

BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING
Quaker Life Membership Procedures Group
Report for Yearly Meeting 2006

August 2005

1. Preface

The Membership Procedures Group was set up in response to a minute of Britain Yearly Meeting 2001 (see Appendix 1). 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.

Our terms of reference are in Appendix 2

Yearly Meeting 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 have surveyed the experiments in membership application procedures in monthly meetings requested by Yearly Meeting 2001, and then consulted the following on our draft proposals:

Monthly Meetings (and their local meetings through MMs)
Friends World Committee for Consultation General Secretary
Quaker Communications Central Committee
Quaker Life Central Committee
Quaker Life Representative Council
Quaker Life Children & Young People's Committee
Quaker Life Committee on Eldership & Oversight
Quaker World Relations Committee
Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM)

49 out of 71 monthly meetings responded to the consultation ending June 2005.

3 Committees plus YFGM responded, 6 individuals and 1 meeting study group.

A note on language

We recognise that not all will be comfortable with words and phrases we have continued to use. Words such as 'acquisition', 'application', etc will cause some Friends discomfort. We have tried to find alternatives, and failed.

Recommendations

1. Our main recommendation is that the membership sections of *Quaker faith & practice* should be reorganised so as to shift the emphasis from the process of acquiring membership to a set of principles underlying this process. The procedures which monthly meetings establish for acquiring membership stem from these principles. This change allows for both flexibility and variation in practice and the retention of well-tested processes for acquiring membership. The principles apply to everyone. The procedures stemming from them can be adapted so as to enable children and young people to enter into membership when the time is right for them.
2. With regard to transfer, we recommend keeping the present process. It seems to us that the main problem is that many Friends do not understand our current procedures. For this reason we recommend that the relevant section of *Quaker faith & practice* is amended so that it includes separate sub-sections with instructions to (a) the Friend whose membership is to be transferred, (b) monthly meeting clerks and (c) overseers.

Use can be made of electronic media.
3. We do not recommend the setting up of a system by which membership can be held non-geographically outside monthly meetings. It is clear that satisfactory arrangements cannot be made for the maintenance of an appropriate list and the oversight of those on it. However, membership procedures and oversight could draw on an individual's wider Quaker community beyond the geographic limits of the monthly meeting.

Recommendation 1: Acquisition of membership

Our main recommendation is that the membership sections of *Quaker faith & practice* should be reorganised so as to shift the emphasis from the process of acquiring membership to a set of principles underlying this process. The procedures which monthly meetings establish for acquiring membership stem from these principles. This change allows for both flexibility and variation in practice and the retention of well-tested processes for acquiring membership. The principles apply to everyone. The procedures stemming from them can be adapted so as to enable children and young people to enter into membership when the time is right for them.

General comments

1. This recommendation has been based on the experiments monthly meetings have carried out with the process and procedures for acquisition of membership, following Yearly Meeting 2001. Many meetings have found these experiments very positive and spiritually rewarding.
2. It allows and recognises the successful innovations Friends have made to their processes. It sets down principles to give a framework for the procedures meetings may develop to meet local and individual needs.
3. A consequence of the 2001 minute and this recommendation is that changes in our procedures will mean that monthly and local meetings have a responsibility to ensure that their procedures derive properly from the principles, are set out clearly and are accessible to potential applicants and members of the meeting.
4. The emphasis on 'nurture' in the process of acquisition of membership links to changes in the nature of the membership of the Society. With nearly all Friends now

joining in adult life through conviction the need for a continuous process to enable those moving into membership and new Friends to understand the nature of the society has been identified.

5. We see the principles in the section on 'Acquisition of Membership' as applying to all ages and conditions. (For further comment on membership of children please see 'Further Work' at the end of this report).

Recommended changes to *Quaker faith & practice* – Chapter 11 should include the following sections:

i) Meaning of Membership:

Bring together, alongside 11.01, other passages in chapter 11 which outline the meaning of membership, e.g. 11.18. (Consideration of the content of such a section was specifically not in our remit. This is a reorganisation of existing material).

ii) Acquisition of Membership:

There would be three sub-sections under the following headings:

Principles of this process

Stages of the process

Guidance to those involved

Drafts of the first two are as follows.

Principles of the Membership Acquisition Process

1. It is a two-sided process involving an individual on their spiritual journey and a whole community of faith.
2. Membership is acquired as the result of a process of discernment which involves both the applicant and the wider Quaker community; local Friends, the Monthly Meeting, and possible contacts with other Quakers in other contexts such as a listed informal group or a university chaplain.
3. Moving into membership is the outward acknowledgement of an inward growth of, or wish for, commitment or a sense of belonging to the Religious Society of Friends.
4. The process should be as open and as inclusive as possible involving the potential member throughout, regardless of age. This means that the applicant should be party to any written report on their application.
5. It must be compliant with the law, such as the Data Protection Act.
6. Potential members should be supported and nurtured before, during and after the application process.
7. The Quaker community should be sure that the individual has an appropriate understanding of the meaning and responsibilities of membership.
8. Variety and flexibility in procedures are needed to reflect individual and local circumstances.
9. Although aspects of the process may be devolved to smaller groups, Monthly meeting has the responsibility to:

- a) make the decision on whether to accept an applicant into membership;
- b) to maintain records of the stages of an individual application;
- c) to establish and explain what local procedures are.

Stages of the process

1. Nurture and support

Meetings have a responsibility to nurture and support individuals so that they develop a sense of belonging and an understanding of our shared beliefs, testimonies and spiritual discipline.

Nurture is a continuing process for all who come to our meetings whether or not they decide to consider membership. Each monthly meeting will have its own ways of approaching this. For example they may provide attenders' packs for information and literature about membership, there may be special nurturing or supporting Friends or there may be an attenders' group.

2. Initiating the process

If and when the time seems right the process of discernment which can lead to membership may begin. This can happen in different ways and may be initiated by the applicant or someone else. For example: others may approach an attender to encourage her or him to consider membership and may begin the acquisition process on their behalf. Attenders themselves may take the first step. The decision to apply may, perhaps, emerge from being part of a discussion or pastoral care or nurture group.

For the individual this decision is likely to reflect a wish to make a public statement to show their commitment to the discipline of Friends and their recognition that this is their spiritual home.

3. Discerning the Rightness of the Application

The process of discernment that membership is right for both the applicant and the meeting is at the heart of the acquisition of membership. Once it has been discerned that it is right for the application process to be taken forward, monthly meetings may offer a number of options. For example: it may be that the traditional process of a letter of application to the monthly meeting and the appointment of visitors is followed; in other cases supporting Friends may hold discussions with the attender and together they write an application letter or a minute which is taken to monthly meeting; for some a meeting for clearness may be right.

Some applicants will have found a wider Quaker community beyond the local geographical area, and those involved in the discernment process may find it helpful to contact individuals from this wider Quaker community (such as members of a Listed Informal Group, a young person's Link Group, or a university chaplain).

The final part of the process of discernment is consideration by the monthly meeting. As monthly meetings are responsible for holding membership they are responsible for the final decision about an application. The decision may be informed, for example, 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.

4. **Recognition and Continuing Nurture**

Membership can be seen as an outward expression of what is already there. The acceptance of a new member should be a joyful occasion and may be marked by some kind of celebration. For all meetings the responsibility to nurture and guide the new member is a continuing one. Monthly meetings will find their own ways of providing this, for example by supporting Friends or pastoral groups.

iii) Membership of children

We recommend that sections 11.02 and 11.03 should be with sections 11.22 and 11.23 (see also 'Further Work')

Recommendation 2 : Transfer of membership

With regard to transfer, we recommend keeping the present process. It seems to us that the main problem is that many Friends do not understand our current procedures. For this reason we recommend that the relevant section of *Quaker faith & practice* is amended so that it includes separate sub-sections with instructions to (a) the Friend whose membership is to be transferred, (b) monthly meeting clerks and (c) overseers.

Use can be made of electronic media.

General Comments

1. We do not recommend a change to the basic process for transfer of membership. The current process ensures that we know exactly where membership is held throughout the process. It is rare for Friends to be forgotten or left in 'limbo'. It recognises the reciprocal nature of membership as a member moves from one part of the Quaker community to another with the agreement of the meetings as well as the member.
2. The main alternative to the present process which was offered to us involved the member who was moving being given a certificate of transfer to take with them. This would lose the clarity of where membership is held. At a time when the member is experiencing change it is likely that there will be a period, of indefinite length, when membership is not clearly held anywhere.
3. We encourage exploration of the careful use of electronic media for communication between monthly meetings concerning transfer of membership. Accurate recording of each transfer process will be necessary.
4. Alongside our recommendations for changes to *Quaker faith & practice*, monthly meetings may find it helpful to have their own pamphlet outlining for members the procedures for transfer of membership including the member's role in this.

Recommended changes to *Quaker faith & practice*:

Transfer of Membership (currently 11.27-11.33) This section should include:

- i) the principles behind the procedures for transfer of membership. These include the need to keep accurate records, and the recognition of the reciprocal relationship between members and meetings and the responsibilities this brings;
- ii) separate sub-sections with instructions to the Friend whose membership is being transferred, monthly meeting clerks and overseers.

Recommendation 3 : Non-geographically held membership

We do not recommend the setting up of a system by which membership can be held non-geographically outside monthly meetings. It is clear that satisfactory arrangements cannot be made for the maintenance of an appropriate list and the oversight of those on it. However, membership procedures and oversight could draw on an individual's wider Quaker community beyond the geographic limits of the monthly meeting.

General comments

1. We have received a very small number of responses which express a wish that membership should not be held by the local monthly meeting.

Most of the responses in favour of non-geographically held membership have been from Friends who see benefits for others, but not for themselves. There has been no desire expressed for non-geographically held membership from YFGM. Only one or two Friends have told us of their personal wish for their membership to be held non-geographically.

Alternatives suggested have included:

- recognition that membership can be held outside the local monthly meeting area, for example with another monthly meeting;
- holding membership at a national level, for example on a Yearly Meeting list or through YFGM.

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

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

- Holding a Yearly Meeting list of members as well as monthly meeting lists of members introduces a duplication of effort, with attendant costs and administrative complexity.

- Experience with the current Yearly Meeting 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.

3. Oversight

We have heard of positive examples of long distance oversight where Friends have been supported well by their original monthly meeting or by their wider Quaker community, such as YFGM, a Listed Informal Group, a young people's Link Group, or a university chaplain.

4. We have become aware of a number of Friends who have moved but whose membership remains, for whatever reason, in their old monthly meeting. In some cases, overseers in the old monthly meeting may feel that providing oversight to these Friends is a burden. As one of the key principles of membership is the reciprocal relationship between an individual and their community we hope that overseers will not feel obliged to continue an extensive one-way relationship. Limited contact may be agreed on an individual basis between the Friend and those responsible for oversight. We remind Friends of the advice in section 11.28 of *Quaker faith & practice*.
5. Other ideas we have considered included a virtual (web based) monthly meeting and a national list along the lines of Friends World Committee for Consultation's International Membership List. Each of these has problems with the provision of oversight.
6. As part of our consultation we have heard from Young Friends General Meeting that there is no great desire from them to hold membership in a way parallel to monthly meetings.

Recommended changes to *Quaker faith and practice*:

We recommend that a paragraph is included in Chapter 12 to give guidance on Eldership and Oversight of Friends who live at a distance from their Monthly Meeting, who move frequently, or who 'belong' to more than one meeting at once.

Further Work

We recognise that the possibility of parents applying for membership on behalf of their children means that, in this respect, applications for membership of those of all ages are not treated in the same way. Concern about this came to us from Children & Young People's Committee. It was not raised by monthly meetings.

If this issue is to be addressed, it would have to be through a separate process of consideration, designed for that purpose.

Michael Eccles
Jane Muers (convener)
Richard Ogden
Anita Thistlethwaite

together with Michael Hutchinson as a staff member representing the Recording Clerk

Annabelle Dixon was part of the Group until her death in May 2005.

30 August 2005

**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*

APPENDIX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE QUAKER LIFE MEMBERSHIP PROCEDURES GROUP

1 SUMMARY OF PURPOSE

1.1 The Membership Procedures Group shall work with the Recording Clerk to take forward the proposals for change to membership procedures as requested by Yearly Meeting by its minute 30 of 28 July – 4 August 2001.

2 MEMBERSHIP AND ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

2.1 The group shall be appointed by Quaker Life Central Committee and shall be composed of 5 Friends, including a convener, nominated through its Nominations Committee, working with the Recording Clerk and Assistant Recording Clerk.

2.2 The members of the Group should be in membership of the Society, and reflect the appropriate knowledge and background required for detailed work on membership procedures.

2.3 The Assistant Recording Clerk shall act as secretary to the Group.

2.4 The group may invite other Friends and attenders, and BYM staff, to attend specific meetings, as appropriate.

2.5 The Group shall serve from appointment until central committee in December 2005.

3 DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 To produce detailed proposals for the 3 areas of membership procedures identified for change by Yearly Meeting 2001:

- 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.

3.2 To consult on the proposals under 3.1 with local meetings ¹, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Quaker Communications Central Committee, Quaker Life Central Committee, Quaker Life Representative Council, QL Children & Young People's Committee, QL Committee on Eldership & Oversight, Quaker World Relations Committee, Young Friends General Meeting, and other bodies as appropriate.

3.3 To assess and analyse responses from monthly meetings made during the life of the Group to the Recording Clerk on their experiments with the application for membership process in order that these may be reported and good practice shared amongst Friends. To liaise with monthly meetings on behalf of the Recording Clerk as appropriate for this end.

3.4 To collect from monthly meetings current good practice on procedures for transfer oversight of 'geographically unattached' members and appropriate procedures for people in differing ages including children, young and elderly people.

3.5 To invite submissions, as felt appropriate, from individual Friends and local meetings, Listed Informal Groups and standing committees (and their functional committees) of Meeting for Sufferings as required.

3.6 To work with reference to the wider context of processes for change within Britain Yearly Meeting, for example that of the Local & regional Groups Working Group.

3.7 To draft, should their proposals require it, any proposed amendments to *Quaker faith & practice*, in consultation with the Recording Clerk.

4 TIMETABLE & METHOD WORKING

4.1 The group shall liaise with Quaker Life Central Committee and its Representative Council at an early opportunity. The group shall aim to initiate a consultation with

¹ The secretary to act as the consultation co-ordinator with monthly meetings as recommended in section 3.2 of paper S 00/12/D on consultation procedures (Meeting for Sufferings 6 of December 2000).

local meetings (through or informing monthly meetings of the process) for a nine month period to be complete by the end of June 2004, informing Meeting for Sufferings through the Recording Clerk of its consultation programme beforehand. The group will submit its final report to Quaker Life Central Committee not later than September 2004, which shall forward it to Meeting for Sufferings to allow proposals to be included in *Documents in advance* of Yearly Meeting 2005.

4.2 The group has an advisory role and is accountable to Quaker Life Central Committee and the Recording Clerk, who shall ensure that provision is made for the group's expenses in the budget and 3-year operational plan. The group shall send its minutes to the clerk of Quaker Life Central Committee, and report to the Committee as required.

4.3 The group should be as far as possible self-servicing, but will be advised and supported through Quaker Life Department which will keep records of its proceedings.

5 AUTHORITY

5.1 The Group will work within these terms of reference, as agreed by Quaker Life Central Committee on the authority of minute 02/32 of 15-16 June 2002.