

BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING

Quaker Life Membership Procedures Group

Consultation document for Monthly Meetings

October 2004

Summary

- 1. Our proposal emphasises the importance of the procedure of acquisition of membership stemming from certain principles. This shift from process to principle should be reflected more clearly in *Quaker faith & practice (Qfp)*. This change allows for flexibility and variation in practice. The principles apply to everyone, and the processes stemming from them can be adapted to meet the needs of all age groups. These principles are listed primarily in Section 5.**
- 2. With regard to transfer, we propose broadly to keep the present transfer system, and to amend the relevant section of *Qfp* so that it has separate sections with instructions to the Friend whose membership is to be transferred, MM clerks and overseers. This would make the section parallel with the current section on membership. Our proposals on transfer are contained in Section 7.**
- 3. We do not see any practicable ways to implement non-geographically held membership. We do see that membership procedures and oversight could draw on individuals' wider Quaker networks to meet individual needs. Section 8 contains more detail.**

QUESTIONS FOR CONSULTATION:

- 1. Would the proposed shift in emphasis from process to principles allow your meeting to develop processes for the acquisition of membership that are appropriate for local needs?**
- 2. Would these principles enable you to develop procedures appropriate to the acquisition of membership by people of all ages and conditions?**
- 3. Is our sense right, that although our current system of transfer is not perfect, Friends can live with it as it is, perhaps with minor improvements e.g. by using e-mail, and by improving the way information about the process is presented?**

4. Considering individuals and groups for whom non-geographic membership has been suggested (see section 8, page 5), would it help your Monthly Meeting to draw on individuals' wider Quaker networks (through e.g. Young Friends General Meeting, Listed Informal Groups, a university chaplain) in membership acquisition processes and sustaining oversight?

1. Preface

The Membership Procedures Group was set up in response to a minute of Britain Yearly Meeting 2001 (see Appendix). Our task is to produce detailed proposals for three areas of membership procedures:

- the processes for acquiring and transferring membership, which should be made as simple and undaunting as possible;
- the possibility that membership, once acquired, might be held in a way that is not specific to a geographic meeting, provided satisfactory arrangements can be made for the maintenance of an appropriate list and the oversight of those on it;
- all age groups should, as far as possible, be treated in the same way, in particular enabling children and young people to enter into membership when the time is right for them.

Yearly Meeting (YM) affirmed its commitment to membership, and our remit is to consider the *processes* of membership. We are *not* looking at the meaning of membership, nor the possibility of various kinds of membership, nor whether the YM should have membership at all.

We expect to report to YM in 2006. We will bring concrete proposals to the meeting that will form the basis of a revision to *Quaker faith & practice (Qfp)*. We are currently working on a first draft of these proposals, based on what we have heard from Monthly Meetings on their experiments with processes of membership through Quaker Life, feedback at YM before, during and after 2001, and from individuals and meetings since then.

What we would like to do now is to share with Monthly Meetings where we have got to in our process, and to pass on to Monthly Meetings our overview of the experiments that Monthly Meetings have been engaged in since YM 2001, and in some cases from before that date. We would like to outline what we see as possible changes to *Qfp* in order to achieve the tasks YM has set.

2. Outline of our approach

We think it will be most helpful to Friends to reorganise the way that *Qfp* describes the membership process so as to shift the emphasis from *process* to *principles*. We suggest that the relevant chapter of *Qfp* should be reorganised to set out (1) the principles of membership, (2) the principles that Monthly Meetings should follow in the membership process.

Our current sense is that the majority of issues of concern to Friends about membership are addressed in *Qfp*. Likewise, the majority of experiments that Monthly Meetings have reported to us are within what *Qfp* allows.

What is more problematic is that *Qfp* is felt to limit what meetings can do by focusing on procedure. Under our proposals, the emphasis will be less on the outward form of the process. This will liberate meetings to implement the procedures that are best suited to local and individual circumstances, while at the same time giving them a way to check that their procedures are in right ordering.

3. Principles of membership

Friends understand membership in a multitude of ways. The principles that have stood out for us in Friends' feedback so far are (in no particular order): commitment; community, reciprocity and mutual accountability in the relationship between the individual and the meeting; a sense of belonging; a public statement; spiritual discipline; shared beliefs and testimonies; being part of a larger body; corporate worship; the value of experience. All of these values and principles are expressed elegantly in section 11.01 of *Qfp*.

4. Principles of process

Despite variations in practice since 2001 (and in some cases before), Friends have valued the following things about processes of membership:

- it is a reciprocal, two-sided process, involving not just an individual on their spiritual journey, but a whole community of faith. (Meetings that have developed application processes that involve more Friends have all reported a sense of renewed spiritual life for the meeting as a whole.)
- applicants need to appreciate this reciprocity: membership is not automatic, nor a 'right', but the result of a process of discernment by both the applicant and the meeting

- moving into membership is the outward acknowledgement of an inward process
- the process should be as open and inclusive as possible, involving the applicant throughout; it should be compliant with the law, such as Data Protection and Freedom of Information
- applicants should be supported and nurtured before, during and after the application process
- the wider Quaker community should be sure that the individual has an understanding of the essentials of membership

In addition, YM 2001 expressed the wish that membership procedures should as far as possible apply to everyone equally regardless of age. We see the possibility for a variety of procedures, which all express these principles, including but not limited to the one currently set out in *Qfp*. Variety is needed to reflect local and individual circumstances, and it needs to be balanced by an understanding of the principles which underlie the process.

5. Stages in the process

The principles identified above can be related to practice in a variety of ways. Here we list some of the things that Friends have been doing or have suggested at various stages of the application process in addition to what is in *Qfp*. What follows is based on section 11.04ff. of *Qfp*, with alternative titles for some sub-sections in order to highlight what we see as the essentials of the process.

“Personal application” (Qfp 11.06ff.). Suggested title: “Initiating the process”

Principle: Either an individual or the local meeting might initiate the membership process.

Example: An application on behalf of a long-standing attender may be initiated by the local meeting with the minimum of formality.

“The role of overseers” (Qfp 11.10ff). Suggested title: “Nurturing and supporting the applicant”

Principle: Meetings have a responsibility to nurture and support the individual during the application process.

Examples: An attenders’ pack of information and literature about membership might be made available in order to inform applicants about the Society; some meetings have developed a special nurturing or supporting group from which Friends are drawn to support the attender.

“The appointed visitors” (Qfp 11.13ff.). Suggested title: “Discerning the rightness of the application”

Principle: The process of discernment, that membership is right for both the applicant and the meeting, is at the heart of the acquisition of membership.

Example: Some meetings have found it helpful to replace the traditional ‘visit’ with a series of smaller meetings between the applicant and other specially appointed Friends. These meetings might be set up as meetings for clearness (cf. *Qfp* 12.22-25). A lengthier discernment process can stave off the possibility of an application being turned down if it becomes clear to those involved that membership is not appropriate.

“Decisions about membership” (Qfp 11.20ff.)

Principle: As MMs are responsible for holding membership, they should be responsible for the final decision about an application.

Examples: The decision may be informed by a report, written jointly with the applicant; by a minute from a meeting for worship for business; or by the outcome of a meeting for clearness. All of these are the product of discernment.

Suggested new section: “Recognition”

Principle: Membership can be seen as the outward expression of what is already there. The acceptance of a new member should be a joyful occasion.

Example: Affirmation (akin to making declarations at a wedding) may be a useful way to give expression to the relationship between a new member and the meeting. The meeting might like to have a celebration.

Oversight for new members

Principle: The nurturing process needs to continue after the acceptance of a new member.

6. Yearly Meeting list

Many Friends have suggested a YM list as one way of solving many administrative problems of membership. After careful consideration, we have concluded that holding a YM list of members raises a number of problems:

- The YM’s policy on data protection makes it possible for people not to be included in lists. This contributes to making any centrally held list of membership impossible to keep complete.

- Holding a YM list of members as well as MM lists of members introduces a duplication of effort, with attendant costs and administrative complexity.
- Experience with the current YM central database shows that it is very difficult to keep a national list up-to-date as it is so dependent on information received from meetings and individuals.

7. Transfer

We have had relatively few responses from Friends about transfer of membership. *Qfp* 11.27-33 sum up the procedures well, and state the principles behind transfer of membership. Membership is of a community and this defines the steps in the transfer process. Important aspects are the responsibility of Monthly Meetings to maintain accurate records, and the provision of appropriate oversight.

Some Friends do in fact see transfer of membership as a cumbersome process, but it is hard to see how it can be improved. Friends' main complaint about it seems to be the amount of administrative work that it involves. The current system is intended to ensure that the new Monthly Meeting, the old Monthly Meeting and overseers are informed of Friends transferring in and out. Some meetings have found it useful to pay for part-time administrative assistance. Another possibility would be to make greater use of electronic media, such as putting certificates on the web, and encouraging greater use of e-mail. In the longer term, perhaps the YM should think about central provision of electronic resources for maintaining records locally.

Our proposal is to amend the relevant section of *Qfp* so that it has separate sections with instructions to the Friend whose membership is to be transferred, Monthly Meeting clerks and overseers. This would make the section parallel with the current section on membership.

8. Non-geographically held membership

We have received a very small number of responses which convey a desire for non-geographically held membership. Some reasons for wanting this kind of membership are:

- movement and mobility of Friends, from one place to another, or in some cases belonging to more than one meeting at once (such as the case of many students)
- people whose relationship to their local meeting is such that they do not feel they belong
- people whose sense of belonging lies at some other level than the local meeting, such as YM

- people for whom transport to a local meeting makes it impossible to attend, whether for reasons of mobility or distance

Most of the responses in favour of non-geographically held membership have been from Friends who see benefits for others, but not for themselves. Only one or two Friends have told us of their personal wish to hold their membership non-geographically.

Given the problems outlined in Section 6, we do not see any practicable ways to implement non-geographically held membership. Oversight lies at the heart of the problem, and it is difficult to see how effective oversight can be provided. One possibility is to encourage meetings to accept people into membership even if it is known that the new member will soon be leaving the area. Meetings could be encouraged to contact an applicant's wider Quaker networks (such as members of a Listed Informal Group, a young people's Link Group, or a university chaplain) if they want further support for an application for membership.

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Michael Eccles
Jane Muers (convener)
Richard Ogden
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29 September 2004

APPENDIX: YEARLY MEETING MINUTE

YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN BRITAIN

AT THE YEARLY MEETING HELD IN EXETER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER 28 JULY – 4 AUGUST 2001

Minute 30: Membership: process and commitment

Further to minute 19, we have had laid before us some of the fruits of the consideration Friends have been giving to the matter of “Membership: Process and Commitment “since last yearly meeting and during this yearly meeting.

We affirm that formal membership is still appropriate to our yearly meeting, whilst recognising that it is not the only form of commitment possible. True commitment, in whatever form, may be costly.

We unite with the following proposals for change:

- a) that we explore the processes for acquiring and transferring membership, which should be made as simple and undaunting as possible.
- b) that it might be made possible for membership, once acquired, to be held in a way that is not specific to a geographic meeting, provided satisfactory arrangements can be made for the maintenance of an appropriate list and the oversight of those on it.
- c) that membership should, so far as practicable, be treated in the same way for all age groups, in particular enabling children and young people to enter into membership when the time is right for them.

We ask the Recording Clerk and Meeting for Sufferings to establish a mechanism for producing detailed proposals in these areas. This should be done through a process of consultation involving Quaker Life Central Committee and other appropriate bodies as well as local meetings. We look forward to receiving at a future yearly meeting their proposals, together with any amendments to *Quaker faith & practice* which may be required.

Meanwhile, we ask all Monthly Meetings to consider carefully at an early date whether their existing membership procedures are in line with *Quaker faith & practice*. We see it as essential that the membership application takes place within a context of care, nurture, education and support of attenders and members. We encourage Monthly Meetings, where they see fit, to experiment with the application process within the spirit of Quaker faith & practice, allowing rather more freedom than the current wording about exceptional circumstances (section 11.21 in particular) allows. We encourage meetings considering experimentation to approach the Recording Clerk for advice or if they have questions about their proposed plan. Experimentation should be planned to cover a specific period of time and then carefully reviewed.

We ask meetings to report to the Recording Clerk on their experience as soon as they feel able so that good practice may be widely shared among Friends.

HELEN ROWLANDS, *clerk*