

# Engaging Young Adult Friends – what do we know so far?

A report on the experiences of 18- to 35-year-olds with the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.



## Introduction

Historically, the Quaker movement was populated by young adults – George Fox was only 28 in 1652; many others in the Valiant Sixty (the early Quaker travelling preachers) were in their teens or twenties; and as recently as the 1980s more than 100 young adults were attending each gathering of Young Friends Central Committee (later to become Young Friends General Meeting, or YFGM).<sup>1</sup>

However, as the Society considers our ageing and declining membership trends, the reduced visibility of young adults in British Quakerism – and in faith communities in general – has become apparent. We wanted to find out what is happening and why.

Between 18 February and 10 April 2016, Quaker Life asked young adults (aged 18–35) with a present or previous connection to Quakerism to tell us how they relate to and engage with their Quaker identity, and what encourages and impedes involvement in Quakerism for young adults in Britain.

The response was staggering, with more than 160 submissions, interviews and survey responses (including contributions from ten younger Quaker group facilitators and university chaplains). This report lays out the results of the consultation, their implications and the response from Quaker Life Central Committee.

## Key survey statistics

- 152 people responded to the survey, with a mean age of 26.
- 75% of respondents self-identified as Quaker, with a further 8% partially identifying.
- 41% of respondents were in membership, 47% were not members and 12% didn't say.
- 24% of self-identified Quakers also identified as Christian.
- 93% of members and 66% of non-members said they fully identified as Quaker.
- 43% of respondents said they currently attend meeting for worship at least once a month.
- 58% of members attended meeting for worship more than once a month, compared with 34% of non-members.
- However, 51% of respondents who self-identified as Quaker said they attended meeting for worship occasionally, hardly ever or never.
- 77% of respondents first attended as children, and 23% first attended as adults.
- Those who first attended as children were more likely to identify as Quaker than those who first attended as adults (76% compared to 71%) but less likely to be members (38% vs. 49%).

<sup>1</sup>Carter, Max J., and Best, Simon, 'Quakers, Youth, and Young Adults', *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. Oxford Handbooks Online, 2013, pp.1 & 6.

Respondents were also asked to rate how important three different aspects of Quakerism are to Quaker identity. Figure 1 shows how each aspect was rated by all respondents and by members only (with 4 being very important, 3 somewhat important, 2 somewhat unimportant and 1 not at all important).

**Figure 1**

How important is the following to Quaker identity?	Average importance rating	
	All	Members
Being in membership	2.18	2.46
An understanding of Quaker processes, structures and traditions	3.10	3.22
Being an active part of a Quaker group/ community	3.08	3.12

Explanations of these scores were also given, and are covered later. However, one thing that wasn't asked about but came up repeatedly was that living according to the testimonies is one of the most important aspects of Quaker identity. Many respondents feel that being guided by and witnessing to their Quaker principles is one of their main ways of engaging with and committing to Quakerism. This is what makes them Quaker even when they are not actively involved in formal structures.

### Overall themes

Firstly, the clearest theme to emerge from the report is one of love and care for the Religious Society of Friends. A total of 114 respondents identified as Quaker, and in response to the question, 'Overall, would you describe your experience of Quakerism as a positive or negative one?' all but two of the 136 people who answered the

question stated that their experience was positive. This was reflected throughout the responses and there were many examples given of positive experiences and strong community bonds, both within and across age ranges, alongside frustrations and barriers.

Many respondents were encouraged by the fact that the consultation was even taking place, and keen to have their voices heard. There were pages upon pages of suggestions for how the Society could improve its engagement of young adults. However, there were also some concerns about the label 'young adult Friends', with some respondents concerned that to be labelled as 'young' is to have their experience of Quakerism devalued, to only be seen in terms of their age, or to be regarded as children. Multiple respondents had experienced feeling patronised in Quaker settings due to their age.

It is clear that the issues that prevent involvement and engagement in the Society of Friends are not specific to those in the 18–35 age range, and experiences vary greatly between individuals. However, the transient nature of the lifestyles of many young adults does mean that some issues disproportionately impact this demographic – the issues outlined in this report are those that came out strongly in the responses to this consultation.

### What encourages and prevents young adult engagement?

#### Local meetings

For the vast majority of Quakers, their local meeting is their main worshipping community, providing both spiritual and pastoral support. However, the experience of many young adults is that those communities are inaccessible; therefore they are missing out on local support.

The comparative frequency of moving area for this age range can have a

detrimental impact on attendance at meeting for worship, because it makes it harder to connect to a local meeting, despite identifying as Quaker. Another issue raised frequently was that Sunday morning meetings are simply not a good time for young adults, due to working shifts or long hours, travelling at the weekends, or Sundays being the only real chance to catch up with life or sleep. Midweek evening meetings or meetings held later on Sundays were mentioned by many as being useful, but there is not enough provision to satisfy demand. For those with young children, the lack of regular children's meetings in many places prevents attendance and involvement. Overall, there is a sense that the life of meetings tends to be built around the expectation that members have lots of free time, which isn't true for most young adults.

It was also off-putting for many that there are few other young people in meetings, and that they are likely to be the only young person there. Numerous young adult Quakers said that they are not made to feel welcomed by older Quakers, and in some cases are not respected as a Quaker due to their age – or only valued because they are younger than the average demographic.

However, examples were given of local meetings being a 'rock' in times of transition for young adults. Although it was only mentioned in a small number of responses, it is clear that local meetings could be important Quaker

communities for young adults, fulfilling some or most of their spiritual and pastoral needs. Suggestions for ways of achieving this include active Quaker chaplains or young Quaker contacts, worship at different times, or through contact between meetings when it was known that a young adult associated with the meeting was moving area.

### **Membership and structures**

Becoming a member is seen by many as a commitment to a local or area meeting more than a commitment to Quakerism or Quaker values. Many young adults do not feel that they have a local meeting to commit to, but still feel committed to Quakerism through other channels, whether that be YFGM, volunteering, or striving to live their lives according to the testimonies. There is a sense that because the commitment that young adults show to Quakerism doesn't 'fit' within the membership system (for example, not attending local meetings), their commitment is not necessarily appreciated. Many respondents feel that the membership–attender distinction is arbitrary and unhelpful outside of administrative purposes, although membership is still respected as part of a personal journey.

The actual or perceived limitations on attenders (which varied in practice from area to area) makes it harder for some young adults to engage, and prevents involvement in some areas of the central work. The impact of this on young adults Quakers can be greater than the impact on other attenders due to their lack of regular attendance.

An understanding of Quaker structures is considered to be somewhat important to Quaker identity – it is harder to engage in Quakerism without one. Whilst the structures are regarded as what makes Quakerism 'special' by many, it was also found to be exclusionary to those who had come to Quakerism as adults or who hadn't had the structures explained to them as children. The time required to be part

“...Each generation of young Friends by its experiments must discover for itself the truths on which the Society is built if it is to use those truths and to continue and enlarge the work of the Society...”

Young Friends Committee, 1926,  
*Quaker faith & practice* 21.04

of and maintain the structures could also be overly burdensome for those living busy lives. Some respondents expressed that membership and other structures need to be more flexible to prevent exclusion.

### **Community**

Dedicated spaces and communities for spiritual reflection and discussion are extremely valuable to young adults. Being an active part of a community is what keeps people rooted in Quakerism, and time away from them is keenly felt, particularly after ageing out of young Quaker events. Where provided (such as YFGM, young adult programmes at Woodbrooke, local groups), spaces and communities are one of the main ways young adults feel engaged and challenged in their Quakerism, helping to develop identity and understanding, and build lasting relationships and bonds. Aside from dedicated young adult groups, many young adult Friends also volunteer at young Quaker events – these too are highly valued as Quaker communities, providing space for spiritual development and an ongoing link to Quaker structures.

However, for many, the spaces that already exist are not accessible and there is a sense of a ‘void’ after ageing out of young Quaker events. This could be due to location, time or finances, or groups and events simply not meeting needs. Many young adults face difficulties in staying linked to their main Quaker communities and peers due to being geographically spread and/or limited financial resources, and there is a lack of support for maintaining or building young adult communities. Many want regional and national events in different formats (not just YFGM) to be provided to aid spiritual exploration and community development in the way that young Quaker events had for many. The local young adult Friends communities in some areas are highly valued by nearly all who attend, providing a local

spiritual community, with space for discussion, friendship, growth and worship. However, there is little formal support at either a local or central level for the coordinators of these groups, some of whom reported struggles of finding meeting spaces, promotion, creating resources for the group, and worries about what would happen to the group should they age out or move area. Particularly for the smaller groups, this dependence on a driven facilitator makes these valuable local communities more vulnerable; plus, the groups only exist in a few cities, so they only cater for a small proportion of young adult Quakers. There is a strong desire for more practical and financial support and for support in setting up new groups.

### **Central involvement**

Being involved centrally when not involved locally is difficult for many young adults. If not in membership or well known to a meeting then central service, financial support to attend courses or events, or even having the confidence to attend events is much more difficult. YFGM mostly fills these gaps for its members, but unfortunately this leaves a large number of young adult Quakers who are not part of YFGM unable to access support, especially since this gap was thought to have been plugged. Another barrier to central involvement is the time required by central service, events or courses, particularly when they occur during the week.

### **Communications**

Traditional local and central communications (such as the clerk’s monthly mailing, newsletters etc.) are significantly less likely to reach young adults. Instead, there is a reliance on social media and other young adults sharing information to find out what is going on and what to get involved in – these informal information channels inevitably vary in reliability, hampering involvement for many.

## What next?

This research reveals a clear gap in how Quakers in Britain include and engage young adults in the life of the Society. As a result, Quaker Life Central Committee has supported a successful proposal for a legacy-funded three-year project to act on the findings.

The post-holder will work with young adults, local meetings, and Quaker organisations and groups around the country to devise and implement solutions to the issues that prevent the engagement of young adults in the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. The role will be recruited later in 2016, guided by a steering group and working alongside YFGM and Woodbrooke.

## References

- Carter, Max J., and Best, Simon (2013). 'Quakers, Youth, and Young Adults', *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*. Oxford: Oxford Handbooks.

## Further reading

- Young Adult Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (2016). 'PYM Young Adult Friends Epistle', Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, [www.pym.org/pym-young-adult-friends-epistle-2016](http://www.pym.org/pym-young-adult-friends-epistle-2016)
- Ben Pink Dandelion, Woodbrooke and the University of Birmingham (2013). 'The British Quaker Survey 2013: believing and belonging in secularising society', Woodbrooke, [https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/data/files/CPQS/British\\_Quaker\\_survey\\_2013\\_initial\\_findings.pdf](https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/data/files/CPQS/British_Quaker_survey_2013_initial_findings.pdf)

Produced in August 2016 by Georgina Bailey, Recording Clerk's Office, Quakers in Britain, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

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## Get involved

If you would like any more information or to receive updates about future work with young adults, please contact [youngadults@quaker.org.uk](mailto:youngadults@quaker.org.uk).

If you would like to find out more about local or national young adult Quaker communities, please contact the groups listed below:

- YFGM:  
<http://yfgm.quaker.org.uk> or [yfgm@quaker.org.uk](mailto:yfgm@quaker.org.uk)
- Edinburgh Universities Quaker Society:  
<https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/society/quakersoc> or [euquakersoc@gmail.com](mailto:euquakersoc@gmail.com)
- Nottingham Young Friends Group:  
<https://nottinghamquakers.org.uk/young-friends-meeting-contact-form>
- Oxford Young Adult Friends:  
<https://oxfordquakers.org/about-oxford-meeting/youngadultfriends> or [youngadultfriends@oxfordquakers.org](mailto:youngadultfriends@oxfordquakers.org)
- University of York Quaker Society: [quakers@yusu.org](mailto:quakers@yusu.org)
- Younger Quakers in Cambridge: search group name on Facebook for information
- Younger Quaker Worship Group, London:  
<https://youngerquakerworship-grouplondon.wordpress.com>
- Young Adults at Woodbrooke:  
<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/pages/young-adults.html>
- Young Adults at Yearly Meeting:  
<https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/ym/young-adults-at-yearly-meeting>