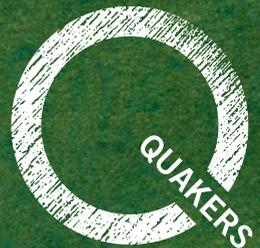


A close-up photograph of two hands, one from the left and one from the right, holding a small, thin, light-colored object between their fingers. The hands are positioned at the top of the frame, with the fingers pointing towards each other. The background is a dark green, textured surface.

Confidentiality

“If in doubt as to what is confidential and what is not, it is good practice always to check with those involved before passing on any information.”

From *Quaker faith & practice* 12.10



Nothing in this leaflet about keeping confidentiality should prevent you from reporting to an appropriate authority when an individual is at risk.

This applies particularly to safeguarding issues: protecting children or adults at risk of harm.

About confidentiality

“As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other’s lives, ready to give help and to receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God’s love and forgiveness.”

From Advices & queries 18

This Quaker advice gives us a vision of openness. But how can we be open without betraying trust? How can we share without slipping into gossip? Suppose, however, that some knowledge is hard to bear, or we feel that someone is at risk: is there a limit to confidentiality?

This leaflet explores these and other issues, offering simple guidelines for everyone committed to the Quaker way. There are some queries that might help a meeting or group reach a common understanding. Clear agreement on good practice will build trust. We hope that it offers advice and helps Friends to consider our understanding and practice of confidentiality within the Quaker traditions of openness and plain speaking.

Some general principles

Openness and trust come from our listening to the Spirit in our Quaker communities and our meetings. Trust is the starting point – trust in the Spirit, trust in God, trust in each other, and trust in the processes of the Religious Society of Friends. Confidence is trusting together.

In all matters concerning others we should strive to act respectfully, responsibly and reasonably, in accordance with the circumstances, and, as far as we are able, hold to truth and love. We will often use the process of discernment.

To build and maintain mutual confidence we aim to be loving, careful and honest in what we say about one another. We should not talk about someone else merely to pass the time, gossip, or create an impression. When we share information that is private or sensitive we should ensure that anything we pass on is clear, accurate, to the point, and helpful. It is important that we only pass on information to those who need to know:

Formal conversations

When a sensitive and potentially confidential issue arises it is important that any further exploration takes place in an appropriate environment. A quiet room should be found where confidentiality can be protected. Further informal

one-to-one conversations may be appropriate. And for more serious issues more formality may be right. Ground rules should be agreed in advance of any meeting. If appropriate, another Friend (or Friends) may be invited to attend.

If someone asks you to keep a matter confidential you should not simply agree until you have a better understanding of the subject. In some situations it may be necessary to share a confidence appropriately. This is particularly relevant when there is the possibility of a safeguarding implication, fraud, risk of harm to an adult, or other illegal activity. You may find that you are unable or unwilling to carry a confidence alone or that it may need to be shared with others because there is a risk of harm. We need to remember that most of us are not trained counsellors. A confidence can be an unbearable burden.

Think carefully about what a formal conversation might look like. The points below offer some guidance:

- What might define a formal conversation?
- In what environment might a formal conversation take place?
- Could an informal conversation become a formal conversation? Might this need to be made clear to all parties involved?
- This type of conversation should never be in a public space such as over coffee after meeting for worship.

Confidentiality in Quaker business meetings and committees

Confidentiality is not generally possible or appropriate in open meetings such as meetings for worship or many business meetings. Clerks should discourage anyone asking for confidentiality from using business meetings to air an issue. However, a clerk could ask a meeting to agree to a specific item being treated as confidential, though it is important that the clerk knows about this in advance and that those present are aware of this before the matter is discussed. If agreed, everyone present should then treat the matter as confidential, and minutes and subsequent actions should respect that understanding.

Minute writing

To be sure that information is not disclosed unintentionally clerks should take care when offering minutes. A clerk should offer guidance if a gathered meeting's discernment could lead to confidential information being released. Minutes are the long-term record of the meeting's business and as such need

to reflect the decisions made at the time of writing. Consider carefully whether a minute needs to be confidential. Why might it need to be? Would separate notes be more appropriate? Here are some examples of decisions and actions that require confidentiality:

- matters around pastoral care of individuals
- deliberations of nominations committees
- a decision to 'release' someone from service (possibly without their agreement)
- employment matters
- some decisions around the termination of membership
- when there is conflict in the meeting.

Further information on confidential minutes can be found in *With a tender hand: a resource book for eldership and oversight* (page 52).

In general, any meeting that is asked to make decisions on a particular matter needs to have before it all the available pertinent facts. Clerks and presenters must exercise judgement in determining the breadth of what is relevant. In any discussion or undertaking deemed confidential, guidelines should be established at the outset on what information can be revealed and to whom. In handling sensitive matters, careful discernment is needed.

If matters discussed in confidence in a meeting or group are communicated, with agreement, to other people, they must be marked explicitly as confidential to the recipients. If people are brought into a group or meeting dealing with confidential matters, the guidelines being used must be explained to the newcomers and agreed and accepted by them. Keeping confidentiality should always be concerned with firmly grounded and reliable facts. Speculation and hearsay must be avoided.

Committees or groups with responsibility for pastoral care (including eldership and oversight) should pay close attention to the principles outlined here. Those responsible for oversight, for instance, often hold information on members that they consider to be confidential. But they may on occasion feel this information should or must be shared with others within – or in some circumstances outside – the meeting so that a matter can be handled effectively.

Nothing in this leaflet about keeping confidentiality should prevent you from reporting to an appropriate authority when an individual is at risk. This applies particularly to safeguarding and the protection of children or vulnerable adults.

Inappropriate confidentiality

Consider the effect that withholding information from someone, on a matter that appropriately concerns them, might have on them if they discover it from another source. Sometimes withholding information on the grounds of confidentiality is not the best way forward. This could lead to feelings of hurt and anger that could in turn result in long-term or entrenched conflict within the community.

There is an important distinction between treating matters personal to an individual as confidential and discussing matters of concern to the wider community, where confidentiality is unlikely to be appropriate. Matters that concern the ongoing running of a meeting cannot be confidential. A difference of opinion about our collective business should be dealt with openly in a business meeting. Otherwise there is a risk of people feeling that there are cliques.

Matters relating to changes in the way things are organised need to be aired sensitively. But 'confidential discussion' could be very damaging, and if it came to light could appear patronising, manipulative or power-based.

A possible source of difficulty is telling several Friends the same thing 'in confidence'. Be sparing in your use of requests for confidentiality.

Some questions for individuals to consider

- What information about you would you like to be considered confidential?
- What information can one assess their own need to know about?
- What can we do to ensure that each of us has an understanding of confidentiality?
- How do truth, trust and consent affect your communications with other people?
- What can we learn from our experiences of problems arising in our meetings from conflict between confidentiality and openness?
- How do you agree the degree of confidentiality to be offered? Can you reconsider what was agreed?
- When visiting an applicant for membership, do you receive all information in a spirit of sensitivity? Is information that is excluded from the visitors' report regarded as private?

- When individuals are burdened with confidential matters, can you uphold them without asking unnecessary questions?
- Should you always obtain permission to speak of a Friend's affairs before helping them contact organisations or social agencies outside the Society?
- Do you ensure that participants properly understand confidentiality when taking part in worship sharing or other activities that include the giving of personal contributions?

References to confidentiality

From *Quaker faith & practice* (fifth edition, 2013) and Chapter 16 revision (2015):

11.32 termination of membership

12.10 enlisting specialist help from outside the meeting

12.16 periodic review of spiritual life and pastoral care in the meeting

12.21 in worship sharing and creative listening groups

12.25 in meetings for clearness

16.38c in meetings for clearness in preparation for marriage.

The book *Patterns of eldership and oversight* (Volume 1 of the Eldership and Oversight handbook series, second edition, 2008) also deals with some of these issues.

Support and guidance

This leaflet and other relevant publications can be downloaded for free from the Britain Yearly Meeting website at www.quaker.org.uk/pastoralcare. You can find other paid-for publications in the Quaker Centre Bookshop at Friends House, London. You can also visit our online bookshop at www.quaker.org.uk/shop.

For a comprehensive guide to pastoral care we recommend *With a tender hand: a resource book for eldership and oversight*, published by Quaker Books in 2015.

Guidance on data protection

Visit: www.quaker.org.uk/dataprotection

Email: dataprotection@quaker.org.uk

Phone: 020 7663 1161

Guidance and advice on safeguarding

Visit: www.quaker.org.uk/meetingsafety

Email: safe@quaker.org.uk

Phone: 020 7663 1017

Quaker Life: eldership, oversight and pastoral care

Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

Visit: www.quaker.org.uk/pastoralcare

Email: qlnetwork@quaker.org.uk

Phone: 020 7663 1007

Courses on eldership, oversight, the spiritual life of meetings and pastoral care

Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, 1046 Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LJ

Visit: www.woodbrooke.org.uk

Email: enquiries@woodbrooke.org.uk

Phone: 0121 472 5171

First produced in December 2011 by Quaker Life. Updated in October 2018.

This leaflet is free. For more copies contact the Quaker Centre at Friends House: email quakercentre@quaker.org.uk or phone 020 7663 1030/1031.

For a large-print version of this leaflet please email publications@quaker.org.uk or phone 020 7663 1162.

Britain Yearly Meeting is a registered charity, number 1127633