



Yearly Meeting of
the Religious Society
of Friends in Britain

Quakers and Ecumenical Occasions

The eucharist

A leaflet from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations

For most churches the central form of worship is the sacrament, variously known as the eucharist, the mass, holy communion, breaking of bread or the Lord's supper. Often on ecumenical occasions a church which is leading the worship will conduct a eucharistic celebration and will invite all those present to partake of the bread and wine.

Representatives of other churches as well as representatives of Quakers may have difficulty in accepting this invitation, while being glad to be present at the service. This leaflet addresses the question of how Quakers who are representatives of the Society might respond to such an invitation.

The Quaker testimony

Friends should be prepared, if asked, to explain why they do not take the Sacrament. It is not sufficient to say 'We regard all life as sacramental', as this is not a reason for apparently regarding the receiving of the Sacrament as the only part which isn't.

The Religious Society of Friends, throughout its history, has maintained a testimony to a corporate life which does not depend on outward sacraments. This testimony is widely known and respected.

The living reality of the indwelling Christ confirmed George Fox in his belief that: 'Christ has come to teach His people himself, by His power and His Spirit in their hearts'. Early Friends therefore argued that they were released from the obligations of ritual remembrance. They experienced the presence of Christ in their life and their worship. Paul suggested that we partake in the eucharist to remember the Lord's death until he come: our conviction is that he is come.

We continue to meet in silence and wait on God for the words that may come, to any of us, from the depths of that waiting together. It is our experience that the reality of God's presence is not restricted to any particular sacramental form, and that it may be fully known in worship that retains none of the traditional elements that are central to the life of many churches. We believe that our meetings for worship, when properly held, give us an experience which matches both the exaltation and the symbolism of the eucharist. We, too, see worship as the means of communion between the human and the divine, celebrating the work of God in creation, renewing and binding together the members of the worshipping body.

Our Society has maintained a continuing witness to the inwardness of religious experience. The whole of life is sacramental, every place, person and action potentially being an experience to bring us into the presence of God. Hence the priestly task of exercising Christ's functions in the world belongs to the whole community of God. The grace of God may therefore be known without an intermediary. However valid and life-giving outward sacraments are for others, they are not, in our experience, necessary for the operation of God's grace.

We hold this witness in trust for the whole church.

Approaches to the eucharist

Quaker relationships with other churches are likely to involve us in joint religious services of various kinds. Sometimes there will be opportunities to introduce members of other churches to Quaker worship, thereby broadening their ecumenical experience. At other times we may participate in forms of worship which broaden our own.

Some Friends have a close connection with other churches and are accustomed to partaking in the eucharist. What action Friends take when the eucharist is celebrated will depend upon the situation. Those who are present as individuals may feel they have more freedom than those representing the Society. Even if you are not officially a representative, you may be known as a Quaker and be seen to be representing Quakers.

If Friends are attending as a group, it would be wise to discuss possible responses in advance. It is reassuring to realise that declining to take the Sacrament is not normally likely to give offence; there may well be others who, for reasons of their own, also decline. On such occasions Friends need to be sensitive to the significance of the celebration to the rest of the congregation, and this itself may vary from one denomination to another, and from one individual to another. Unlike Friends, most Christians view the celebration of the eucharist as a specific occasion when Christ becomes known to them in a special way. When taking part in a Holy Communion service, Friends should recognise that it may be a means of spiritual enlightenment if approached in a spirit of humility and love.

If you know you are not going to partake, it may be helpful to choose a seat where you will not prevent others from going to the altar.

Different forms of communion service

At many communion services, the congregation will be invited at the specified time to come to the altar or communion table to receive the sacrament, or alternatively, a blessing administered by the priest. Friends may remain seated. As most of the congregation are quietly participating in the Sacrament, Friends remain in worshipful communion with them.

In some churches it is the custom for the bread and wine to be brought round to the congregation. In such a situation Friends may decline, for example by shaking the head, or by not holding out the hands to take the elements, or by passing them on after a suitable pause.

For some Friends, the feeling of unity with a particular group of Christians may be very strong, and it may well seem right to them to signify this unity by receiving the bread and wine. Where Friends exercise this freedom they need to be aware that it may contribute to a misunderstanding of the Society's Testimony.

Queries for reflection

If you are in the position of representing Friends at an ecumenical service which includes the eucharist, you may find it useful to consider the following queries.

1. Have you thought out your position in relation to the eucharist? Are you aware of the way your experience and background has contributed to this response?
2. Have you consulted about these matters with your Meeting or other Quakers that may be present?
3. What will the members of other churches present on this occasion expect of a Quaker?
4. Have you talked with the person celebrating the eucharist about their position in relation to giving communion to a Quaker, or have you explained why you do/do not want to take part?
5. If you are going forward to receive a blessing, have you communicated this to the celebrant? If the bread and wine are being passed round, have you considered how to account for your response?
6. Have you thought how you will explain your action to others?

7. In what you are deciding to do, to what are you bearing witness? Have you thought how this witness will be received and understood by others?
8. How do you feel you will be representing Friends?
9. Is there anything about this particular celebration of the eucharist that might make you change your accustomed response on this occasion?
10. Are you clear in your own mind that you are rightly led, and you are continuing to listen to the spirit?

A leaflet from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR).

QCCIR can provide advice and support to Quakers and Meetings who want to broaden and deepen their encounters with other churches and faiths.

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