It may be felt that the distinction between attender and member has very little significance at local meeting level. However in its absence we might need much deeper discernment about whom to trust with our outward affairs.

Yet there is something inherent in the formation of human groups with their shared experiences, history and ways of doing things that naturally leads to membership as a necessity. Membership can then be seen as an acceptance of those spiritual insights and practices that make up the Quaker way.

We also acknowledge that, for some, having a process for becoming a member is a spiritually significant step in their journey.

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Cumberland AM

23/30 Consideration of the questions about membership

We agree the minute below and ask the Clerk to send it to Meeting for Sufferings.

We feel that yes, the Society of Friends does need membership. If we did not have membership we would not have representation on non-Quaker bodies. We would also be vulnerable to people turning up with their own agenda and describing themselves as Quakers.

Concern was raised about Young Friends and others who move around a lot and are not attached to a particular Local or Area Meeting, and also those who only attend Meeting for Worship virtually. We thought it might make more sense for all members to be recorded as members of Britain Yearly Meeting rather than separate Area Meetings, though the application process would still need to be managed by the Area Meeting.

The application process needs to be made more inclusive and more joyous!

We accept that there are some attenders who do not wish to become a member, on principle. However others may be unclear or nervous about the process and these people should be informed and encouraged. It is not essential to follow the traditional role with an official visit, alternative procedures are acceptable where they seem appropriate. If visitors are appointed they need to be well-informed about the process. The applicant should be reassured that it is not an exam but a discussion and a chance for them to ask questions.

We need to talk to attenders more about Quakerism and about how and why to apply for membership.

Crynwyr Cymru - Quakers in Wales (CCQW) CYFAN Network

The CYFAN network (Cyfan means 'whole or complete' in Welsh and is the Children, Youth and Families All-age network in Wales) has asked the clerking team of Crynwyr Cymru - Quakers in Wales to forward on you their attached minute, for consideration in the membership item at October's MfS.

We will minute this at CCQW's meeting on 28.10.23 as done on a between-meetings-basis due to the timescale.

The clerking team can confirm that we will also be sending you CCQW's report and presentation for MfS in October and hope to get those documents to you shortly

Minute to MfS re membership and Belonging for Children and Young People on behalf of CYFAN

CYFAN is a national peer support network of those involved in and passionate about work with Children and Young People in Wales to replace the traditional system of Area Meeting appointed Children and Young People's Work Advocates. Its formation arose from the recognition that young people associated with Quakerism, often do not have a strong sense of connection to an Area Meeting. Typically, young people feel most connected to a community of those with shared interests or experience and younger children to their local meeting.

Some years ago, 2 parents from one of our local meetings applied for membership together and in their letter to the AM clerk they asked if their young children could also become members. Following conversation with the children, it was felt that because the children did not have any experience of AM or understanding of the wider Quaker context, it would not be in right ordering to accept a membership application on their behalf from their parents. However, they were very regular and faithful attenders of the LM and had a strong sense of belonging and connection to the local Quaker community and an age-appropriate understanding of Quaker values. The LM felt strongly that we should celebrate and acknowledge them as "members" of the worshiping community, particularly as they had started coming to meeting at the same time as their parents some years before when they were already of school age, so there had never been a 'baby welcoming'. Thus, an All Age Worship to celebrate belonging and connection was devised, which included giving each child a certificate, reminiscent of the Quaker marriage certificate, which all Friends present were asked to sign after the meeting as witnesses pledging their commitment to support the children as valued members of the community.

This experience highlighted to us in CYFAN, that young children attending meeting regularly can have a profound sense of belonging and commitment, which current AM membership arrangements cannot acknowledge, and which is very different from what the Society of Friends used to have in 'birth right' membership. Unlike the dilemma for older young Friends, who are 'disenfranchised', because their attachment to Quakerism is not geographically based, these children can also be 'disenfranchised', because they have a sense of belonging and connection to a local meeting and local Friends, which is not recognised in current membership arrangements.

We feel strongly that in considering changes in membership arrangements, BYM should be mindful of the need to celebrate and recognise the sense of belonging,

connection and commitment to Quakerism of young children and young people.

CERTIFICATE OF BELONGING and FRIENDSHIP

Name _____

Date _____

This certificate is to mark and celebrate the mutual sense of belonging and commitment between this Friend and others in Penarth Quaker Meeting.

We the undersigned affirm the important place that this Friend has in our meeting and make a commitment to celebrate their joys and to provide them with support when it is needed.

.....

.....

.....

.....



Devon AM

Minute 50/2023 Consideration of DAM response to BYM on Membership

Ref DAM minute 07/2023

We have received minutes from several of our LMs and we are aware of the diversity of views and opinions that exist within DAM.

We began the afternoon session with Worship during which part of Quaker Faith and Practice 11.01 was read and have had small group discussions on the Meeting for Sufferings questions which have been posed to us all.

After a time of sharing, we have welcomed points that have arisen and ask that they are collated by the Clerks.

We ask that the Clerks send a copy of the notes to Meeting for Sufferings for consideration.

Notes and Minutes from Local Meetings and some personal perspectives were posted with agenda papers before the meeting. They included historical background, views on personal spiritual journey and belonging as well as points on pragmatic organisational needs. They continue to be collected on Devon AM intranet and can be viewed via this link. <https://quaker.link/KHA83Z>

Collation of notes from afternoon groups and Worship held at Devon AM 15 July 2023

Why Membership? It's important; significant; gives identity personally and cohesion to Society of Friends

Two aspects, both important: - Inner - spiritual, a deep connection and meaning and Outer - pragmatic and organizational. If membership done away with, it will threaten the integrity of our collective understanding of Quakerism. An antidote to accusations of Quaker 'wooliness'. "How can we be organised? Without membership it would be very difficult."

Public witness: Experience from 1980s of attender speaking "as a Quaker" yet not in alignment with Quaker values nor understanding them. Membership process may help discern that understanding is there, though it still may not be the case!

However, when Quakers are lobbying, numbers can count and it's relevant and affirming to say Quakers include members and attenders. (Although noting we discern and don't vote on issues)

Appreciate International role that Quakers play and hence identity we have in the world e.g. QUNO well respected and in a gentle way able to look for nonviolent solutions to conflict.

Boundaries and Thresholds: Analogy of a cell with a membrane - the membrane being the membership requirement. In the right environment the cell doesn't need protecting, things can move back and forth and there is no risk to the body of the cell. However, as a Yearly Meeting and a body of Quakers, we do need a level of protection and so a cell membrane is essential.

Becoming a member: A personal commitment; a matter of identity; a personal decision; enables us to recognise ourselves; "being a Quaker not just about attending a Quaker Meeting"; a 24/7 thing about values, testimonies and living your faith; "by identifying, committing and standing up for our testimonies, one has a clear identity"; "to signify something tangible to self, and to others of a commitment."; bearing in mind it's a do- it-together religion so need commitment.

Applying for membership: "Like a conversion"; "something clicked"; "nailing your colours to the mast". Can seem daunting and taking the plunge can require courage, but gives increased meaning which is valued. It gives security, identifying with core beliefs of the Society. "Joined Society of Friends so I could resign if I really disagreed with something & I'm still a member!"

- A right of passage, which is lacking for those who became members at birth.
- All Quakers are on a journey of exploration though becoming a member is like crossing a threshold
- Attendership as a process of learning, the end product is membership."
- Ensures that the crucial importance of spirituality remains within Quakers. When attenders apply for membership the spirituality of the prospective member can be taken into account.
- Not about belief but practice. Core is about the inner light but we don't have a monopoly on that!
- Some welcome keeping the religion of their family or culture as well as being a Quaker.
- Important that a person coming into membership knows what Quakers are about, what we do. A vital consideration, without which we are diluted .
- If no boundary about who calls themselves Quaker and we simply self-identify -then how do we maintain our understanding of the Quaker Way and worship? Risk a slow decay of discipline
- Told by several attenders that they value the concept of Membership even if feel it is not yet for them.
- Others dislike the formality or bureaucracy or feel that being a member brings "oughts" about attending or taking on roles. Yet we try to say joining is about understanding Quaker values not oughts.

Belonging to worshipping community meaningful

- May become meaningless in outer sense, if the person does not identify with any community and in habit of attending a Meeting for Worship. Aware of

members who've drifted away without resigning. LM/AMs don't have common approach on how much to make that explicit.

- “At our Local meeting whether someone is attender or member isn't obvious, a distinction seldom thought about. Nevertheless, membership does seem necessary - not sure why.”
- “I don't feel that membership is necessary because attenders are playing a full part in Local Meetings. If members and attenders are the same. What is the role of membership?”
- Value in us being a group, and having a process of accepting Friends into a group. It can't be too woolly as everyone needs clarity about what it is for and what it entails.
- Need to recognise the contribution of those who don't chose to become members. Soft boundaries can appear welcoming and inclusive or blurry and unhelpful? Both members and attenders can have strong sense of belonging and commitment to Local Meeting Community and worship. What form should the process take?
- It is seen to be valuable in its present form by most who have joined. ▫ How we treat attenders is not useful. Our system is too rigid and structured. It is seen by some as restrictive and judgmental.
- “Nervous about visits” ▫ We welcome the option for a LM to recommend Membership rather than requiring a visit. Heartily support process by which a Local Meeting is able to bring forward a name of a longer-term attender, as happened in Devon AM today.
- On other hand, visits often appreciated by both visitors and applicant as opportunity to share about spiritual path – maybe we could all do with a visit every 5 years or so?!

National Membership?

Realise this would necessitate changes, but coming to favour this idea. e.g. the AM (or other worshipping body) could bring names forward for a central register. They would be a member of the YM not the AM. Takes into account a more mobile population and the variety of ways we worship now ... Someone could a "member of BYM", worshipping with X (and Y) community

Perhaps a small membership fee simply to fund the record-keeping - with contributions to the running of LM, AM and BYM separated clearly from that? Perhaps collecting membership fee a mechanism of identifying continued existence and so people were not lost track of if they weren't attached to a community? If Friends were lost track of, 'getting your name back on the list' should not be as difficult as getting accepted on the list in the first place.

Can we look to the USA or other Yearly meetings and learn anything from any of their arrangements?

Dorset & South Wiltshire AM

23.40 Membership Consultation from Meeting for Sufferings

We have heard responses from all our Local Meetings to the questions on membership from Meeting for Sufferings. These are attached to the Minutes and will be sent with the Area Meeting Minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Friends recognise that formal membership is important as a personal commitment to some and is a legal requirement for our Area Meeting charitable organisation. However the process of becoming a member puts off some and the perceived expectations of membership put off others. We feel that it would be appropriate to either drop the requirement for membership from many if not all roles, or to make the process of acquiring and terminated membership much simpler, based on local Friends' acceptance of a person into their own worshipping community e.g. onto address lists, but subject to Area Meeting approval.

East Cheshire AM

Why do we have Membership and what is it for?

Generally, membership implies 'commitment', 'responsibility' and 'belonging'. It has both a nurturing and challenging role in our spiritual journeys and can be a meaningful force for good in the world. Membership helps us to speak out to one another and to the wider world about what it means to be Quaker and is also about sharing our joys and our sorrows with one another.

As in Qf&p11.01: "Membership is for those who feel at home and in the right place within the Quaker community." 'I feel those in worship and in service alongside those of us in formal membership are 'members' too, in my heart and mind for the time they are with us'.

We have a large group of active attenders at Disley meeting who are fully involved and committed both within the meeting and beyond it. Whilst membership is important to us we welcome our attenders taking on roles within and beyond the local meeting.

Is it still necessary?

Membership is still important, because of the challenge of upholding our faith in the world, because we are a charity and because of our legal obligations through the work of Trustees. Of more importance is the psychological value of membership, as in Qf&p 11.04: "It is the outward acknowledgement of an inward growth of commitment or a sense of belonging to the Religious Society of Friends."

What form(s) could it take?

The Membership 'process' at present is quite simple with clear steps involving the applicant at each stage but perhaps there is room for more flexibility in the process. For some the letter of application and visit can be quite stressful. Another idea might be a simple invitation from elders & pastoral friends to become a member because 'we value you'.

Alternatively, a mixture of the traditional visit by two appointed friends, informal approaches by pastoral friends and a suggestion, if wished, for a discussion about membership. Then encouragement to apply to Area meeting, including a question on the willingness, or not, to undertake responsible roles, etc. without expecting an immediate commitment.

Finally, there is a concern in The Society of Friends about falling numbers and a need to turn outwards through outreach, to remind people that we exist and that we are a meaningful force for good in the world, at both grass roots and national levels.

'It might be good to understand better why long-standing Attenders do not come into Membership. There's a bunch of folklore around it but it would be good to have some evidence. It's not necessarily a goal to "convert" Attenders to Members, but we may learn something useful.'

23.07.14: After lunch we considered the subject of membership as requested by Meeting for Sufferings.

This was facilitated by Hilary Topp our Local Development Worker. We discussed new and creative ways of considering membership and attendance as well as acknowledging the historic reasons for membership, and how we all have had different pathways towards becoming Quakers and different reasons for taking membership or remaining as an attender.

We thank Hilary for joining us today.

We discussed the following questions:

- What are your dreams for membership and belonging to the RSoF?
- How would it be if our RsoF was truly inclusive?
- How could membership "enhance our experience of being Quaker"?

This is the beginning of an ongoing journey into our eventual decisions about membership.

The Clerk will forward this minute to MfS.

East Kent AM

1. Membership

Friends have welcomed the prompt from Meeting for Sufferings and responded in a variety of ways. We feel our discussions have generated some richly diverse thoughts and experiences from amongst both members and attenders that have started us on ongoing discernment of membership both individually and as meetings.

For many members, the experience of applying for membership holds a deep personal and external significance. For others, the practice of membership has become a barrier to a more equal and inclusive society. We feel that commitment to Quakers is not determined by whether or not we are in membership.

We recognise the value of having membership and acknowledge it is timely to rethink the model. We are aware that having membership attached to Area Meetings excludes certain friends such as those who frequently move, associate with other groups such as Young Friends or worship mainly on-line. We would welcome a model of membership that would include all those identifying as Friends.

We question in our local practices whether we make it too difficult for attenders to apply for membership, and hope we can improve the route. Should there be a time period of learning and worshipping that helps attenders grow into membership? Are we providing appropriate support and positive encouragement for attenders to join or has this reduced in recent years perhaps because increasingly we don't distinguish between attenders and members? We believe our own Area Meeting might need a more energetic approach and wonder if this is reflected in other Area Meetings.

We support removing barriers to regular attenders serving meeting through specific roles. This would help us to develop those willing people for each role, alongside our journey towards Simpler Meetings.

We agree to forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

East Scotland AM

23.08.06 Reflection on membership

In October 2022 MfS took a request from Central Nominations regarding the appointment of non-members to central committees. MfS rejected the proposal to permit this, wishing to look at membership in a wider context.

Membership has a central place in our structures but it is being questioned by our nominations committees and there are broader questions to ask.

In December 2022 MfS agreed a minute asking Area Meetings to consider the following questions:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form or forms should it take?

We considered membership and were reminded of *Quaker faith and practice*, 11.01, that membership, 'does require a sincerity of purpose' and a commitment to Quaker ways and practices, the process not only about seeking but also about finding.

We heard strong feelings about the value of membership: the commitment to serve; the importance of how we live the Quaker way and about being Quaker in every aspect of life. We heard however of the need to respect other people's journeys and where they are, of the value and the commitment of attenders and how Friends' welcome to newcomers, without putting pressure on them, was appreciated.

We hope that attenders who show commitment and understand Quaker values can be invited for appointments when suitable, however we acknowledge that important decisions need to be made by those grounded in the Quaker way.

Gloucestershire AM

Minute 23/28. The nature and meaning of membership:

23/20 Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings for discernment on the nature and meaning of membership by the end of August 2023, focussing on the following four questions; Why do we have membership? What is it for? Is it still necessary? If yes, what form(s) could it take? LMs are asked to have their responses ready for inclusion on the next AM agenda, July 8th.

Today at Nailsworth we have before us an introductory paper about the matter obtained by our Friend John Miles from the BYM staff; as well of each of the Minutes or Notes from Local Meetings and a gathering of Elders and Pastoral Friends 3 April 20223. The collected Local Meeting Minutes are attached to this AM Minute and most of them have been in circulation on line prior to today's gathering.

In our discernment process here, we have first spent time in small groups. We then gathered as a whole assembly to discern what messages we wished to return to Meeting for Sufferings.

We noted that Membership signifies engagement and commitment along the spiritual journey. We celebrate that we also have Attenders who are willing to play a full part in our communities.

In this Area Meeting we have developed a particular process where the applicant for membership works together with Supporting Friends to express their own journey. We commend this process to Meeting for Sufferings.

For the person making the journey into membership, this is an important rite of passage –but that different people work with this differently, whether quickly or slowly.

Membership is a valuable form of making a commitment both in the sense of affirming our religious faith as Quaker and, also to the practical ways of doing Quakerism. That journey signifies we are accountable to our community and responsible for its further development.

We need to make better account of how more and more people are not themselves anchored in one spot to a single Quaker meeting – but may have multiple connections to Quakers in more than one setting. We need our sense of membership to work flexibly with these different associations. Non-geographical membership needs to be able to accommodate young people sometimes being in a family home and sometimes, living, studying or working elsewhere.

We ask our Clerks to send copies of this Minute and its attached papers to Meeting for Sufferings by the end of August 2023 as requested. Meeting for Sufferings hopes to return to this matter at its October 2023 residential meeting.

Hampshire & Islands AM

2023/63: Considering Membership

Minute 2023/18 of our February Area meeting asked Local Meetings to respond to the Call for Discernment by Area Meetings on Membership issued by Meeting for Sufferings with Area Meeting's response to be submitted by the end of August.

To date, responses to the consultation's four questions have been received from Alton, Jersey, Southampton, Portsmouth and Winchester.

The importance of the information given to new members while maintaining the role of Area Meetings and ensuring that contact with Members is kept active if involvement diminishes were all recognised.

We heard the view that although the fact that all our Meetings wanted to retain Membership is encouraging our Membership arrangements were no longer fit for purpose and need to be changed to ensure a more welcoming engagement of people showing interest in joining more fully in local and area meetings with particular emphasis on the life of the local meeting.

We were reminded that the Charitable framework locates membership at Area Meeting level and we were encouraged to consider opening up the Unattached List (those not attached to a particular Local Meeting) to the choice of individual Members.

We have been urged to consider the possibility of child membership.

The importance of Membership being a lively and developing experience for all with mutual encouragement and support ongoing throughout was emphasised. Membership should reflect the joyous experience of a shared community.

We agreed to send this Minute and the Minutes from our Local Meetings to Meeting for Sufferings, stressing the importance of retaining Membership.

Hardshaw and Mann AM

Liverpool LM

We acknowledged that there are practical reasons for having membership: data keeping, legal & regulatory requirements relating to the stewardship of money and property however, this was not the main value we attribute to having membership. A great value was ascribed to how membership engenders a sense of belonging to and, affirmation from our community. Membership is an outward sign of a commitment to our inward life and our Quaker community. It provides a spiritual home where we can live our testimonies through joint witness and action as we travel together on our spiritual journey.

We recognise with joy what committed and involved attenders bring to the life of our meetings. Not all members are committed and involved; not all those committed and involved are members. Any future form of membership should encourage Friends in, rather than being a hurdle to jump. It is important to remember that membership doesn't require us to prove we are good enough only that we are committed to the search. The form should enable recognition of what attenders as well as members bring.

In current times, the word membership can convey a sense of exclusivity. Could the name be changed? Would the concepts of both Committed and Convinced Friends be helpful? Committed Friends being those active attenders who are a significant part of our communities. Committed Friends could be formally acknowledged, allowing them to undertake roles even where they have not undertaken the process of membership (becoming a Convinced Friend).

Could membership be held at a national level and recognise (possibly multiple) community affiliations, whether those be Area Meetings or other communities? This would allow for virtual & non-geographical communities that bring Friends together as much as Area Meetings do. It would be flexible enough to support convinced friends who have to move around the country frequently, making it difficult to take out membership in a particular Area Meeting.

Any form that it takes in the future must allow us to keep right ordering. It should provide a structure that enables the provision of pastoral care. It should create a space to talk about our beliefs and build a worshipful community in which we can support and uphold our testimonies. It should allow us to take responsibility for finance, buildings and infra-structure, make links between our local meetings and create a sense of fellowship. We should look to find a way to mark personal commitment to seeking spiritual direction in today's world without penalising those who aren't in formal memberships but are committed to our communities.

This minute is provided in preparation for our Area Meeting's discernment of this subject with the expectation that Area Meeting provide a response to Meeting for Sufferings by August.

Southport LM

We have been asked to consider Why do we have membership? What is it for? Is it still necessary? If yes, what form should it take? The meeting discussed the above and each of our own commitment to either Membership or Attendance. There was a common spiritual thread running through the discussion which was that some degree of commitment and structure was necessary. Each member or attender could decide what their own commitment was to be. We agreed that the current structure of membership and attending was a good one that should be continued.

Wigan LM

Along with our other Local Meetings we have been asked to discuss the relevance of

Membership in our time prior to a discussion at Area Meeting and a subsequent minute to Meeting for Sufferings. Our structures are based upon ideas and ways of earlier generations and may need reconsidering. Our meeting consisted of two members and two long standing attenders.

Members were of the opinion that membership continues to be of importance. It indicates a commitment and a clear acknowledgement of the acceptance of Quaker testimonies. We recognise that certain roles within the society should be filled by committed members. For example the roles of treasurer, trustee and Elder are most appropriately filled by committed members. One of our attenders expressed the view that, for her, membership as opposed to being an attender indicated a division between attending meeting for worship and being part of the administration. She finds that our Area Meetings for business lack the warmth that she finds in meetings for worship and this is a factor in discouraging her from applying for membership. Another attender spoke of how she feels somewhat second class and unwilling to offer a point of view at Area Meeting. She relates this back to our previous way of asking attenders to leave the room when membership matters were discussed. She also spoke of the long winded and somewhat boring ways that we have of making decisions and how this is a factor in discouraging her from membership and from taking on roles within the Area Meeting. The lack of warmth or the way in which we undertake our business meetings is something that Area Meeting might well consider. There may be ways in which we could make them warmer, more prayerful and approachable to those of us less used to them.

Hertford & Hitchin AM

23/30 Response to Membership consultation from MfS

In several Area Meeting sessions and in our Local Meetings we have considered the question of whether lack of formal membership [of the Religious Society of Friends] should be a bar to appointments.

We feel we should trust the discernment process in our [the Society's] Nominations Committees and Meetings for Worship for Business, to appoint the right person whether member or attender.

We ask our Clerk to send this Minute to Meeting for Sufferings together with the document compiled by Cathy Rowlands as requested by Area Meeting in March.

Hitchin LM

9 Friends attended the session, both members and attenders. Cathy spoke briefly of the concern from Meeting for Sufferings, shared her own journey into membership, and read the second paragraph of QF&P 11.01:

'Early Friends felt no need for formal membership; they were a community of seekers who recognised in each other a similar hunger, a similar quest. Seeking the 'hidden seed of God', they were prepared to recognise it wherever they found it.'

Some points arising from our discussion:

- That attenders may come to MfW for years and never apply for membership is not necessarily a 'problem' that needs to be fixed.
- Application for membership is an outward confirmation of an existing commitment.
- At our meeting there is minimal distinction between members and attenders, but we heard of other meetings where there is much more of a distinction, to the point of members being considered 'proper Quakers'; we strongly disagree with this.
- Membership could perhaps be considered as a private matter, a step in our faith journeys, comparable to adult baptism. 'We are all on the same journey, but in different vehicles'.
- Many Friends do not identify with Area Meetings, perhaps membership should be of Britain Yearly Meeting instead?
- We should trust the discernment process in our Nominations Committees and Meetings for Worship for Business, to appoint the right person whether member or attender.

Ipswich & Diss AM

I have included in this paper relevant minutes from LMs and our AM in response to the request from Meeting for Sufferings.

19.22 f) Online membership

We have received and include below the following minute from Woodbridge LM.

Woodbridge LM minute 22/10: Membership and online meetings

We recognise that the nature of our Quaker communities is changing and for some, an online community is the natural one for them and they feel a need for meetings which are based either online or in partnership with local or area meetings.

We note that we have recently considered details of our membership procedure at Area Meeting, but we think that the time is due for a consideration of membership nationally.

We agree to this minute and ask our Clerk to forward it to Quaker Life and Meeting

Local Meeting responses

Diss LM

Meetings for Sufferings has asked area and local meetings to consider the following issues relating to membership;

Why do we have membership?

What is it for?

Is it still necessary?

If yes, what form should it take.

Diss local meeting has considered these questions, and in our discussion about membership we spent a little while looking at the difference between members and attenders. We are a small meeting and for us there is no difference between members and attenders. For example, there is always an invitation for attenders to come to and participate in local business meetings, We are happy with this approach, which demonstrates inclusiveness. However, whilst we recognise that this approach works well for us, we accept that at some meetings the differential will be more obvious, but we nevertheless ask Meeting for Sufferings to acknowledge how things work in smaller meetings.

On the question of why we have membership, we believe that there is a high degree of individuality about this which has to be respected, and any attempt to establish criteria which a person either meets, or doesn't meet, is a violation of basic Quaker principles.

We recognise that current organisational requirements specify membership for roles such as Clerk, Elders and Treasurer, but we felt that the concept of membership as a prerequisite for these roles should not be a determining factor in whether or not to have membership.

We accept that some people feel the need to have membership as a formal commitment to the Society, but that this was an individual matter and should not in itself be a factor as to whether or not we have membership. A view was expressed by one Friend who felt that membership gave them the power to change and challenge not available to attenders.

We also considered the current process of membership, and the question was raised as to whether the interview was judgemental. Friends experience was that they did not perceive it a judgemental, but it was accepted that this could be the perception of some people. Rather, the interview was considered as a space for people to reflection their personal experience of Quakerism and its relevance to belonging to a Quaker meeting.

Felixstowe LM

There are differing views, particularly over Path Two- Meeting for Clearness, but we are broadly in agreement with wanting to keep the category of Membership, and we think the Becoming a Member leaflet is helpful. The LM clerk will send a copy of this minute to the AM clerk". (The leaflet referred to is our AM leaflet)

Ipswich LM

Membership: (Request from Meeting for Sufferings)

All AMs have been asked to consider the following 4 questions.

Q.1 Why do we have membership?

Answers from a group of Friends:

To show commitment

It creates a cohesive group.

You can feel you can say "I am a Quaker" and not just "I go to a Quaker Meeting"

A feeling of belonging.

You have taken the decision to join (you have taken action)

(From a Friend (F)) Membership is about commitment rather than a looser 'association with' (see the 3rd paragraph) which experientially comes from a different angle. Membership is then a statement to and with a body of Friends of a personal commitment to the Quaker spiritual way and of responsibility, initially to a Meeting and its Area Meeting

(From an Attender(A)) I think it does emphasise a definite commitment and automatic right of attendance at BMW's. Also it includes being present at a members only item though I can only recollect one of these. I also think it helps to support elders if all are members, which is the case in our meeting.

(Friend) I feel that we should continue with Membership. It is a two way shared thing, on the one part by the individual saying ' I want to belong, and share in the responsibility that comes with it' and the other is that the AM says ' We are happy for you to belong, and again, share in the responsibility of the running of our Area Meeting. Although we have committed attenders, these friends can drift in and out, there is not always the commitment that comes from belonging that membership brings.

(A)Membership may engender a sense of commitment. It can be a source of income (although attenders do contribute)

(F) Everyone is welcome to take part in Quaker worship. To become a member involves making a commitment to Quakers' faith and practice.

Q.2 Who is it for?

Group:

It is for everybody

It means a decision has to be made including those who decide not to take it up

It is for the Society for admin purposes (client base)ymbiotic , for LMs, AMs and individual Friends

Symbiotic relationship between LMs, AMs, Friends and individuals

Being part of the community of Quakers

It's like a shared meal, we are doing it together

(F) Membership is for the individual in their spiritual life as part of the Quaker way - and, symbiotically, membership is for the Meeting and Area Meeting which are the result of, and therefore exist for, the spiritual life and commitment of its Meetings and members.

(A) For anyone who feels ready but only after a commitment of at least six months of regular attendance. Too many times in our meeting those made members suddenly stop coming. That tends to refute part of my answer in question one as attenders are present in many of the meeting's committees.

(A) Friends who have attended fairly regularly for a few years and agree with perhaps at least 4 out of 5 of the testimonies. Maybe they have read "Advices and Queries" and dipped into Quaker Faith and Practice"

(F) Quakers have a very definite behavioural creed. As we are all equal, with no separate clergy or leaders, Quakers have each to make an educated and considered decision to follow this creed. It is not a decision to be taken quickly or lightly as it should inform how we act in all areas of our lives. I believe this is what it means to become a member and this is why we should have membership.

Q.3 Is it still necessary?

Group:

Yes

It is not automatic like being baptised in a church when you are then a member for life

(F) Meetings and Area Meetings do not exist without committed members - so to ask if members are necessary one might as well ask 'are Meetings necessary'? It's a circular, symbiotic thing: it's being part of the Quaker movement, and the movement is embodied in the Religious Society of Friends, both of which, in turn, exist because of spiritually committed Friends belonging to the Quaker movement, therefore to the Religious Society of Friends, therefore as a member.

So the titles 'Full Member' and 'Associate Member' (instead of 'Attender') could be adopted, where both categories are therefore regarded as members. I have experience of this in other associations and it's not a problem (of status) as the choice is largely down to the member and their level of commitment. (Addressing all Friends as 'members' would also resolve the current difficulty of addressing Friends as 'members' - oh, and 'attenders!').

(F) Membership, I feel is an important step on the road to belonging and shows a commitment to Friends and the Quaker way.

(A) Most religious groups (and Quakers is the Religious Society of Friends) have some way to make a person moving from an attender to a member. So it seems a bit

odd to me that Quakers are even discussing whether they need membership. But, in these days of people being able to simply declare their gender, does it matter if people simply declare they're a Quaker? Neither seems right to me, but I seem to be in a minority on the first!

(A) I'm not sure I liken it to "living together" (attenders) and marriage (members) – both can be very committed. Some members have suddenly stopped attending shortly after confirmation of their membership for whatever reason.

(F) Membership is a way of affirming one's beliefs and an agreement to uphold and, therefore, to maintain Quakerism.

This is why I think we have membership and why it is still necessary.

Q.4 If yes, what form should it take?

Group:

Advantage of membership means you can exclude people

One example of a Friend after having their visit, did not want the report read out to Friends at the Area Meeting so a decision on whether to accept her into membership took place without knowledge. Suffice it to say they did not remain coming to the Meeting for very long after they came into membership.

It should be more than one visit. Some churches require applicants to take a course before they are allowed to "convert" e.g. Jews and Catholics.

Should visitors have a crib sheet of questions to ask?

Any of the 3 methods we feel are relevant so the Friend could choose which one they wanted e.g. visit, Clearing or writing a statement.

Do attenders know what it means to be in full membership? Is there a difference?

Are they prepared with any knowledge of Quakerism?

Does it need to be spelt out to them?

What is the difference between attenders and members? Is there any advantage to being a member?

(F) However, the process for Full Membership should be concerned to address the applicant's spiritual alignment with Quakerism and that Quakerism is spirit-led (not least in the process of discernment in decision making) and what this means - as well as in the practical aspects, such as structures and role holding. (Without this information some newer Friends can fill in those spaces with their own assumptions which sometimes leads to misapprehension and difficulties within Meetings).

The membership applicant can be offered various options for making an application - for example by the 'traditional' visit - or using a Meeting House or church room or other venue - or in comfortable coffee venues, or in meetings for clearness with experienced Friends, whatever an applicant would think would be most fulfilling and relaxing.

(A) I have no objection to the current procedure of a meeting between the applicant, one person from their meeting and another from a separate meeting. They then report back to Area Meeting. However, if the applicant is known to believe in God it would help for one of the two others to also be a Christian. However, bearing in mind that at least two from our meeting have over the years been made members without appearing to believe one or more of our core beliefs, I think the meeting conversation should include :

peace testimony
environmental concern
simplicity
the importance of silence
knowing the way a QMW is held
recognising 'the light that is in all of us'
and at least having read Advices and Queries.

I would like to see the presentation of a copy of Quaker Faith and Practice to all new members, as used to happen- obviously postponed if a new edition is imminent.

(F) The ways we come into membership can be through the 3 various ways that are in the attachment document.

(A) Maybe a visit by members that ask the attender about the person's beliefs, the testimonies and Advices and Queries.

(F) I do not have a good answer as to what form it should take. I recognise the argument that the current process of becoming a member can feel challenging and perhaps intimidating. There should be opportunities for people to ask questions and discuss any concerns. These opportunities should be easily accessible and welcoming.

People might ask to become a member, or current members might raise the question. Would it be reasonable to use the idea of the "sense" of a person's readiness, as the clerk does in Meetings for Business?

(F) indicates a Member

(A) indicates an Attender

Group indicates several Friends discussing

Kendal & Sedbergh AM

Minute 23.07.5

We have heard from Preston Patrick LM and agree to forward its response to Meeting for Sufferings.

We encourage Local Meetings to continue to consider the matter, and their responses will be forwarded to MfS

Preston Patrick LM

We looked at the way membership began in the early days, to identify “Those persons who had been convinced of the Truth, who duly attended meetings and who professed (i.e. accepted Friends’ beliefs) were considered to be members.

This was later refined in order to identify those who, being outside the Church’s provision for financial help, needed help from fellow – Quakers.

Today, Friends asked to give service to their meetings are, in Gerald Priestland’s words “Seasoned and with integrity” but not always necessarily in membership.” Membership is the outward expression of an inward commitment”

We decided that there is a “natural membership” as well as a formal one, but that the process of applying is an important stage for many people. Others may be put off by what they see as the requirement to undertake roles, and others may join purely as activists in some area – though this should be enquired into during the membership process.

There are legal requirements for a Charitable body, as the Religious Society of Friends is, to have a membership, which also enables us to speak out to the world as a body, rather than as a loose grouping of like-minded people.

This quote from BYM at Bath in 2014 spoke to us:

“ We recognise that the path to membership will not be right for everyone. Meetings delight in the gifts and leadings of both members and attenders. What is important is the quality of relationships, the sense of community, encouraging one another and offering love to all who come amongst us.”

Kingston & Wandsworth AM

23/48 Minute on membership

We receive the following minute from the ad hoc Meeting held on 31 May 2023 to consider membership. The meeting sought to answer the questions posed by Meeting for Sufferings. We agree to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

The minute reads:

We have considered the following 4 questions about membership sent to area Meetings by Meeting for Sufferings:

- What is membership for?
- Why do we have it?

- Is it necessary?
- What forms might it take?

We have shared experiences as attenders, members and visitors and feel that despite some tensions and imperfections membership remains an important part of our Quaker commitment. Some have expressed the value of belonging as a member beyond their local meeting and others have talked of a welcome deeper commitment.

Accepting someone into membership recognises a reality that has already happened. People become ready for membership at different points. Neither the concept nor the process is perfect but that is more a reason to work at improving it than to scrap it.

We feel there is room for change to make our processes more inclusive, less nerve-racking and simpler. We could communicate more clearly. We could be less coy about talking to attenders about membership. We could write letters of invitation.

We could make more use of alternatives to visitation. We could celebrate membership as a joyous event, featuring cake! We could find ways to express the value of long-term attendership. We could add the option to simplify the whole process to a single application form that ensured mutual understanding of the nature of the commitment to the Quaker way. We could refresh our leaflets.

We could be more understanding of the fear that membership may bring more responsibilities. How can we carry out the necessary work of our community without leaving some members overburdened? This needs more thought.

We need to ask ourselves why young people are not joining us. Have they found a different, a lighter way? We would like Meeting for Sufferings to explore at least a different form of membership, including on-line, not tied to area meetings.

We note that, as discussed at the ad hoc meeting, when Friends become members of their Area Meeting they also, at the same time, become members of BYM.

We agree to circulate what Quaker Faith & Practice says about which roles have to be held by Members and which might be held by Attenders. We recognise the benefits of opening as many roles as possible to attenders where Friends are so led.

Lancashire Central & North AM

Leeds AM

At the Meeting for Sufferings in December 2022 the item 'Quaker Membership: the way forward?' was raised.

Representative to Sufferings were asked to take these questions back to their Area Meetings:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

A Blended Meeting (in person and online) was held at Carlton Hill Local Meeting at 7pm on Thursday, 7 September 2023 to discuss these four questions. All Members and Attenders in the Area Meeting were invited. Fifteen Friends attended.

We are coming to a new understanding of Membership. It can be perceived as divisive. Many of us who are in Membership cherish it, but are nevertheless open to change. We feel that we are at a stage where change is necessary. Many thoughts have been expressed, but we are only beginning to work through them. This will be an on-going conversation.

Whatever we do, the process will be complicated, but we believe that change is entirely possible. We are bad at sharing our spiritual lives. If we did not rely on Membership, we might do this better and put more emphasis on the discernment of Nominations, which would be a good thing. We need to remember that we should all be living and learning together.

Leicester AM

Lincolnshire AM

London West AM

Luton & Leighton AM

Manchester & Warrington AM

2023.33. Call for Discernment from Area Meetings on Membership

Minutes from each of our local meetings on this subject have been read aloud. The clerk has also picked out some extracts from a longer report prepared by Elders at Central Manchester who held a detailed consideration of the issues.

We have had the opportunity for a break-out discussion in small groups to share experiences, hopes and fears about membership of the Society of Friends and to express some of those feelings in Meeting for Worship. We conclude that:

- Broadly we value the opportunity to express commitment that membership brings and believe that it remains an important feature of the life of Quakers in Britain;
- Most of us recognise membership as an important part of Quaker discipline;
- The tradition of visiting people to discuss their application provides an opportunity to ensure a good common understanding of the principles of

Quaker worship, testimonies, business decision making and ways to contribute to the life of the meeting;

- Membership visits provide an important opportunity to share spiritual journeys;
- It is important to us that those who chose not to apply for membership are not excluded from taking as full a part in our meeting life as possible;
- We wish to reduce the number of roles that must be filled by members to a minimum;
- We hope that central guidance can be provided to help determine which roles, if any, must be filled by members;
- A move to a national model of membership away from an Area Meeting model could help reduce risk of Friends, particularly younger Friends, becoming detached from Quakers. However we recognised that we hadn't been able to include much consideration from younger Friends, or indeed attenders more widely, during the consultation and are also aware that there does exist a route to membership through Young Friends General Meeting;
- We realise that many of our formal responsibilities (for example under charity law) remain at Area Meeting level and if there were a move to national membership, some way of retaining connection locally will be essential. Any reform will need careful and detailed national consideration including of legal implications;
- We feel there may be opportunities to simplify procedures, both for joining and leaving membership;
- We feel there are things we can and should do locally and encourage Local Meetings to consider how they may support those exploring their spiritual journeys and considering how membership might play a part in that.

We ask the clerk to forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings along with the detailed consideration from Elders in Central Manchester.

Elders report on the question of Membership

Elders in Central Manchester meeting have sought to engage with Friends in response to the questions posed by Meeting for sufferings regarding Membership.

In order to encourage Friends to share their thoughts Elders distributed a questionnaire and seven responses were received. Two meetings were also arranged, one held at the meeting house and one on zoom.

The following is a summary of the responses.

Why do we have membership and what is it for?

Several Friends described very positive feelings about their own membership and spoke of having found the visiting process, as part of the application, a valuable experience.

One Friend spoke of being a birthright Quaker, meaning that their experience of being a member was through the experience of commitment, rather than a process of being accepted into Membership.

Some Friends described a “powerful feeling of belonging”, and found being a member of the Quakers was important for their identity, as well as feeling a valued part of a community.

Membership as a symbol of commitment was mentioned often, and for various Friends this included financial commitment, time, energy and accepting responsibilities, as well as a commitment to learning more about Quakers, to live the Quaker faith and to maintaining the Quaker movement spiritually.

The importance of having an understanding of the basic principles underlying Quaker worship and its business structure for becoming a member was mentioned, as well as a sense of being on a shared spiritual journey and commitment to a process of communal discernment.

Friends said that they were happy to see Attenders on an equal footing - recognising that a good number of Attenders are more active and more part of our community than many Members.

Friends who felt less positive about membership discussed struggling with labels, questioning what the difference was between members and attenders and feeling that a “two tier” system wasn’t congruent with our testimony of equality.

One attender found themselves wondering if they could call themselves a Quaker if they were not a member, whereas another strongly felt themselves to be a Quaker, despite not feeling led to apply for membership, even after having been asked.

Issues that left people hesitant about applying for membership included the fear of being overwhelmed by the jobs that need doing (as some jobs may only be done by members) and feeling that they would feel the responsibility of taking on roles more strongly if they became a member.

Other people wondered if the prospect of being visited as part of the application process might be intimidating, and the safer recruitment requirements were also mentioned as off putting.

Is it still necessary?

Some Friends felt there was no need for anything to change.

A Friend spoke of the need to support attenders to explore membership if they wish, but not require it.

The shared sense of commitment as a foundation of the Society was seen to be helpful in establishing expectations of support and responsibility.

Apart from the views held above, other issues mentioned when considering how necessary Membership might be included the following.

A Friend described a wider “crisis” of the society having fewer members, with looser ties to each other and to the meeting, and less willingness to do jobs.

The necessity for us to have some sense of numbers within the Society was mentioned, which would be difficult if we had no way of defining who was a Quaker.

Having members was considered important for the meeting and the wider community as a way of having a core of committed people, to help the organisation develop and maintain a sense of direction, through consultation, time, money, energy and ideas.

Friends were aware of the difficulty of Young Friends and other people who may not be settled in one area for long and consequently don't feel connected to a particular Local or Area meeting. It was considered important to hear from Younger Friends, and there have not been much feedback from them included in this report.

The recent possibility of joining meeting for worship ‘virtually’ from different locations around the world was highlighted and was felt to put further pressure on the community-based model of Quaker meetings.

Friends discussed the fact that some members are not active and haven't been seen or heard from for a very long time. We discussed the possibility that they may feel they align themselves with Quaker values but don't want to be part of the local community. We were reminded that there is a way of formally removing Members from the lists if this is felt to be important.

It was recognised that there are legal responsibilities connected to charity law which are held at Area meeting level, rather than by a national authority, that require some roles to be held by members. However, there is “boundaried flexibility” whereby attenders can be appointed to roles traditionally done by members, if a minute is prepared, explaining why the decision was taken. There does seem to be some differing understandings currently about which jobs can only be done by members.

A couple of Friends focussed on why some boundaries may be necessary, mentioning that Quakers are theologically diverse and keen to be inclusive and equitable and in trying to be all things to all people, there is a risk of not being able to maintain organisational integrity. Quaker processes were described as subtle and fragile and could be easily subverted or corrupted in a way that is not obviously apparent because they are dependent upon ‘the spirit’ rather than bureaucratic rules. In the absence of a centralised authority occupied by specific role holders (a church senate or priesthood), there is no distinction between members. This can and does lead to difficulties with conflict in meetings where differences cannot be resolved by conventional calls to creed or obedience to authority.

Maintaining the integrity of Quaker groupings (by the function of membership) provides protection from the potential of malign actions from external groups/organisations, even if such a possibility is not currently being anticipated.

If yes, what form(s) could it take?

Some Friends wondered whether there would be more to gain if the conditions of membership were to be loosened further, feeling it could be a bit cumbersome at present. One suggestion was that a process of discussion at LM level might take place with people known to the attender, rather than having to wait for what can sometimes be long periods while AM appoint visitors and then feedback. Perhaps initial membership could be of LM, until endorsed by AM.

A Friend discussed how to make the idea of membership more attractive, possibly providing people who may be considering membership with a “buddy” to work with them. Also there should be opportunities to find out why some attenders have no wish to become members and maybe set up a dialogue between them and Elders.

A possibility of being able to become a member of a grouping other than AM, ie national groupings such as YFGM, or BYM was mentioned. (If a Friend became a member of YFGM then provision would have to be made to transition elsewhere in due course.) We heard that currently it is possible for geographically isolated Quakers to have membership through EMES (FWCC) .

A Friend felt it might be important for people to be able to have a membership with whichever Quaker group they felt an affiliation with, but that this should not be at the expense of more involved participation with one’s local Quaker community.

Mention was made of Friends in America who are asked to review their membership each year, with a commitment of finance and time. Some Friends felt that they wouldn’t want to have to do this and spoke of wanting to feel they could still belong to the Quaker community even when old and not able to actively participate.

Mid Essex AM

Mid Wales AM

Minute 28/23: Membership and Belonging:

In our afternoon session we have prepared our response to the Minute from MfS 22/12/10 requesting Area Meetings consider Quaker membership and, in particular, the following questions: 1.Why do we have Membership? 2.What is it for? 3.Is it still necessary? 4.If yes, what form(s) could it take? The response from this session will be sent to MfS together with this Minute.

Appendage to Minute 28/23: Responses, addressed question by question. Many of the responses overlap:

Why do we have membership?

Originally Membership, which from 1737 could be birthright (although this birthright abolished in 1959), was a mechanism to control poverty assistance. This may be seen as a crucial factor in the continuation of Quakerism when other, similar radical movements, fell by the wayside. Quakers are the only radical group from 17th century still in existence.

- Membership necessary to functioning as a spiritual/religious organisation.
- It has a function in apportioning roles and holding responsibility.
- It is about belonging and being accepted - a 'right of passage'.
- Demonstrates a reciprocal commitment between the person and the organisation.
- Gives an opportunity to devote energy to something believed in.
- An encouragement to other's who might want to take part.
- Membership gives structure to the organisation.

What is it for?

- Membership gives a sense of belonging, spiritual continuity and history.
- It is a way of holding traditions that are tried and tested.
- It is a way/a guide to sharing our lives as a supportive community, and apportioning jobs and roles.
- Having membership builds trust so that we can:
 - Share in a search, giving opportunity for exploration.
 - Share beliefs' understanding.
 - Open ourselves to new light / experiences / education.
 - Challenge hierarchies
- It is for our comfort and discomfort.

Is it still necessary?

- It may be seen as a source of finance/financial support.
- It provides a base for action.
- Its value to individuals can be in the solidity that it provides for those who want to dip in and out.
- As members the commitment to seeking truth holds us together.
- Membership becomes a crucible, holding a valuable jewel in realm of spirituality.

BUT

- It loses value in the hierarchical implications of 'membership', causing splintering into different groups, (i.e. members, non-members / attenders).
- There is a need to ensure that the willingness to take responsibility, or of being a 'member', is not seen as a badge of honour.

If yes, what form(s) could it take?

- The division between attenders and member may be seen as unnecessary where 'attenders' are as active in meetings and take on responsibilities.
- Is there a problem with the word 'attender'?
- Could there be 'formal' and 'informal' membership – i.e. everyone a 'member'?
- Could there be 'local' membership – identified as commitment to the community of the Local Meeting, coming together to worship, in silence, rather than necessarily a commitment to the wider structure of Quakers?
(Reference – *Quaker faith & practice* 10.03 – 1994 – Change of structures, BYM)

Mid-Somerset AM

Mid-Thames AM

23/07/08 Membership of the Religious Society of Friends

Further to our Minute 23/04/11 we offer Meeting for Sufferings this response to their questions about Membership. It is the result of the considerations of our Local Meetings followed by the discernment of Mid Thames Area Meeting.

Why do we Have Membership?

Membership has several quite different roles. One is purely administrative which enables us to communicate with and support each other and fulfil the requirements of external bodies, such as the Charities Commission. This requirement could be met in other ways and is not, on its own, a good answer to 'why do we have Membership?'.

Those who become Members value it for

- the sense of belonging and recognition
- a way to express their spiritual and practical commitment to The Religious Society of Friends.

Many Friends are regular Attenders who have not sought or do not wish to seek Membership. They appreciate that they are not under pressure to become Members (and resent any well-meaning attempts to suggest that they should). For some, this is a matter of principle. Others, who have been brought up as Quakers and called themselves "Quakers" all their lives, wonder why they should have to apply for something that they live. Perhaps this provides a clue as to the definition of Membership, you become a Member when you move from saying "I go to Quaker meeting" to "I am a Quaker"

Perhaps the question should be "How do we recognise this commitment when it happens?"

What is it for?

Key points made from personal experience are:

- Providing a sense of acceptance and belonging (becoming a Member can make Friends feel truly part of their Meeting and the wider world of Quakers, but this can also happen through getting more involved in Quaker life).
- An inward and outward sign of strong personal commitment, to the Society, to its spiritual roots and the way of life that springs from those roots. Like marriage as opposed to living together.
- It's the way we identify with and are part of The Religious Society of Friends as a whole.
- The visit is an opportunity to clarify where the Friend is on their own journey and to know other Friends more deeply. It is greatly valued by many Friends.

On the other hand:

- The Society does not need to 'approve' personal conviction
- Some Friends feel that Membership goes against the testimony of equality, creating two classes of Friends within Meetings, though many long-term Attenders do not feel excluded or second-class, but appreciate being able to choose to be Friends Without Membership. We value diversity.

Most of our Local Meetings agree that in practice there is no distinction made between Members and Attenders and they all play an equal part in the life of their Meeting. We ask that barriers to regular attenders fulfilling roles such as trustees, or on central committees, be removed.

Is it Still Necessary?

For some Friends our current Membership processes do not appear to work. Others think that usually our current Membership processes work well and do not need changing.

There is some concern that the questions being asked seem to be leading towards getting rid of Membership as a foregone conclusion.

It seems that Meeting for Sufferings is finding it hard to fill committee roles from within our Membership. This issue can be solved by membership no longer being a requirement for central committees, or for any roles in the Society.

If the 'practical' and 'external' requirements for Membership cease to exist, Membership is no longer 'necessary' for external reasons, but is still beneficial to many Friends at a personal and spiritual level. There is a strong feeling that the decision to become a Member or not, is a personal matter.

For some Friends, Membership has never been spiritually 'necessary'. For others it is very important. Many, who have been brought up as Quakers and called

themselves “Quakers” all their lives wonder why they should have to apply for something that they live.

What would be lost if we didn't have it?

- An opportunity to declare our commitment publicly and within Meeting
- Something that recognises an important stage in our spiritual journeys
- A ritual of belonging – and we have few rituals
- Milestones in our journeys could be and are marked in other ways which are recognized by the Meeting as a whole.

If Yes, what form should it take?

We feel that it is helpful to many Friends to have their commitment to Quakers recognised, though this does not have to be called membership.

We suggest that MfS consider the administrative, spiritual and belonging roles of Membership separately.

The administrative function could be fulfilled by Area Meetings maintaining a Register of Friends, initially based on Handbook data with appropriate consents. This would be published as the Handbook but would not distinguish between Members and Attenders as these terms would no longer apply. Local Meetings would maintain an email list for communication. Being on this list would indicate no commitment, but simply a wish to be kept informed.

Local Meetings should focus on creating the sense of community, belonging and welcome for all Friends and visitors.

Local Meetings should encourage Friends to explore the wider Quaker World, by regularly reminding Friends that anyone can attend AM, RM, BYM, a Woodbrooke course or be the Meeting's link with Quaker Life or QPSW or other Quaker bodies etc. QF&P could be presented to any Friend showing commitment to the Local Meeting.

Friends would join Quakers by notifying their Area Meeting that they wish to be a Quaker. No visit would be needed before being registered in the Handbook, but could be offered as a service that can be taken up at any time. Friends registering would be acknowledged and welcomed as they agree with their Local (or Area?) Meeting, but ideally this would include Friends from another LM. Once registered, Friends would be offered a Pastoral Friend and be listed in the Handbook if they wished. Nominations Committees would discern suitable people as they do now, but without membership being involved.

There could be an opportunity for Friends to have a more formal recognition of their commitment to Quakers, which involves a visit and a welcome, thus giving them the chance to meet and be acknowledged by Friends outside their Local Meeting.

Friends could be encouraged to explore this possibility when they realise that they identify as a Quaker.

This approach might be less daunting and confusing for newcomers. We want to welcome people into our Meetings and be more open and inclusive.

A Question for MfS

How would BYM retain its identity without Membership?

Norfolk & Waveney AM

9. Membership Discussion

Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings and Local Meetings to consider the following four questions –

1. Why do we have membership?
2. What is it for?
3. Is it still necessary?
4. If yes, what form(s) could it take?

The Meeting considered these questions both in small groups and in worship sharing. A summary will be prepared for forwarding to Meeting for Sufferings, and for circulation to Norfolk and Waveney Area Meeting.

Summary of exercise regarding Membership.

Friends did not really keep to the questions posed, but a summary of responses is given below. It is fair to say that they were, on the whole, very positive.

Positives

Historical - tradition since 1712. Good to confidently acknowledge the variety of traditions represented in our Meetings.

Spiritual Commitment – allows Friends who so wish to make a commitment to Quakers.

Gives mutual support and feeling of belonging – could possibly act as legal reason for refusing certain requirements, such as conscription or oaths. Allows a greater degree of organisation and thus potentially a stronger voice in the community.

Reservations

Is membership compatible with a truly open society?

Suggestions for the future

Need to remember that the process of coming into membership should not be hurried – it is different for each individual. Needs to be accessible and inviting – Are you ready? Rather than Are you acceptable?

Important to ensure that applicants have sufficient knowledge to understand what they are applying for.

Is there a route for individuals not attending an Area Meeting? Membership of an Area Meeting means the individual is also a member of BYM, but can one become a member of BYM without going through an Area Meeting?

North East Thames AM

23. 53 Spiritual and Practical Basis of Membership

This morning we heard reflections from a number of F(f)riends about what membership means to them and why we have membership of the Religious Society of Friends.

We have heard many ways that we value membership and the aspects of membership that are important to us.

Over the course of the day we have considered the following questions:

- What groups are you a member of?
- How do you show you are a member?
- How does the group acknowledge that you belong?
- What do you get from being part of the group?
- Why do we have membership?
- Do we still want it?
- What difference does being a member or not being a member of the Society of Friends make to you?

We have heard there is a potential tension between:

- our testimony to equality and the concept of membership
- feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

We feel that membership continues to be needed and have spent this afternoon considering alternative forms of membership and explored alternative membership procedures, in the light of the fundamental elements of being a Quaker outlined in *Quaker faith & practice* 11.01.

We have been reminded of current membership application processes in different AMs and Young Friends General Meeting.

We feel that an important part of being a member is a willingness to contribute to the spiritual life of the Society of Friends and its corporate discernment processes.

There are many people who consider themselves to be Quakers but do not wish to become a member and we have heard some of the barriers that may contribute to

not applying for membership. We have felt the lack of voice of long-term attenders today.

We thank our Friend Helen Carmichael for leading us through the programme and all those who have helped with the arrangements for today's meeting.

We forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings and hope this will aid their discernment when considering membership.

We also forward this minute to North West London AM.

North London AM

North Scotland AM

30/23 Consideration of membership

In response to a Meeting for Sufferings request to consider the nature of membership our Meeting today has collected the following comments:

- Why do we have membership?

It provides an opportunity for Friends to commit. We need Friends who are long-standing, committed, maintaining Quaker tradition, practice, and our Quaker voice in society.

Membership affirms a society of like-minded people. There are no other leaders and ministers than us.

- What is it for?

It marks a right of passage, being loved into Quakerism, it takes time, it's an invisible process.

Membership recognises the knowledge required before joining

- Is it still necessary?

While it is important to minimise the difference between attenders and members, welcome attenders into roles and to recognise their gifts to our Meetings, we need to identify key roles that perhaps only members can fill (for legal reasons as well as evidence of commitment and experience): AM clerks, trustees, 'elders'.

- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

A greater emphasis on being members of BYM. AM's only administers our membership to the Society of Friends.

Flexibility on routes into membership. That Local Meetings might initiate the membership process by finding out what route to membership an Attender might prefer. Attenders might then be simply given an invitation to join the Society, or to

receive visiting Friends. Area Meetings appointing visiting Friends might best check with the Attender that the names of visiting Friends are acceptable to them, and to agree a location for the visit.

The membership process needs to be unthreatening and welcoming, minimising the sense of meeting high ideals, accepting new Friends on the journey, at any point in that journey.

Young Friends might have the choice of not be attached to an Area Meeting, but attached to Junior Yearly Meeting, for example.

It is helpful to let attenders know that they can choose how and with what AM their membership is attached to/administered by.

Reassure Attenders that it is an easy process to resign membership.

There might be an option for paused membership, so that those Friends (Members) who are no longer active or contributing to AM are not adding to the AM quota.

We recognise there is a need to modernise membership and our route to membership.

North Somerset AM

23.35 Membership of the Society of Friends

Friends in our Meetings appreciated the opportunity to think about the meaning of membership. Our Local Development Worker Jac Blacker facilitated a well-attended online meeting and each of our three Local Meetings considered the matter in their meetings for church affairs. Their minutes reflect a clear sense that membership continues to be valued for a number of reasons:

- It supports a sense of commitment and belonging;
- Continues to be essential for certain key roles;
- Signals acceptance of the structure and discipline of the Society.

Minutes from our Meetings also indicated the need to look again at the process involved in becoming a member to make it more supportive. The importance of nurturing attenders and enabling them to fulfil a greater variety of roles was emphasised.

Ministry at this Area Meeting highlighted the following:

- We need to remember that some Friends feel comfortable to remain as attenders while being active in their Meeting;
- We are conscious that we have an increasing difficulty in filling roles. We hope that Meeting for Sufferings will encourage Area Meetings to enable attenders to take on a wider variety of roles. We may have too many roles to

fill, but maintaining the life of the Meeting and finding Friends who are prepared to give wider service in the name of Friends is vitally important.

- The human connections, the way we react to each other in our Meetings is crucial, but there also needs to be more clarity about systems and structures as well as the tasks which need to be performed.
- A range of alternative processes for becoming a member should be considered and explored, including different patterns which have already been tried in some Area Meetings. This can include variations in the way visits are organised. Attenders being able to choose their visitors can be supportive, as long as at least one visitor is an experienced member.

Talking about what it means to be a Quaker and using study programmes such as Quaker Quest and Becoming Friends are helpful.

North Wales AM

23/55 Further to minute 23/14, local meetings had been encouraged to give consideration to the question of membership as such, the need for it, the shape of it, possible routes to it. The clerks collated the responses (attached) they received from some of our meetings, which have been circulated.

This is something individuals as well as area meetings have been asked to discuss and we have had a period of reflection on this matter, in order to respond to Meeting for Sufferings as an area meeting by the deadline for their consultation.

We find that, across our local meetings, we value the current system of membership – while respecting the decision of attenders not to come into membership and encouraging their full participation in our spiritual life and work. We would like to see full appreciation in future of attenders' offer to serve, at any level.

We do feel that, as an area meeting, we could in future be more flexible about the possible routes into membership already available.

At area meeting level, we see a need for embracing online Friends, without them having to 'belong' to a local meeting.

We would also like to see a possibility for those meeting primarily online or not affiliated to a specific area meeting to hold membership at the Yearly Meeting level and we hope that this is a question that will be resolved soon.

North West London AM

NWLAM Minute 2023.07.23.5

We support the concept and process of membership with its commitment and responsibility. All are welcome to participate in our Meetings, members or not, and we hope attenders feel equally part of the Meeting. We hope membership can be extended to include Friends without a local geographical tie.

Northamptonshire AM

Northumbria AM

Nottinghamshire & Derbyshire AM

2023/20 Response to MfS regarding Membership

The draft response was approved and is attached to the Minutes.

Why do we have membership?

- Membership is about discipleship and the affirmation of Quaker values and practices. It is not about spiritual achievement.
- It often leads to further learning about Quakerism
- It is common for organisations to have membership.
- Quaker membership asks us to: accept Divine guidance; be able to participate in Quaker worship; accept the equality of all people; be willing to share responsibility for our Quaker Meeting.
- Quaker membership makes clear that the way we live our lives is as, if not more, important than any set of beliefs
- It is meant to be both a responsibility and a joy – a statement that ‘this is my spiritual home, where I belong’
- It is necessary to understand the numbers for planning and staffing the whole organisation including BYM
- It has an external dimension that is demonstrated to the outside world

What is it for

- A demonstration of personal commitment for some, and also a commitment from the Meeting.
- It is seen as a step on a spiritual journey
- Some wish to be visible as a Quaker.
- Mutual support.
- Some system of formal membership is necessary for the right management of money and property. Trustees are certainly required legally to be members and there may be other roles both locally and centrally that have the same requirement.

Is it still necessary

Yes

If yes, what forms could it take

- The present membership process is too cumbersome and should be simplified. People move around the country – especially those studying – and it should be possible to belong to BYM and not just one AM. It should not be necessary to document transfers between AMs.

- Membership could be automatic after a suitable period.
- Attenders and Members should be equally considered for all roles. This should be a matter of discernment for the local meeting, especially the smaller ones who struggle with maintaining a full business structure.
- It may not be necessary for it to be a commitment for life and could possibly be renewed periodically.

We recognise that some Friends are not Members for a range of reasons such as:

On the journey towards membership

- Already hold membership in another faith community and feel that is sufficient/do not wish to feel a previous commitment is being rejected
- Value the Quaker way but continue to miss aspects from other traditions.
- Find the process cumbersome

Oxford & Swindon AM

Pendle Hill AM

Pendle Hill AM Minute 23.35 Membership

Further to area minute 23.32 'Membership Reflection' Pip Swancott our Meeting for Sufferings representative has collated our responses.

We discerned during worship sharing on 10th June that membership is important to us. The analogies with marriage or being part of the crew on a passenger ship were expressed several times by Friends as was membership meaning belonging and commitment to the Society.

We considered our existing membership process to be still important but that it could be modernised or simplified so that the process does not represent a barrier or make Friends who are not in membership feel 'secondary' in our meetings. We have heard that Friends not in membership can feel undervalued and hope we can simplify our ways of working to enable them to use all their gifts in our meetings. We have also considered the possibility that Friends could have 'National Membership' rather than AM membership where more appropriate. We have considered that the membership process could become a local meeting rather than an area meeting responsibility.

Area Meeting agrees to forward this minute to Robert Card, clerk for Meeting for Sufferings.

Pickering & Hull AM

Quaker Prison Chaplains

23.16 Membership issues for chaplains

We reported back the experience of our threshing meeting about whether membership is a crucial step for chaplains.

We affirmed that membership remains an important part of the official faith endorsement of Quaker Prison Chaplains:

- It expresses a commitment to the Religious Society of Friends through a recognised process which means that chaplains can expect to be properly acquainted with the full richness of Quaker life of which they will be a representative.
- It gives confidence that an appropriately rigorous process has been adopted as a starting point for eligibility prior to the discernment, nomination and appointment of the chaplain. This provides a clear link of accountability through to the Quaker Area Meeting that can be upheld by the Quaker Faith Advisor to HMPPS, and provides parity with the processes followed by other faiths.
- We affirm that, for the purposes of appointing Quaker Prison Chaplains, the membership system exists as a helpful and systematic process that we can trust has been conducted in right ordering at the local community level where the individual chaplain is best known: if we didn't already have this process we would need to create another system to do the same job.

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings as part of their consultation on membership.

Sheffield & Balby AM

South East London AM

23/20 Membership

Meeting for Sufferings has asked all area meetings to discern the role of membership and to report back to them..

In particular:-

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for? (and maybe, in addition, what is it not for)
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

This was discerned at length, and the following minute approved:

SELAM Minute 23/20 Membership (19 March 2023)

We held a wide-ranging discussion about membership, both of in-person and Zoom meetings. Friends generally felt that membership should be retained, although perhaps in a different form as means of communications change. We believe that membership shows commitment, but may not be the only way of showing it.

One attender who joined us on Zoom is deeply involved in Quaker work and wishes to be a prison chaplain. However, as he is not able to attend a “bricks and mortar” meeting, he cannot currently become a member and therefore is unacceptable to the prison authorities. We would hope a solution to this problem can be found.

We believe that membership needs to be welcoming and inclusive, and we accept that

people’s ability to contribute to the meeting may vary as their circumstances change. A sense of belonging is paramount. We also accept that Friends who are unable to attend Meeting physically for any reason should be as welcome and as much a part of the community as anyone else.

In short, we feel that diversity in forms of membership (not excluding the current procedures) will enrich our communities in the future.

This minute will be sent to Meeting for Sufferings, as requested by them.

South East Scotland AM

South London AM

Earlier in the year you asked Area Meetings 4 questions about Membership. We dealt with those at Area Meeting last Sunday and I attach our response. While they are bit a straightforward answer to those question our response does, we believe, encapsulate our thoughts about Membership-Item 4 of our Minutes.

Summary of responses from Friends at South London Area Meeting

Meaning of membership to individual

It imparts a sense of belonging, to a community and a tradition (historical community)

It enables members (and attenders, as potential members) to grow and develop spiritually. It can attract people to Quakers via what is seen by some as a practice of mindfulness.

It gives access to a community of support. (We were reminded that membership historically developed as a way of providing a community of support.)

It may be personally important to say ‘I’m a Quaker’.

It can be an important stage in the spiritual journey of friends

Meaning of membership to a Quaker community

It enables the meeting to compile information about friends who are participating in the life of the meeting, and especially those who are doing jobs that involve legal, financial or safeguarding responsibilities.

It enables a formal relationship between the individual and the Quaker community, with a clear set of responsibilities on both sides. There is a discipline to membership, and it clarifies both what being a Quaker asks of us, and what we receive: personal service is an important way of doing Quaker, as well as being Quaker.

It is important to have signed-up members to give stability and structure to our community.

It provides corporate security for both right ordering of Quaker worship, business and financial stewardship.

It is important to apply a consistent standard for membership, through guidance for visitors.

Personal service is an important way of doing Quaker, as well as being Quaker.

How will membership work in a Pan London Area Meeting?

Meaning of membership to the wider world

Membership is part of the historical context of the beginning of the Society's movement; it would be sad to let it go.

It demonstrates to the wider world that Quakers can fulfil the legal requirements of corporate governance and compliance (which may be important for the Charities Commission).

It is a public commitment to trying one's best to live by the Testimonies.

This corporate membership allows us to have a distinct Quaker voice with which to contribute to public discourse beyond the Society itself.

Acquisition and types of membership

Recognising it is sometimes difficult to fill posts, might we consider a 'half-way house' to fill posts?

Acceptance of membership may come to mean added pressure to take on jobs and to contribute financially, which may deter attenders from applying. The spiritual meaning of membership should therefore be emphasised.

Remaining out of membership may make a statement by attenders who thus show their wish to maintain a limited level of commitment, and it is important to continue to allow them to enjoy that freedom.

The process of applying for membership and needs to be robust but also a sensitive, supportive and shared experience between the applicant and the meeting.

Acquisition of membership might be made more flexible: the example was offered of a meeting that allows attenders to enter membership via correspondence, for those who do not wish to be visited.

Given that people are generally more reluctant to join organisations these days, might we consider replacing formal membership with a statement by meetings that an individual friend was in good standing with them? What practical difference would that make?

We noted the growth of different forms of Quaker fellowship, such as the growth of online meetings, where there is no natural geographical link. Online meetings offer benefits to disabled and elderly friends and those who belong to dispersed communities.

However, we are aware that virtual communities in general raise issues and challenges for the oversight of membership and the maintenance of right ordering in both worship and church governance, as well as safeguarding. It is difficult to see how enquirers and new attenders will learn about the Quaker way without having a geographical location, or attachment to something more formal than logging onto a virtual meeting for worship. We recognise that many people have always been in places of isolation and their participation needs to be supported.

Young people who may be moving around - for example, between their hometown and a university town - may find it difficult to build a link to one local community. Might this be recognised by some other form of membership, such as national

South Wales AM

Minute 2023.07.06: The meaning of membership: Response to Meeting for Sufferings

We have received notes of an area meeting event on membership and belonging, held on 7 June, and minutes and reports from Cardiff, Lampeter, Milford Haven, Newport, Penarth, and Swansea Local Meetings: see the attached document Minutes and Reports. Some of us also attended an event hosted by our Local Development Worker in March. Alongside long-standing and more recent members, a few attenders were present at most of the discussions, and they added valuable perspectives.

The pandemic has helped to create new ways of being in community. Some Friends now feel their strongest connection to an online community, which can be more inclusive of those who find it difficult to attend in person, for health, geographic location, or other reasons. Worshipping online is also a preferred or additional option for some Friends. It is important that where and how we meet is not a matter of certain ways being more 'the real thing' than others. Any form of membership in the future will need to recognise that for some people the local meeting is not their primary, or only, Quaker community.

What does membership mean to us personally? It can be an expression of commitment, a mark of belonging to a community and being at home, a public statement of identity, like a marriage. The commitment of members to uphold Quaker

discipline, and to the testimonies, is important. Another analogy is that of being part of the crew rather than a passenger on a ship. But membership can mean different things at different stages of our lives, we might be actively involved at times and more distanced at others. Friends belong to multiple communities, Quaker and non-Quaker, and they might have a sense of just one community being their spiritual home or of several feeling that way.

To some people membership can appear off-putting, making them feel more of an outsider. The distinction between members and attenders can be viewed as a contradiction to our testimony to equality. Some feel that joining is unnecessary and irrelevant as part of their spiritual journey, they are already part of the meeting. If the commitment is strong enough, do we need the label?

Membership marks boundaries and defines who is part of the community, for example, for charitable purposes. Some people wondered whether it could be as simple as including all those who are invited to be on the contact list as members? Is it essential for the secular purposes of membership to be conflated with a spiritual commitment? The Spirit does not require membership, but membership does require the Spirit.

Some felt the present geographical basis of membership works well for most Friends, but that an alternative non-geographic system was also needed, e.g., BYM-wide membership.

The current form of membership does not work well for children and young people who may be very committed locally, or indeed more committed nationally. How can we ensure that children and young people feel welcomed and affirmed in their commitment to Quakerism?

Membership should be a two-way relationship – a commitment by the individual to the community and by the community to the individual. This commitment anchors us, particularly in times of need and difficulty. The opportunity to make such a commitment is both necessary and valuable. But does this need to be by joining the Society? Some Friends feel they express their part in this two-way relationship through faithful attendance, service, and financial contribution. Attenders and Members are all part of the Meeting, and it is primarily: 'by their deeds shall you know them'.

In many worshipping communities no distinction is made between attenders and members when making appointments. Being in membership helped some Friends feel a commitment to serve, which helped them to grow and develop relationships across the community, for others the expectation that membership entailed service to the Society gave them a sense of a burden and guilt. Service involving three-year commitments to a role, was especially off-putting for some. Can we develop more ways of giving short term service to specific tasks, working in teams which enable us

all to work more flexibly. Is there a necessary connection between membership and certain forms of service?

Whilst some people regarded the process of applying for membership as an unwelcoming barrier, many members described how the membership visit enabled them to talk about their individual spiritual lives as an experience which they treasured. A visit of this kind can feel like a meeting for clearness. Could we facilitate more of such conversations at depth naturally and regularly, so that we feel really known by our Quaker communities?

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Collated minutes and reports of discussions within SWAM responding to the call by Meeting for Sufferings for Friends to consider these questions:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

Meetings approached this consultation in different ways, some including a question related to our sense of 'belonging', in addition to the questions about membership above, or some adaptation of them.

Report of the BQLQ event on Membership and Belonging, 7 June 2023

This Zoom event was advertised widely within SWAM "for anyone who finds or seeks a spiritual home amongst Quakers". 18 Friends attended, all but one in membership. Friends responded in the first half to the question: What does that spiritual home feel like to you? Friends described how they value belonging to a diverse community which offers them:

- spiritual nourishment,
- acceptance, friendship and caring,
- encouragement to be creative and take risks,
- opportunities for meaningful service,
- boundaries,
- the practice of discernment.

A Friend asked, If your meeting feels like home, does it mean it's your only home? Or are there layers of spiritual home, or of belonging as a Quaker? Not so much 'home' as 'homes'. Another offered a parallel with an insight about bereavement, that people come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. We are in some Quaker communities, such as our meetings, for a lifetime; we serve or take part in others for a season or a reason. But we belong to them all.

Friends then reflected on where membership comes into this: Why do Quakers have membership, what is it for? Responses focused more on what it means spiritually and personally than any functional purpose.

A two-way relationship. We heard how a US Evangelical Friends Church makes a covenant with its members: the meeting makes a promise to the individual and the individual commits themselves to the meeting. If we focus on the body that we belong to we might ask, What is it my meeting gives me that nothing else can?

What is the difference? Attenders also serve in key roles, worship as faithfully, give as much of their time and money. And yet membership does feel important. Maybe it isn't for anything, it just is. A Friend who hates joining finally felt they had grown up on making the commitment to become a member after many years as an attender. Another described how joining was a spiritual step, it said, I am a Quaker, this is what I stand for. But an experience of deep sharing in their meeting changed their perspective – they were clearly all members. If the commitment is strong enough, do we need the label?

Our evolving faith and practice: Evolution is a characteristic of the Society of Friends; what membership means now is different from before. Some Friends value membership as an agreement to accept the discipline and contribute to the meeting, but others do little for their meeting while some attenders do a lot. Only recently did trustees have to be members. Things are changing all the time; our Quaker future isn't fixed.

A sense of identity. What do we gain and what does the meeting gain when we identify as members? It's a marker that says, I belong to this group and this group belongs to me. Our need for a sense of identity is very deep rooted.

The membership visit. It would be a loss not to have that process. It marks a vital transition in becoming a Friend, an experience of really being seen and acknowledged as who you are by your meeting, it's not just about being accepted.

Maybe we wouldn't need membership if we could feel more sure that our meeting really knows us.

Southern East Anglia AM

SEAQM response to request from Meeting for Sufferings re membership

Why have a membership?

In the very early days of Quakerism, membership was not thought necessary. But because of the need for welfare and later the then political situation it was soon necessary to commit openly to be part of a particular organisation and its principles. Now, becoming a recognised charity in the late 20th century brings the further legal responsibilities of owning property and employing people, governance documents and bank accounts. Certain officers of the charity must be members.

Membership of the Society of Friends however is associated with a definition of Quakerism then and now. It is an essential, indispensable part of our community. This separates it from membership of many organisations where membership merely adds a name and contact details to a list and indicates the need for an annual subscription of some kind to maintain the purposes of the organisation.

Being a Member of the Society of Friends in the UK requires an understanding of its spiritual and practical purposes. There is a strong spiritual bond but also a commitment to the understanding of the Priesthood of all believers – there is no laity, we are all responsible for the organisation which bring implications and responsibilities. Membership is by conviction and brings a sense of belonging, being part of a community with a purpose beyond that of the individual. We are not just meeting to share our spiritual journeys, which we clearly do; together, we act out our beliefs in action in the wider world, spelt out in our testimonies of truth, simplicity, equality and peace.

What is it for

Would a spiritual bond without formal membership be enough? The possible responsibilities incurred by running ourselves for some gets in the way of their spiritual needs or their work with other organisation or even their lives. It is possible to be an attender, living as a Friend without formal commitment. For some, the very process of being accepted into membership is complicated because of the need to understand the organisation. But, it is this very understanding that brings a deeper understanding of what is meant by discernment and how our business method works without voting – we jointly seek the will of God. However, we are not just a worshipping community but live our lives in the world and ‘let them speak’. Seeking membership is just part of a life journey in the spirit. Our history records what Quakers have achieved in the past.

We have a responsibility to explore Quakerism, to guide a worshipping group in the Quaker approach to religion. We are the ‘Religious Society of Friends.

Is it still necessary?

Yes, we want to uphold and encourage less experienced Friends in the journey, while recognising it is not a goal to be reached but a public commitment to move forward in the spirit with others also seeking. We have to talk through our understanding of the form and structure of the organisation with existing Friends before being accepted as it is not straight forward. Some join and later resign, some even coming back later. Membership is a way of sharing the deep processes of understanding Quakerism. The paperwork associated with the process could be simplified but not the understanding.

If so what form should/could it take

We need to recognise a fluidity and mobility of modern life that being a member in one location may not be right, particularly for students. This may even need a rethink

on the geographical location of our charities, their governing documents etc. which determine membership. Different forms could be explored. This is where the ongoing debate should take place.

Southern Marches AM

AM 23/09 Reports and items emanating from them

(a) Meeting for Sufferings Minutes – report from Ann Davison
Ann Davison spoke about the Meeting of Sufferings Meeting on the 1 and 3 December by highlighting items that AM needed to know and to think about.

In terms of needing to know: the name of Overseer is not to be used – Pastoral Friend is a possibility, but other terms may be adopted. Book of Discipline revision first draft texts are available on nominations and marriage. Friends are invited to make comments and suggestions, which Meeting for Sufferings is keen to receive. Information can be found on Revising Quaker faith & practice | Quakers in Britain

Friends are encouraged to think about the relationship between Trustees and Meeting for Sufferings. The question posed was ‘How can discernment be retrieved from Trustees?’ The relationship between Trustees and Meeting for Sufferings will be an agenda item for Britain Yearly Meeting this year.

(b) Membership

[This is a minute of exercise, which is a minute demonstrating participation in a process of discernment]

The matter of membership considered by Meeting for Sufferings at its meetings on 1 and 3 December 2022 – Minute MfS/22/12/10 refers, together with a background paper ‘Membership – call for discernment by area meetings’ have set the scene for a discussion today on membership.

We have been asked to focus on the questions proposed, which were

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

We explored the purpose of membership. The views expressed in ministry today distinguished between the purpose of membership for the individual Friends applying for membership and the purpose as it relates to the Quaker community.

From the community point of view we want participation in worship, participation in the business of the meeting, including committee service, and financial support. We also want their spiritual gifts. We want their leadings and their ministries, especially their Spirit-led vocal ministry. We want their prayers. We want them to enrich our

collective religious life with their individual spiritual stories and gifts and strengths—and their spiritual weaknesses, their seeking spirits, their inner crying-out.

But what do people seeking membership want? They seek membership in part because they have come to realise that they are already Quakers in some degree, they already identify with this Way, and they want to take this identity to a new level, which membership in a meeting promises to confer. But what does “being a Quaker” mean? It means perhaps growing into this identity, which is undertaken by nurturing and developing growth into this identity.

People who seek membership in the Religious Society of Friends, the life of the Spirit is important to them, they feel they need to pursue it in the embrace of a community, and the Society of Friends looks like the right community.

All of us are on a journey with varying levels of uncertainty about what it means to be Quaker – for some becoming a member is a transformative experience for others there is a gradual realization that they are Quaker but can't quite understand why or use the words to describe what it means. Are these people less Quaker, than those who are more certain? It seems a matter of degree, rather like a test, but in reality it is not so.

There was much anxiety expressed about the distinction which is often made between members and attenders, and although there was acceptance of why individuals want to apply for membership, there was much disquiet expressed that some roles, such as participation in central committees, are not open to attenders.

One of our testimonies is to equality and it seems strange to distinguish in our list of Friends, members and attenders. Are both designations equally valued or is there some hierarchy at play here with one person being superior to another?

Some of the main issues raised relate to young Quakers and to non-geographic membership, which are subjects we shall return to this afternoon. Young Friends often feel isolated, and events such as link groups, Junior Yearly Meeting, Quaker Camp, and Young Friends General Meeting are very important in providing a sense of spirituality within a community of young people.

We will return to membership issues at a future in person meeting.

AM 23/13 Non geographic membership / membership for students and others

Reading 10.25 from Qf&p was read to us at the start of the afternoon, which emphasised the importance of practical commitments, a spiritual willingness to grow, to listen to one another and confirmation of the spiritual growth in our lives.

We then considered membership in these contexts through the following suggestions in break out rooms. In addition Friends were encouraged to extend the discourse developed in the morning session.

1. Categories

- Types of people who might be interested in non-geographic (unattached) membership
- For example, students, people with jobs (or seeking jobs), where they have to travel around and unattached Friends such as the Friend who joined while in Usk Prison
- Other issues that may come to mind during ministry

2. Mechanism of communication

- Electronic communication
- Among Young Friends, who are difficult to communicate with even by e-mail
- Social media

The minutes from each group are recorded below. [These are minutes of exercise]

A

Concern was expressed that HE institutions offer less opportunity for Young Friends to meet other Quakers than they did when Friends speaking were young. Quaker schools also no longer seem to want to advertise this. However Area Meeting camp is still a vibrant, all-age community.

If Young Friends are excluded from Central Committees by not being in membership, we're losing a vital viewpoint and contribution. Being recorded on LM lists, as a member or attender, offers an opportunity to express further commitment beyond your current participation. If many Young Friends don't identify with an LM, how can they register this commitment? How could people register an interest in living a Quaker life at a national level?

Another Friend suggested we should turn this around 180 degrees and look at it from a different angle. Can we go to places where young people congregate and strike up conversations which give an opportunity to explain that we're Quakers and how climate justice, equality, peace etc. are all fundamental Quaker values?

LM & AM Clerks could also make more effort to contact students from Quaker schools moving to their area.

B

We were in favour of unattached membership as it showed that somebody cared where they were and in that way cared for them as members.

Re membership – this was important as it let us be witnesses for our Faith and reminded us to Let our Lives Speak.

C

Our group concentrated on ways of engaging Young Friends (YFs) rather than

membership as such. By engaging YFs we hope that it will lead to a sense of belonging and bring involvement at all levels of the S of F.

1. We suggest that our resources should go into supporting YF activities outside our LMs or even AM.
2. We should listen to YFs starting with YF central groups (Link Groups, JYM, YFGM, BYM). What do they want?
3. Develop social media to help YFs to link in online.
4. YFs are interested in the burning issues of the day and we should use outreach to help them to be involved.
5. LMs need to be more open to visiting families so that they are encouraged to come along. Quakers and ice cream rather than 'no children's meeting'. Each meeting should be prepared to greet families and be able to hold a YFs meeting.

D

“We believe that Friends should be able to offer their gifts to the benefit of the whole community, irrespective of whether they are 'members' or 'attenders'. The important criterion is that the Friend should have shown commitment and willingness to contribute, plus a good understanding of the Quaker approach. We are aware that formal membership is no guarantee of the above.

“We warm to the approach of Young Friends (outlined in Qfp 10.25). We would welcome the development of a form of non-geographic 'belonging to Quakers' which is applicable to young people for whom the current structures are not appropriate, and which we hope would be extended to Quakers of all ages.

“We consider our annual AM Camp to be an example of a flourishing Quaker community, where the age range is often a few months to 80 plus, but few are formal Members of the Religious Society of Friends. Second and third generations of families show their commitment not only by coming along each year but also by taking on roles and responsibilities.

“We understand membership to be part of our spiritual journey, not a destination. What is needed above all is some continuous process of nurture and spiritual development which extends beyond the initial stages of becoming part of the community. Whether someone is a member or attender is not as important as whether they show commitment to the Quaker way. Some sort of structure is still necessary to enable Friends to 'belong' to a Quaker community.

“Qf&p 11.11 describes two routes to membership. We have heard of an AM where individuals are supported by mentors in a process of learning and development; a letter of application for membership is sent when the person and their mentors consider the time is right. However, we appreciate that our traditional process for membership application works well for many people. A range of approaches is needed.

“Our group came up with one suggested approach for a continuous process of nurture: the idea of 'spiritual care groups' or 'spiritual friendship groups' (small 'f') of about three Friends each, into which a meeting could be divided. The groups would meet regularly to air problems informally and explore aspects of Quakerism. They might be selected by a process of appointment or self-selected, ie Friends could team up with those they feel most comfortable with. The practicalities of setting up such an arrangement would need careful thought, and it might not work for everyone; no-one should be pressurized into it.”

E

We talked about how meeting Friends from anywhere in the country automatically gives us a connection to them and a wider community, finding there others whose values we understand and share.

Closer to home in our local and area meetings we find ourselves in a place where our skills can be recognised and nurtured and put to good use, and where our spiritual lives can be tested and extended. This experience is very different for Friends who for many reasons are unable to be attached to one AM, specifically students.

This issue of where we 'belong' has come to the fore again during the time of Covid when Woodbrooke started and continues to offer daily online Meetings for Worship. These meetings continue to attract Friends worldwide and many of those attending have forged a commitment to each other that is akin to that in our Local Meetings.

They are now beginning to ask how their experience of belonging to a Quaker community can be formally acknowledged? If they and we see ourselves as Quakers does it matter if we aren't tied to a physical location, or don't see the need for the distinctions of Member or Attender?

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Staffordshire AM

This part of the response, is the report summarising responses from local meetings in Staffordshire, which was agreed and accepted at SAQM business meeting on 9th September 2023.

Qu 1 & 2 Why do we have membership and what is it for?

Becoming a member shows a commitment to and acceptance of Quaker ways. Application for membership is a significant spiritual decision and being a member is a recognition of one's Quaker identity, allowing one to say "I am a Quaker". Becoming a member is a way of giving back to the Society.

Those in membership very largely think that membership is a good thing but recognise that some show their commitment through attendance and involvement and feel themselves to be 'member' though they are not in formal membership.

Some members see membership in terms of their local or Area meeting rather than of BYM.

Some recognise that membership is needed for legal reasons and the operation of our charity, though for most membership is much more than a legality.

We need a structure that can accommodate us all and we would be concerned if the distinction between members and attenders reduced inclusion of any

Qu. 3 Is membership still necessary?

Some feel that they are 'members' without the need for formal recognition of a membership process. Some long term attenders see no need for membership.

But many of us say that yes, membership is still needed, to ensure the continuing spiritual basis of the Society and to distinguish us from just being a campaigning organisation.

We recognise that there are many committed attenders faithfully playing their part in their local meeting.

Some think that roles such as trustee or Elder require membership whilst we accept that the diminishing numbers of Friends available to serve means that this is not operated as an absolute rule.

4. If yes, in what form ?

The membership process has changed in recent years and rather than being a 'test to pass' becoming a member is more like a transitional step, when feeling ready, in a personal spiritual journey.

We see no great demand for the membership process to change further.

Surrey & Hampshire Border AM

23/03/02 Quaker membership – the way forward

We have heard the thoughts on 'membership' from our Local Meetings when they considered what it meant to them.

For some, it is important for practical reasons such as counting Friends, administration, budgeting and organising. It is seen as a necessary, and even a mandatory, part of being a Society and a charity. In contrast, there were suggestions on how practical matters, such as counting and charity status, could be handled without formal membership.

There were Friends for whom membership means belonging. A home with warmth like a 'wonderful cloak'. A core part of ones identity. A spiritual belonging.

Becoming a member can show commitment for some. Standing up and being counted. Showing a willingness to help and be actively involved in the running and

organising of the Society. A leading to providing 'service', with an ensuing sense of belonging. An expression of their life and commitment to the local Quaker community.

There can be an expectation that members will take on (what can be seen as) the “burden” of running the Society, although this is an expectation seldom expressed. In practice the expectation is usually that Friends will help to the extent their circumstances allow.

It was noted that the membership process itself focuses on the spiritual and not on the practical matters. This, it was felt, is as it should be.

To become a member is challenging, however expressed. There is a sense that we are never really good enough (to qualify) - we are all still seekers. Our corporate testimonies can be challenging and daunting for some considering membership.

Being a membership of an Area Meeting was felt to be correct.

There was a sense that membership is not always explained to Attenders, such as, the process, the difference between members and attenders and so forth.

There is concern that a consequence of having no membership could be that the meeting conforms to the vision of those it has admitted. Our faith becomes unclear.

We heard from those for whom the status of 'Attender' felt excluding. A feeling of in-groups and out-groups. This feeling is not helped by a number of conventions, such as, the need to ask permission to attend business meetings, or being excluded from appointment to certain roles (being a member does not equate to ones availability, gifts and abilities). Some did not wish to “sign-up” - are not “joiners”. In other cases membership had echoes of more formalised religion with creeds which they were trying to leave behind. For some it seems unnecessary.

Membership for some did not feel very Spirit led (not part of our 'Gospel Order'). It was felt that we should be about welcome, fellowship, community and relationship.

Sussex East AM

Why have membership?

Outward sign of Inner Commitment

Public Statement

Legal role appointing Trustees

Consider committed Attenders in Good Standing

Core Decision-making Body.

What is it for?

Charity Commission requirement

Trustees legal role & Duty (Quaker Law Breaking?)

Safeguarding issues
Minute of Decision - Legal Liability

Is it still necessary?

Charity Commission requirement.
Hold yourself to Account.
Mutual Support in Troubled times
To show Commitment
Pastoral Care by the Meeting

If so, what form could it take

What is difference between Members & Attenders?

The discussion around the above points was lively and explorative, many members saying they would attend Eastbourne FMH next weekend.

Additional point

Should we be a charity???. One key point voiced by several participants was the willingness to be prosecuted for breaking the law and this may mitigate against Charitable Status. where protest action may be dumbed down by Trustees of the Charity].

We discerned the difference between a spiritual, functional and a corporate sense of 'membership'.

Regular attenders share spiritually in our worship but may not wish to join or be identified as Friends.

Attenders have freedom of choice whether to remain attenders or become members.

Another suggestion was that, instead of Quakerly navel-gazing, we should actually ask our attenders to express openly their concerns about issues such as 'exclusivity'. Meeting by meeting could then become knowledge-based instead of vague self-flagellation because of worry about our declining membership.

There is yet another point to consider and that is the sense of commitment both financial and of service on committee. This comes to the fore during the process of visiting aspiring members – but even that process could be considered a sign of 'exclusivity' of Quakers.

Membership of the CofE electoral roll is also open to members in good standing of a Church not in communion with the Church of England" just as Quaker Area Meetings are open to Attenders of Good Standing.

When too few hands are willing, the unshared task is onerous. Yet to outsource and call in help is the start of a slippery road, one that can tear the heart and lose the soul of what it means to be a Quaker... So, what's to be done?

If the present trend of membership decline continues with our ageing demographic, we have to face the possibility of organisational failure, a winding-up or a merger in business terms.

We become a remnant church, holding the ground until the Spirit is renewed and the relief force reaches us - loyalty to a cause when all seems lost, except for our faith that the truth will one day prevail; not in our time though, not in our time.

1. Attenders can feel hurt and excluded when herded out of consideration of an item on the agenda of Meeting for Business. Isn't Quakerism an inclusive faith?
2. For some who attend Meeting that is enough. They may choose to exclude themselves from the management of the local meeting.
3. An organizational structure does need some boundaries to operate. This is not exclusion.
4. Perhaps we might have a category of Registered Attenders?
5. Membership is not about enabling people to take on tasks but a commitment being made and a responsibility undertaken.
6. All, whether a Friend or an Attender, are responsible for the Meeting for Worship which is the heart of our faith.
7. Why is membership tied to a local and area meeting? Young Friends in particular are often very mobile.
8. Our attenders are as important to our meeting as our Members are. Nominations Committees should be empowered to make the decision that an attender can fill a role in the meeting.
9. The process of becoming a Member can be perceived as fearsome and judgmental. It is not so and is often a sharing of questions in a warm and gentle way. The recommendation to Area Meeting is not a judgement on the virtue of the applicant for membership. Some attenders have felt they were not good enough to be Quakers.
10. Attenders who have taken up tasks in our meeting have given good service to us.
11. Some attenders may be seekers but perhaps we all are.

12. If we believe that there is that of God in all of us, why do we create barriers instead of looking for the good? The “silent assemblies of God’s people” should be available to all.

Reflections on Membership – extracts taken from the SEAQM study afternoon in February 2021 held in preparation for compiling the SEAQM Membership Matters leaflet.

What does Membership mean to you?

- Greater sense of commitment; of involvement; not just an observer
- Sense of belonging.
- Membership can be the glue joining the meeting together.
- Overcoming a fear of rejection (when applying).
- Overcoming a fear of being visited and judged (when applying).
- Membership is a confirmation of a journey; a journey away from something to something (Friends).
- Membership enables Friends to grow even further on their spiritual journeys.
- Membership gives a sense of identity: no longer ‘them’ but ‘us’; no longer ‘them’ but ‘we’.
- Becoming a member creates a strong sense of family.
- MfW is the most important thing in bringing Members and Attenders together.
- Roles and responsibility – what does one need to know about being a member?
- The many gifts attenders bring to meeting.
- Time as an attender is of great importance – it isn’t a ‘blank’ time.
- Applying for membership can seem a ‘big deal’ but actually easier than initially thought and there is no judgement in the process.
- Sense of obligation and commitment important in membership.
- Advice needed for potential new members about what obligations or expectations come along with Membership – some people felt they were put off applying for membership because they had no idea what expectations or obligations they would then find themselves involved in.
- Diversity of views between members is one of the strengths of Friends.
- Explorer’s groups create the opportunity for stretching one’s mind.
- Roles – it has been known for 1 attender to be brought into membership to fulfil a particular role but this is not usual practice.
- Attenders don’t have to feel that they are ‘perfect’ before applying for membership.
- Membership not only about people but also spirituality.

Sussex West AM

Minute 23.33 Feedback on Membership: Meeting for Sufferings’ call for discernment by area meetings

We have considered the questions raised by Sufferings in its consultation document about membership. In doing so we felt that the position of those Friends referred to as “unattached” or “non-geographic” were particularly relevant to our consideration of the four questions set out in the document. This reflects the importance of having a Society that is truly welcoming, supportive, and inclusive and in which membership, if it is to continue, can be seen as an opportunity rather than a barrier to participation. Friends in our Area Meeting expressed a wide range of views, and we are not in unity in our responses to the questions raised.

We are aware that these are complex matters about which many members and attenders feel strongly, and which goes to the heart of being a Quaker. For some membership was an important statement of identity while others questioned if membership was necessary, especially as in practice attenders could be as committed to Quakerism as members. While membership was seen an important public declaration of commitment there were also fears that it creates an unhealthy ‘two tier’ structure of members and attenders within meetings. Differences were expressed about where membership should be located within the Society and whether it could be held at nationally or internationally rather than at area level. The rapid increase in the use of the internet may offer ways for membership to no longer be tied to one geographical location although this might have consequences for meetings being able to develop as local worshipping communities.

We considered the idea that as attenders and members were felt to be of equal value then it followed that attenders should be able to perform all Quaker roles if they were in accord with Quaker values. We did not come to a conclusion. We identified some practical difficulties without finding ways of resolving them. We noted that membership was originally the basis for pastoral care and financial support to members which made the position of “unattached” Friends of particular concern.

Another issue was that one of the roles of Pastoral Friends is to support attenders into membership which may be problematic if they were not in membership themselves. Questions about the extent that membership was required for certain posts in the local and area meetings and the extent to which this determined who could speak on behalf Quakers were also important. In our discussions a common thread was the importance of making our Quaker communities places where people and their contributions are valued, and their needs recognised and supported. To achieve this we need a level of organisation and administration carried out in a way that reflects our Quaker values.

We are unresolved as to how far membership of the Society is necessary to achieve these aims. We are concerned that, as part of this consultation, the voices of those members and attenders who have not taken part in our discussions so far are heard.

Swarthmoor (South West Cumbria) AM

Teesdale & Cleveland AM

MfS asked for these membership questions to be discussed :

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes – what form(s) could it take?

We have spent some time expressing views on these questions from the point of view of members and attenders. We have appreciated all views.

“Membership is a multi-faceted gem which is viewed differently from different sides”

“Is making a statement of commitment good enough”

!What is the relationship between membership and faith and membership and practice?”

“11.01- read it changing membership to Quakerism. How does it change the meaning?”

We ask Local Meetings to consider these questions and bring any thoughts back to March Area Meeting for a more considered discussion.

Consideration of Membership from Teesdale and Cleveland Area Meeting 18th March 2023

Local Meetings have been further considering the questions about Quaker membership that Meeting for Sufferings asked us to discuss:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes – what form(s) could it take?

We have received minutes from 5 Local Meetings on their discussions and these are attached.

Today we've spent time in small groups, reflecting on the questions and the local meeting minutes, before returning to this matter as an Area Meeting in session.

We have heard of the personal importance of membership to Friends and how much making a formal commitment can mean to us. But we've also heard that we do not feel comfortable distinguishing between members and attenders in our organisational affairs, and for some of us this seems to mitigate against our testimony to equality.

We have valued the time we've had to reflect on these matters in the different parts of our Area Meeting. The discussions have been rich and have sometimes involved Friends sharing very personal feelings and experiences. Friends have at times spoken bravely and been able to listen deeply and lovingly. On the matter of formal membership, and the personal decisions we make to seek it or not, we have come to know one another a little better.

We feel this minute forms just part of our response to the questions and should be read alongside the minute from January Area Meeting and the minutes from Local Meetings to give a fuller picture.

Thaxted AM

Wensleydale & Swaledale AM

23/33 Meeting to discuss Membership

As recorded in our minute 23/9 10 Friends met online to begin initial discussion about Membership as requested by Meeting for Sufferings. Our feedback sent to meeting for Sufferings has not been recorded amongst official minutes sent by other Area Meetings, and so we agree to send this minute which includes our initial response below:

We met on Zoom on 28 November to begin initial discussions on membership.

Via worship share and then general discussion we had deep sharing. We were equally split between finding membership to be bonding and give a sense of belonging to thinking it was unnecessary and divisive. We aim to revisit the topic

West Kent AM

West Scotland AM

West Somerset AM

23.01 The Meeting is a time for Friends to consider the questions received from Meeting for Sufferings:

'Why do we have membership? What is it for? Is it still necessary? And, if yes, what form(s) should it take?'

It has become clear that all these questions are interconnected and the answer to one affects the answers to the others.

Discussing these questions there was some uncertainty about the necessity of membership for legal or charity law reasons.

It is felt that:

- If the collective decision-making forum of Area Meeting can and does safely function without the need for membership with Trustees being responsible to Area Meeting.
- And if the situations where presently membership is considered essential are self-prescribed by the Society, and so could be changed, (apart from the position of Registering Officer which would need to be legally investigated.)
- Then, if this is correct, Membership is probably not necessary.

Membership has always been a two-way responsibility, originating in the requirement to account for those in need of support during times of persecution.

It is also important to keep track of those who do not attend MfW but who wish to keep their Membership.

If it is found that Membership is discerned to be necessary, then there is a strong feeling that any perceived hierarchy within the Quaker community, is artificial and detrimental.

If membership is to continue then it is felt that the membership process should be reviewed and simplified. It is felt that at present the process could be seen as daunting, off putting and even exclusive. We suggest for instance: -

- A model letter of application.
- A Spiritual mentor or companion for enquirers.
- The removal of the distinction between attenders or members in the roles they can fill.
- The acceptance of new ways that Friends can belong – such as through Woodbrooke.
- An option to follow the Young Friends concept of Membership through attendance, with an opt out option if required.

We are of the opinion that we need to get to know each other in the things that are eternal, to build and to nurture our community, and the question arises - Is formal membership still necessary for this?

West Weald AM

Minutes of Area Meeting for Consideration of Membership and Belonging held at Dorking Meeting House on 11.02.2023 in person and via zoom.

23/8 Membership is valued by Friends in membership as a commitment to the Quaker community and way of life.

We recognise that many friends not in membership also contribute greatly to our Meetings and show much commitment to our worship.

The membership process can be instrumental in helping us be clear about what it means to be part of the Religious Society of Friends and our lives of service, underpinned by our spiritual foundation.

We respect the reasons why some Attenders might not wish to, or have thought of, applying for membership. Exploring this more proactively with Attenders could prove helpful to us all.

23/9 Given that we feel both Members and Attenders can contribute equally to the life of both Local and Area Meetings, we suggest the importance of gifts and commitment friends bring are as important as formal membership.

Discernment of the appropriate friends to fill roles is at the heart of our Meetings being served well.

We need to know each other well before this discernment can take place and some guidelines might be useful here.

West Wiltshire & East Somerset AM

Wirral & Chester AM

Worcestershire & Shropshire AM

23.42 Response to Meeting for Sufferings' consultation on membership

We have considered, collectively and individually, the four questions about membership posed by Meeting for Sufferings last December. Written responses have been collated, and a summary considered at an open meeting of members and attenders held online on 3 July. We found that responses to qu.1 'Why do we have membership?' and qu.2 'What is membership for?' overlapped. We have therefore addressed qu.1 in terms of historical and organisational reasons for membership and qu.2 in terms of reasons important to each of us as individuals.

1. Why do we have membership? Historical and organisational reasons

Membership acknowledges that there is a core theology behind Quakerism, even if it is flexible at the boundaries.

Historically we kept records of members so that support could be provided to those in need/suffering, and this continues to be an important function. Another reason that remains as important today as throughout our history is the reputation of Quakers, nationally and internationally, as upholders of truth, equality, peace and justice; this is strengthened because we are known as a membership organisation.

In the UK, operating under the legislative framework of the Charities Act 2011, membership is necessary for CIO status.

2. Individual reasons for membership

For individuals, membership confers a sense of belonging and identity as a Quaker.

The process of applying for membership focuses the applicant's attention on questions of faith and values, and becoming a member reinforces commitment to the purposes of the Society of Friends. Membership can be seen as a public declaration of a personally held belief, a form of witness, which is then recognised by a wider body of Friends.

3. Is membership still necessary?

A range of views were expressed, largely centring on the member/attender distinction. Some feel that the distinction between members and attenders is arbitrary and many attenders have found from personal experience extending over many years that it is not necessary to be a member in order to serve. Others feel that, although attenders are always welcome and often play a significant part in their Quaker community, certain roles, such as elder, should be undertaken by people who have made a public commitment (i.e. members).

4. If membership is still necessary, what form should it take?

Our reflections on qu.3 prompted another question, namely: why aren't attenders becoming members? We support the current range of possible ways of becoming a member, all thorough-going, but foregrounding shared awareness between the applicant and the community they seek to join.

We also feel that there needs to be a form of 'unattached membership' that is not geographically based. This might be more suitable for those who are committed to their identity as Quakers but whose circumstances make regular affiliation to a particular meeting unfeasible; it might also be more appropriate to Friends who are more active in online Quaker communities.

We ask our clerk to send this response to Meeting for Sufferings.

York AM

2023/26 Membership

Further to minute 2023/6 the four questions circulated by Meeting for Sufferings about membership have been discussed by Friends in all our Local meetings. Relevant minutes were circulated with the agenda for this Area Meeting.

In their discussions Friends expressed a variety of views and we think it right to share all the minutes received with Meeting for Sufferings. Here are some general observations:

Membership, including the process of becoming a member, means much to many Friends and is seen as a commitment to shared values and principles. The Society of Friends has found it helpful and at times important to know how many members it has.

Other Friends who are very much involved in things Quaker are not 'joiners'.

Attendees should not be regarded as in any way inferior to members. We are all Friends at different stages of our spiritual journeys.

For many roles within the Society membership is not needed.

Some creative thinking is needed about the membership of younger Friends.

To conclude, whilst membership remains important it should be seen as one aspect of a worshipping community of Friends, the cohesion of which and sense of belonging are more important than its division into members and attendees.

We thank Friends for responding so thoughtfully to this request from Meeting for Sufferings.

1. Why do we have membership?
2. What is it for?
3. Is it still necessary? If yes,
4. What form(s) could it take?

Young Friends General Meeting

2023.05.01 Membership

In December 2022, Britain Yearly Meeting's Meeting for Sufferings issued a call for discernment, asking its members and their associated meetings to consider four questions regarding membership:

- Why do we have membership?
- What is it for?
- Is it still necessary?
- If yes, what form(s) could it take?

YFGM has engaged with these questions through a series of Special Interest Groups at our recent gatherings. Within YFGM, we do not practise membership in the same way that Area Meetings do; ours is a simple consequence of attending YFGM's events.

Although 'membership' for us is primarily administrative, rather than a public and personal commitment to the community, many YFGMers come to have a powerful sense of belonging. Traditional membership structures can present practical barriers to many younger Friends, and we feel that these difficulties need to be considered in the wider discussion around membership.

Our Special Interest Groups have had wide-ranging conversations but were not led to bring forward specific answers to the questions posed. There are many experiences of belonging among our membership and our discussions reflected the passion that many of us feel.

We are aware of our ability as YFGM to bring a unique perspective, reflecting both the perspective of our age range and our different existing approach. We are grateful for the consultation and look forward to engaging with ongoing discussions of this topic within the wider Yearly Meeting