

# Confidentiality



*Quaker faith & practice 12.10*

...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.



Nothing in this leaflet about keeping confidentiality should prevent you from reporting to an appropriate authority when an individual is at risk. (This particularly applies to safeguarding (child protection) issues.)

## **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.”

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. The questions for discussion would help a meeting or group reach a common understanding. Clear agreement on good practice will build trust.

This is one of a series of leaflets and books offering information, support and guidance to all those responsible for eldership and oversight – for spiritual and pastoral care – based on the experience and insights of Quakers in Britain. It has been compiled in the light of Friends’ comments, and includes a list of publications and other resources.

This leaflet was originally produced by the Committee on Eldership and Oversight, Quaker Life, May 2006. You can make as many copies as you need for your meeting: or download the leaflet from <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight>.

Alternatively, ask the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life (see inside back cover) for paper copies, or copies in other formats.

## **A paper to help you discuss confidentiality in your meeting**

The purpose of this paper is to help us 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 openness to the Spirit in our meetings. Trust is the starting point – trust in God, trust in the Spirit, 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 and reasonably, in accordance with the circumstances, and, as far as we are able, hold to truth and love. We will use the process of discernment.

To build and maintain mutual confidence we should 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. If we do decide to pass on information that may be private or sensitive about a person to a third party, we should check:

- whether the subject would consent
- whether the third party has a need to know of the matter
- that what we say is clear, to the point, accurate, and helpful.

## **Confidentiality in meetings and committees**

Confidentiality is not generally possible or appropriate in open meetings where anyone can attend; these include meetings for worship and 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 a specific item be treated as confidential. If agreed, members present should then treat the matter as confidential and minutes and subsequent actions should respect that undertaking.

Closed groups (groups with a specified membership) can agree to keep some or all of their business confidential, depending on how they decide to operate. They may agree a confidentiality policy that governs all aspects of their meetings, or bring particular areas or meetings under such a policy.

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 of a case must exercise judgement in determining 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, 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 is about truths and facts and should not allow room for speculation.

## **One-to-one conversations**

If you are asked by an individual to keep a matter confidential you should not agree unconditionally. At the outset you should request permission to extend the confidentiality if you discern it necessary. You may find that you are unable to carry a confidence alone or others may need to be informed because a third party is at risk. We should remember that most of us are not trained counsellors. A confidence can be an unbearable burden.

Committees or groups charged with a duty of pastoral care need to attend particularly closely to the principles outlined here. Those responsible for oversight, for instance, will often have information about individual members that they will consider confidential, but which they may on occasion feel they should or must share with others within the meeting or with outside agents in order that a matter can be more effectively handled.

Nothing in this leaflet about keeping confidentiality should prevent you from reporting to an appropriate authority when an individual is at risk. (This particularly applies to safeguarding (child protection) issues.)

Sometimes withholding information on the grounds of confidentiality can be the wrong way forward. If those who have been excluded on matters that appropriately concern them receive information by another route they may feel hurt and angry and alienated from the Quaker community.

## **Some questions for use in meetings**

- What sorts of matter do you think should be considered confidential?
- How can you assess your own need to know?
- How can we ensure that each of us has an understanding of confidentiality issues?
- Have we considered how truth, trust and consent should affect our communications with one another?
- If you've experienced in your meeting a problem arising from a conflict between confidentiality and openness, how did you deal with it, and what did you learn from it?
- At the beginning of a confidential undertaking, do you agree with all parties concerned the degree of confidentiality that is being offered? What do you do if there seems to be a need to reconsider what was agreed?

- When visiting an applicant for membership, do you receive all information in a spirit of sensitivity? Do you also regard information that is excluded from the visitors' report as private?
- When individuals are burdened with confidential matters, can you uphold them without asking unnecessary questions?
- Do you always obtain permission to speak of a Friend's affairs before helping them contact organisations or social agencies outside the Society?
- Do Friends ensure that participants in creative listening groups properly understand confidentiality?

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References to confidentiality:

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

16.21c in meetings for clearness in preparation for marriage

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

## Resources

A list of relevant publications to buy or download is on the website of Britain Yearly Meeting: go to <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight>. Also at [www.quaker.org.uk](http://www.quaker.org.uk) you can browse the catalogues of the Quaker Centre Bookshop (tel. 020 7663 1030/1031), which sells by post and to visitors, and also contains the Quaker Centre Resources Room (tel. 020 7663 1030).

Guidance on the Data Protection Act can be obtained from Helen Griffith, 020 7663 1161 or [heleng@quaker.org.uk](mailto:heleng@quaker.org.uk), in the Recording Clerk's Office.

If you have any queries on oversight, eldership and pastoral care in general, contact in the first instance the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life:

Email: [michaelsb@quaker.org.uk](mailto:michaelsb@quaker.org.uk)

Telephone: 020 7663 1023

Friends House  
173 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BJ

Courses on eldership, oversight, the spiritual life of meetings and pastoral care are offered by:

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

[www.woodbrooke.org.uk](http://www.woodbrooke.org.uk) or

Email: [enquiries@woodbrooke.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@woodbrooke.org.uk)

Telephone: 0121 472 5171

Fax: 0121 472 5173

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Large-print versions are also available:  
please contact the publications team on 020 7663 1162,  
or email [publications@quaker.org.uk](mailto:publications@quaker.org.uk)

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