

Responses to questions posed ahead of QLRC April 2017: Digest for QLCC - 4 pages

Cluster 1a: What inspires or excites you about being a Quaker?

Three main themes emerged from Friends' responses to this question:

- Being a Quaker provides Friends with a spiritual life that meets their needs; centred on Meeting for Worship, it is experiential, nourishing and encourages spiritual growth
- Friends value the acceptance, the deep sharing, friendship and *loving supportive community* that they find in their Quaker meetings.
- Friends value feeling part of a live tradition rooted in an inspiring history. They find inspiration in the lives of other Quakers and they value the challenge and support given to live out Quaker faith and testimonies in their own lives.

To say a little more about each of these:

Spiritual life: Meeting for Worship is at the core of what Friends reported inspired and refreshed them. The great majority of responses mentioned Meeting for Worship specifically. Friends valued the silence and peace, the ministry, the depth of a gathered Meeting, the joy of not knowing what will happen in Meeting. "Experiment with Light", worship sharing and Quaker business meetings were also mentioned, though less often, as providing spiritual nourishment. Friends reported finding and valuing the freedom to explore spiritually, made easier by the absence of a creed, the openness to diverse views and spiritual practices and the encouragement to ongoing learning, all of which allowed them to grow and develop spiritually.

There's a strong sense of connection and an underlying sense of the spiritual....A sense of warmth, a generated concentration, whether you call it meditation, worship, just stillness. (Swaledale & Wensleydale)

Community and F/friendship: Intertwined with the experience of worship is the love that *underpins all we are and do* and the sense of community this engenders. Very many responses described the non-judgemental acceptance that Friends had found within Quaker meetings. Sometimes this was linked to the lack of dogma and creed. Sometimes it was linked to how Friends treated one other. Deep connection was experienced in Meeting for Worship. And friendship, support and acceptance were found within the wider Meeting. Some Friends spoke of conversations where they shared their lives with one another at a deep level and that this could result in strong friendships. Other valued aspects of community, mentioned by a smaller number, were the opportunity to give interesting service and the practical care offered and received at times of need.

And generated friendship, a sense of absolute safety, which can withstand any irritations normal to any human gathering (Swaledale & Wensleydale AM)

Living our faith, inspired by the lives of other Quakers. Friends described the Quaker challenge to live in accordance with Quaker values in their everyday lives and relationships. They welcomed the emphasis that Quakerism puts on this *faith and love in action* rather than on believing the right things. They commonly described the inspiration they took both from Friends within their Meetings and from *the greater Quaker movement*, both current and over history. They described the hope and *sense of possibility* that came from being able to work together to bring about change in the world. Several described being daunted by the challenge with the feeling of *not being good enough* to meet it.

The sense of support from one's Meeting when taking action in the world (Oxford & Swindon AM)

Cluster 1b: Are the things that inspire you reflected in your local and area meetings? Do your meetings nurture the spiritual development of young people?

Most Friends reported finding the things that they value spiritually in their Local rather than their Area Meeting. A much smaller number of responses reported that both Local and Area Meetings are *spirit led*,

and *that spiritual nourishment and support are found at local and area level*. And an even smaller number reported disappointment in their Local Meeting, with some of these relying on their Area Meeting for inspiration and spiritual nurture. Whatever their reply to this particular question, many Friends also value being part of the wider Quaker community at area, national and, in some cases, worldwide level.

From a few responses, it appears that Friends in some areas have been wrestling for some time with the issue of the relationship between Local and Area Meetings. Geography is a factor, as especially in rural areas *it can be difficult to get to Area Meeting if you are from one of the outlying meetings*. And the combination of geographically widely spaced local meetings and falling numbers of Friends able to carry out all the roles required creates an even greater challenge. One Meeting in that position fears that *We are in danger of losing our spiritual way if time is more committed to attending committees or representative councils ...than to right holding of our Meetings for Worship*. They suggest a pilot project with regional workers as a possible solution.

Irrespective of geography and meeting size, it seems to require a special effort to ensure that Area Meetings offer the Friends who attend them more than “business only” and nurture their spiritual development.

There seems to be a real distinction between “Local Friends” (some of whom are Quakers of long standing) and “Area Friends” who regularly attend Area Meeting and accept Area roles. Quite a number of respondents declared a lack of knowledge of (or indeed interest in) Area matters and there seems to some to be a sense of a “club” about Area Meeting (Ipswich & Diss AM)

Most Meetings report concern about the **low numbers of children and, particularly, young people** who attend. A small number of Meetings are looking for other ways of involving children and young people, for example bringing their grandchildren to Meeting or hosting activities for the children from other Local Meetings in the area. Others rely on their Area Meetings to nurture young people via Link Groups, camp or a Young Friends group, as only at Area Meeting or national level are there enough young people to provide the peer support and companionship needed.

But most Friends think they do a good job in nurturing those children and young people who do come and some Local Meetings maintain their readiness for nurturing children should they come in the future. *eg box of materials, a willingness to help and awareness of safeguarding practice*. A small number, however, were reported to be *unprepared and uncertain about what young people need or even (rarely) to have lost their appreciation for what young people can contribute*.

Nurturing the spiritual development of young people is taken seriously, especially in terms of support for young people to take part in events...Our Area Meeting Clerk is putting in a lot of effort to make Area Meetings more attractive to young people. (Lancs N & Central)

Cluster 2: Do people know you are Quaker?

The great majority of Friends are most comfortable telling others about being Quakers when the subject arises naturally out of conversations with others, either in person or, less frequently, via social media including Facebook. Friends also frequently report sharing their faith with others when it is integral to the work they are involved in, for example as Chaplains, in work with refugees, homeless people, prison visiting, as a political candidate, or engaged in political activity with *Quaker banners on demonstrations*.

The context for these conversations is important. Much working together with others is reported to take place through ecumenical and interfaith initiatives. One Friend who lives in an ethnically diverse area, reports that it is *easier to talk about one’s faith if living in a multi-faith community*, where it is expected that you will have some faith even if the exact type of faith is unknown.

Most of the small number of Friends who mention talking about Quakerism in more secular environments report that doing so is more challenging. The topic may not come up naturally. Or a clash between Quaker values and those of the workplace may make it very difficult to act as a Quaker in that context:

The difficulty of identifying oneself as a Quaker in some work settings was illustrated by those Friends who reported having done so precisely as a response to the clash between expected behaviour at work and Quaker values. Examples included giving directly to a work-based charity instead of joining in a sweepstake at work, a court interpreter declaring a Quaker refusal to swear on the Bible, refusing to work on defence projects and blowing the whistle on quality assurance practices.

A very small number of Friends report actively seeking out opportunities to spread the word ...

I wear a "Q" lapel badge and usually manage to get in a reference to my being a Quaker in ordinary conversation (S. London AM)

...but most Quakers prefer to live their lives as patterns rather than evangelise amongst others. Despite this, most also accept there is a need additionally to undertake specific outreach activities. For a minority of Friends, however, their reluctance to seek out opportunities to tell others about Quakerism carried forward into an aversion to outreach work, which they associated with proselytization and saw as being in opposition to living as patterns.

A small number of Friends report reticence or caution in revealing to others that they are a Quaker. Reported barriers included a feeling that it is not always appropriate to tell people about their faith, feelings of not being good enough to be a Quaker (which was reported to delay self-identification as a Quaker, sometimes by years) and also *not wanting to be good* or not wanting to *miss out on some of the secular things in life*. Depending on the reason underlying it, the reticence was reported to take time or practice (such as role-play) to overcome.

I often feel a Quaker fraud but I don't think that is a question of confidence – more that Quakerism challenges me and I struggle. (I then don't want to let people know because I feel I am not a good representative of the faith community. I don't want to let Quakers down.) (Southern Marches AM)

Cluster 3: How do people find Quakers? Are they made welcome?

In order of frequency of mention, seekers have found Quakers through:

- National or local websites and Facebook pages
- Word of mouth, sometimes a contact with a Quaker from years' previously
- Activities at Meeting Houses organised by hirers
- *Causes we are associated with, demonstrations*
- And through Quaker Week exhibitions, posters, leaflets, radio broadcasts, newspaper advertisements and books

The physical location of the Meeting House can be important.

Most Friends are confident that their Local Meetings make newcomers welcome and many give considerable thought to how to achieve this. Several respondents noted that a proportion of people seek out Quakers at a time of crisis in their lives. They describe the sensitivity they therefore bring to the task of welcoming newcomers, emphasising the need to *be prepared to listen to the real question and respond to the questioner's need rather than giving prepared answers*.

Other Friends describe their efforts to provide for newcomers the same non-judgmental acceptance and opportunities for spiritual exploration that they value for themselves.

I asked newcomers what made them come back. The most common answer was a sense of calmness and peace during worship, not being told what to say or do, feeling safe and feeling accepted. We were available to them at a time of their life when they needed us (Marlborough LM)

Some described the additional events organised to ensure that these benefits were offered to newcomers. Enquirers sessions after Meeting for Worship, Enquirers days and weekends, Becoming Friends courses, an Attenders Lunch on How do we do Meeting for Worship and courses for those new to Quakers such as Quaker Fundamentals were mentioned.

Not all Meetings were reported to be getting welcoming right. Suggestions for improvement included calling people attending for the first time "*newcomers*" rather than "*visitors*" and avoiding *the usual "Have we any visitors? Would they like to stand up and introduce themselves?"...to a first time non-Quaker that could be terrifying*.

Only a very small number considered welcoming newcomers to be something that Area Meetings might also need to consider. One noted that *Newcomers are not really welcomed to Area Meeting. This is something the Local Meeting overseers could do and the Clerks could explain a little about Area Meeting business*. Another talked about *the feeling of a club or even a clique* in their Area Meeting. It would seem that Friends attending Area Meeting for the first time are expected to find their own way without help.

Cluster 4: The role of Quaker Life

There is a feeling that Meetings do not have a ready understanding of what Quaker Life is able to do for them. Sometimes this is because Friends are uncertain as to what comes from where in Friends' House and whether, and if so how, Quaker Life differs from other national Quaker resources such as Woodbrooke. Even some Quaker Life representatives report confusion on this point.

Friends were aware of some things that Quaker Life do but not that it was Quaker Life doing them (Shrewsbury LM)

Resources like 'Becoming Friends', 'Being Friends Together', 'Hearts and Minds Prepared', 'With a Tender Hand' the online Radical Spirituality course, the framework for reading of Quaker Faith and Practice, "I am a Quaker and this is why" leaflet, "What do Quakers say" business card and those resources produced for Quaker Week, Quaker Quest and posters were all mentioned and are appreciated as are materials for work with children. Also appreciated though mentioned by a smaller number of Friends were consultations with specific individuals from Quaker Life about particular problems.

While Friends mentioned their Quaker Life representatives and their reports, often saying they do a good job, it was rare for Friends to report that the inspiration and challenge experienced at Quaker Life Representative Councils have been successfully transmitted to Area or Local Meetings, a task one Friend compared to *trying to bring a holiday romance home*. The one exception described a powerful impact: her Area Meeting had responded to the Representative Council on sustainability (October 2016) by organising an Area Meeting Away Weekend, an Area Meeting social and a Woodbrooke-on-the-road event *all to consider our spiritual sustainability*.

Of those respondents who answered the question about what further tools they needed, many suggested that access to someone to consult when needed was sufficient, with one expressing view that *we have to take some responsibility for asking*. Other suggestions included:

- *eye-catching and thought-provoking posters, leaflets and Quaker Quest, an A Board and a simple way of explaining who and what we are. One suggestion specified an A4 size poster for domestic windows which is colour fast and does not fade in sunlight, and it would have a space for the name of the LM and a contact number.*
- *Speakers' notes for giving talks, maybe on themes such as Quakers and Banks or Quakers and Chocolate, (the latter particularly for talks in schools)*
- *Tools that can be understood by someone who is not familiar with Quaker terminology or practice. Something that explains Quakerism is a process rather than a position and reflecting the depth of Lent Groups. Can Ben's 2004 lecture be made into a 5-week study outline?*
- *Workshop materials including loose, non-directive suggestions for topics to follow on from the excellent framework for reading Quaker Faith and Practice*
- *Leaflets with greater spiritual depth, ones that mention the spirituality of worship.*
- *Some small meetings feel they need more support and to feel part of the wider network. Is there a Quaker Life cluster for small meetings? Is there such a thing as 'Top Ten Tips for (small) Meetings'? (North Scotland)*
- *Ideas for those for working with mixed-age groups of children would be very welcome (N Scotland)*
- *One (South London) specified that they would particularly appreciate structured support from Quaker Life around laying down their Meeting House.*
- *Help with a housing project we hope to develop through Aylesbury Meeting and the Area meeting? QHT have not been able to give a small grant to scope the work. (Chilterns – Aylesbury LM)*
- *Quaker Life should delegate more resources to regions, less in London & at Friends House. Teams should travel round and visit meetings. Work with Woodbrooke & spend money on every Quaker having a course / retreat every year. Too many projects and too little time (St Albans LM)*
- *And finally two Friends who had recently become Quaker Life Representatives requested a refresher of all the ways Quaker Life can support. (Swaledale & Wensleydale and N Wales)*