

# Being Friends Together:

## Sharing our meetings' stories



Woodbrooke  
Quaker Study Centre



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# Sharing our meetings' stories

## Background

Over recent years, an increasing number of Friends and meetings have recognised the importance of the link between the shared life of our meeting, our outreach and engagement with the wider world and our own individual, inner life. Enriching and enlivening one will in turn give life, vitality and purpose to the others; they each feed and are nourished by one another.

There are things that Friends and meetings do that deepen and strengthen their life together: practices, experiences and aspects of their shared life that help them to grow both individually and as communities. At the same time, the life of every meeting has challenges and experiences times of conflict and difficulty.

The work of both Quaker Life and Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre is to offer support, resource and encouragement to meetings, responding to their needs and listening to their experiences. As part of a process of creating a new learning resource called 'Being Friends Together', a group of staff from Woodbrooke and Quaker Life and Friends from the Quaker Life Network initiated a series of visits to meetings around the country, simply in order to hear their stories.

The visits took the form of an open, facilitated conversation, built around three questions. These were:

- ✳ 'What has been the story or journey of this meeting that has brought you to the place where you are now?'
- ✳ 'What nourishes the life of the meeting?'
- ✳ 'How does the meeting connect with the wider world?'

Each meeting was led by two facilitators, both of whom shared training for and understanding of the project and the process. One facilitator had particular responsibility for guiding the conversation, while the other took notes. These notes were then related back to the meeting for comment, addition and confirmation. Whilst it was made clear that the notes would not be sent back to the meeting as a written report, meetings were assured that nothing would be added beyond what they had heard and agreed. All we were seeking was a sense of the life of meetings today and to try to discern what common themes or experiences might emerge; from these, we would be better able to shape the resources and support we offer.

We selected meetings that represented a broad cross-section of the Society in England, Scotland and Wales in terms of geography, size, setting and history. We were careful not to make pre-judgements about the life or liveliness of meetings, nor to have any fixed idea of what we might find or what would emerge as being significant or important in a meeting's journey or experience. The project was intended as an opportunity for meetings to tell their own story, in a way that was meaningful and truthful for them. There was encouragement for everyone to share what seemed important to them. There were no right or wrong answers; it was fine to have widely differing interpretations of an event or experience; particular stories would not be identified as having come from particular meetings.

The sessions themselves were fruitful, worshipful and enlightening experiences for the facilitators and for the meetings. On the part of the meetings there was an appreciation of the opportunity to tell their story to each other and to find their own place in it. On the part of the facilitators there was a sense of privilege at being able to hear such rich, often deeply personal and frequently uplifting stories.

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Background

The stories reflected experiences of warmth and welcome, of spiritual enrichment, of transforming relationships and of coming home. They also touched on conflict, disappointment, the demands of leadership and the struggles and delights of living together as richly diverse communities united by common purpose. Personal, individual stories were told as well as stories of shared life and shared journeys.

It was clear from the stories told and from the reactions of meetings to both the process and its purpose, that there was a real valuing of both the support and encouragement received from Friends House and Woodbrooke and of the sense that the experience and insights of Friends and meetings significantly shaped and informed the work done on their behalf.

Once a meeting report was completed and agreed by both facilitators, it was returned to Quaker Life; we compiled these and sent them to Kathy Chandler, a member of Lancashire Central and North AM, with a background in nursing, education and community development. She undertook the task of distilling and analysing the reports, identifying common themes and exceptions, evidencing them and commenting on particular aspects.

Her report, below, now forms a substantial part of the background for the creation of a new resource being developed by Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and Quaker Life, to offer support, nourishment and encouragement to meetings. It also offers a window into the life of meetings in Britain Yearly Meeting today.

Her report identifies a number of themes, some of which are common to all meetings, others which are particular or significant for a smaller number of meetings. Reflecting on those themes, it is possible to see certain elements of these stories that can be seen as practices which emerge as helpful and enriching in the life of meetings. The importance of some of these practices was sometimes recognised by their absence, either now or in the past, and that absence was keenly felt.

Many meetings acknowledged their struggles and shortcomings.

Nine main practices emerged (see pages 3–5).

In all the meetings we spoke to, strengths and weaknesses were talked about, things that went well and things with which meetings struggled and every meeting felt themselves to be a mixture of all. The experience of coming together to share their story was something that meetings found to be both challenging and rewarding and provides a rich insight into the life of meetings today.

**Alistair Fuller**  
**Head of Outreach Development, Quaker Life**

## Nine main practices



### 1. The centrality of worship in the life of meetings

The importance of deep and centred worship was acknowledged by all meetings as essential in nourishing the life and witness of individual Friends and uniting meetings that were often very diverse in terms of insight, experience and outlook. It was seen as both the root and the fruit of a well-gathered, healthy meeting. It was also recognised as crucial to the healing and growth of meetings that had experienced difficulty and division.

### 2. Creating opportunities to share spiritual experiences and to learn more about spiritual practice, in particular experiences of living out our Quaker faith in the world

Study groups, discussion, visiting speakers and a range of other activities and opportunities were talked about as being a vital part of enriching and enlivening a meeting. In many cases, the content of the discussion was less important than the experience of listening to and learning from each other and the opportunity to share one's own spiritual practice and experience. As much as an opportunity for learning (though this was important) often the deepest value of these events and the conversations they enabled was the sense of knowing and understanding one another more deeply 'in the things that are eternal'. They also helped Friends and attenders to feel more confident and better equipped to share their Quaker faith with others.

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Background

### **3. Being engaged together in a shared endeavour**

Whether it was the development of the meeting house (which was also sometimes remembered as a cause for conflict), organising an outreach event or undertaking a public act of witness, working together on a project, sharing responsibility and facing challenges, difficulties and successes, was felt to have galvanised and enlivened meetings. It provided a sense of focus and purpose and frequently opened up unforeseen opportunities.

### **4. Food and fellowship and the importance of celebrating the life of the meeting**

Arranging shared lunches, ceilidhs, parties and social events was clearly a source of enjoyment and enrichment for Friends and meetings. Frequently it gave newcomers an opportunity to get to know others in the meeting and to make a contribution themselves. It gave a sense of shared life being something joyful, loving and life-enhancing and created a richer and deeper sense of community and belonging. This in itself deepened and enriched the worshipping and witnessing life of the meeting.

### **5. Being an all-age community**

The presence of children and young people in a meeting was felt to be crucial. Meetings where children were not present felt their absence and those where children were present recognised how much they brought to the life of the meeting. Even where children were not present, many meetings gave time and attention to making sure they were ready to receive children – and families - when they came. Some meetings worked hard to include children in the shaping of their life, in their worship and decision making and having a lively children's meeting was clearly a source of encouragement and delight.

### **6. Welcome, encouragement and care**

The quality of welcome and encouragement and being helped to feel part of the meeting was given as the reason many Friends had moved from the initial point of enquiry to becoming involved and committed members and attenders. Whilst a personal contact or a desire for community was often cited as the reason for coming in the first place, welcome and warmth were the reason people stayed. This was expressed in the negative, too, and experiences of indifference and lack of welcome were acknowledged as a cause of hurt and deep disappointment. Welcome was often a sign of a particular quality of relationship; a sense of the value of each individual and an attention to pastoral and spiritual nurture and care.

## 7. Equality of voice and a sharing of responsibility

The quality of relationship demonstrated through welcome and pastoral care was often a reflection of the life of a meeting which worked together coherently and with a sense of mutual support and responsibility. The experience of established Friends was valued and the fresh insights of newer attenders were heard and received. This was not always the case and, even in meetings where this now happened, memories of hurt and division were still keenly felt. Great value was placed on the rich diversity of experience and spiritual insight within each meeting; it was understood to be both a source of strength and challenge and something central to being a Quaker meeting.

## 8. A willingness to talk about conflict and to acknowledge mistakes made

Conflict is very often part of the life of a meeting, either past or present, and dealing with this formed a significant part of many of the stories shared. The sources of conflict described were often to do with coping with change but they might also be centred around a particularly difficult set of relationships that would then be played out at a time when making difficult decisions was called for. In most cases, the conflict itself was understood as symptomatic of something already going on. Many meetings acknowledged these experiences and none claimed to have dealt with them without making mistakes or lasting hurt being caused. What was appreciated was the ability to talk about these conflicts; acknowledging that they had happened, being honest about mistakes and trying to learn from this was understood to be positive, healthy and necessary.

## 9. An element of flexibility and openness in trying new things and exploring new possibilities

A number of meetings spoke of the value of exploring new possibilities, of being open to opportunities and of a willingness to try new things. This might be about ways of making Quakerism more visible and available to others, witnessing effectively in the wider world or about the shape, structure and support of the life of the meeting. An element of risk and occasional failure was acknowledged as well as the importance of the a new venture being owned and supported by the whole meeting rather than being driven by a small group or an individual.



# Themes

Twelve themes emerged from stories of twelve Quaker meetings:

- ✳ the importance of worship
- ✳ welcome, warmth and inclusiveness
- ✳ being open to new ideas and a willingness to try new things
- ✳ care and support of people during times of difficulty
- ✳ valuing diversity
- ✳ time spent together socially
- ✳ valuing the presence of children
- ✳ exploring Quaker spirituality together
- ✳ engaging effectively with each other during times of disagreement
- ✳ sharing responsibility
- ✳ effective eldership and oversight
- ✳ connection with the area meeting and Quakers nationally.

Themes identified within this document have been those that appeared within the stories of three or more meetings as read and interpreted by one individual. This process began with six completed stories and more stories were added when they became available, with care being taken to be alert to the possibility of new themes emerging. Where there appeared to be exceptions to these themes within the meeting stories, these were also noted.

Reports from the sharing of meeting stories varied considerably in terms of the level of detail recorded and in style. Wherever possible, the words that Friends themselves used have been included, both for accuracy and so that their voices are clearly heard. These words are given in quotes. When note takers seem to have summarised what was said, their words are not in quotes.

The text in bold is comments by the writers of this report, and the indented text is taken from the reports from individual meetings.

## Theme 1: The importance of worship

### **The importance of worship in enriching the life of the meeting was mentioned by all meetings, with examples as follows:**

People's willingness to share and what they bring to MfW and share in the afterword is felt to be very important.

The first and unanimous response [to the question 'what enriches the life of the meeting] was meeting for worship.

**“** 'There is deeply centred silent worship, out of which inspiring ministry comes from people's grounded experience.'

'The most important thing is the strength of the silent worship which really does exist.'

'For me and for others, the meeting for worship is the pull, from which everything else arises... But meeting for worship is spiritual dynamite.'

'Being a community centred around worship is important, and most enjoyable.'

Early in the session, when a Friend had said that Meeting for Worship was the core of their participation in [the] Meeting, there was a ripple of agreement around the room.

**“** 'I need Meeting for Worship, it goes beyond other Quaker things, into all of life, beyond the Meeting.'

'Everything is secondary to meeting for worship.'

'Meeting for Worship gives permission for conversations – the onus is on us to take advantage of this opportunity.'

'Our action, our being in the world, springs from our spiritual experience.'

### **A number of meetings particularly mentioned mid-week meetings for worship.**

**“** '...we have a Wednesday lunch-time Meeting which has been very beneficial.'

We discussed the mid-week meeting for worship that takes place at the town centre church on a Thursday. It is popular and successful (there is a farmers' market at the same time in the town centre) and contains a central core of people who also attend meeting for worship on a Sunday.

The meeting on Thursdays – a small regular offshoot, which suits those who prefer a small group... enables getting to know each other well, and the forming of loving bonds. 50% of those attending it also come to meeting on Sundays.

A mid-week meeting ... has helped to establish a greater sense of presence in the local community and enriches the worshipping life of the meeting. One more recent attender said, 'It was attending the mid-week meeting and getting to know other Quakers, who were so encouraging, that gave me the courage to come to [meeting] on a Sunday and to get more involved.'

A mid-week meeting for worship offered another opportunity for outreach and for local people to experience Quaker worship. It is usually silent, but followed by rich and varied discussion.

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes



**For three meetings, the fact that their meeting formed part of an unbroken tradition of worship was significant:**

It was described as a meeting firmly rooted in Quaker tradition and method...

**“** ‘When I come into worship, I can feel the presence of all those Friends, all those generations, who worshipped here before us.’

Many Friends – especially newer ones – commented in different ways on the sense of peace that permeates the Meeting House; it is tangible even from outside, but from within people feel a strong presence which they ascribe to the continuity of silent worship there. It’s felt to be a “thin place”.

## Theme 2: Welcome, warmth and inclusiveness

**Almost all meetings commented on this. There were many examples of meetings actively welcoming newcomers and seeking to be inclusive:**

...a leaflet [had been designed] in response to visits from people in the local community with low literacy skills.

**“** ‘We came to this meeting one day, and the welcome was outstanding. We were made to feel part of it from very early on.’

‘That first day, Sue gave me a hug.’

‘In some Meetings you get a sense that they feel ‘we are select’. Not here.’

The warmth of the welcome and sense of inclusiveness was thought to be even more important: the warmth of the handshake on arrival, or the welcome when an enquirer phoned the number on the board outside.

**“** ‘We were the first Meeting in our Area Meeting which said that people are free to speak in Welsh as the spirit moves, with no need to translate. I am grateful that people have a home here.’

One Friend spoke of herself as an ‘awkward bugger’ who always felt like an outsider, apart from at meeting, where she was loved, cherished and accepted.

**“** ‘The circle groups are very important in a large meeting. If newcomers could only meet Friends over coffee after MfW that would be very daunting.’

One family drives past their local meeting house; at least two other people have meetings which are nearer to their home...

**“** ‘The warmth of the welcome...a permanent home and a regular Sunday meeting. Most of all, the open welcome and the sense of acceptance [helps to bring in newcomers].’

The meeting house welcomes a lot of visitors during the year; in the previous twelve months this was over 1,000 and members of the meeting are always there to show them around.

**“** ‘A friend who is a Friend encouraged us to come along... Everyone has been so welcoming.’

One Friend shared a very painful experience of rejection and isolation from her association with a previous meeting. She had come to [to this meeting] not wanting to come to meeting but felt she ‘was accepted and have been able to feel part of this community’.

**There were many comments about being a community where people see each other as ‘family’.**

...he felt he had found a family and a home. These words and sentiments were echoed by others. A story was shared about kindness, welcome and support given when bringing her newborn daughter to the Meeting, that it was like finding a ready-made family.

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“ ‘I have gained a family, I feel so welcome.’

The word ‘family’ was used repeatedly through the conversation, a feeling of connectedness and dependency and of belonging to each other.

“ ‘We are very open. The Meeting House is much loved, a great joy, like a family home.’

‘This meeting is like a family. A bit untidy and sometimes ragged round the edges, but there is great care for one another and a willingness to try what might work, what might help.’

## **There were also some comments about Friends continuing to be part of the meeting even if they are no longer able to attend regularly:**

Very elderly and longstanding Friends are still important members of the Meeting even though they are no longer able to get to the Meeting House.

There are a variety of people who have moved away but who come back to [the weekend away].

One Friend recalled how being loved and accepted as a child and young Friend continued to shape her daughter’s life, although she no longer attended meeting. Another said that her children, now in their 20’s, still regarded the meeting and its members as part of their family.

## **There is also sometimes a history of welcome not being present and a deliberate attempt by everyone to change this having made a difference.**

“ ‘Then there were these awful people who shut people out. They shut me out. They didn’t want me. I stayed away for years, then I came back and things had changed. It is very important not to let cliques run an organisation.’

...a Friend who came to the meeting in the 1980’s... hadn’t found it friendly or welcoming. Individuals were, but the meeting didn’t have a culture of welcome. Someone less robust or perhaps newer to Friends may well not have stayed. Over the years, this had changed; it had been challenged, acknowledged, wrestled with and worked on it ‘and have got hugely better at it’.

WELCOME is now an important part of the story. They have worked to improve this and are aware of the fine line between welcoming and ‘smothering’.

## **Some meetings also commented on how welcome is a shared responsibility (an overlap with another theme):**

‘Welcome is a job for all of us. We are all the meeting; it’s no one’s job...and it’s everyone’s.’

People have become conscious of the importance of welcome, as something that involves the whole meeting.

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**In terms of welcoming both Friends and other users of the meeting house into the building, the presence of a Quaker on site, who was sometimes but not always a warden, was mentioned in the stories of four meetings:**

Resident Friend (N.B. different from manager) does a lot to make people welcome in Meeting House and to share Quaker ethos.

...having a Quaker presence on site has created opportunities for interaction with users groups, and has enhanced the Meeting's relationship with them and with the local community.

**Some exceptions to this theme of welcome were:**

**“** ‘It sounds odd, but getting rid of names off the members' list has been good for the Meeting. We took off the names of the children of staunch members of the Meeting, because those children are now adults whose spiritual life is not in this Meeting. It was a release, it told us that we were not in thrall to those families.’

Over coffee, a Friend who had been in membership for forty years, explained quietly that she had been at [the meeting] for three years, but had recently decided to move away as she did not feel supported by the Meeting or that Friends were tolerant of her use of Christian language.

**One large meeting seemed to be a particular exception to this theme, with a significant number of comments recorded about the lack of welcome:**

There are many new people coming to meeting; it can be a struggle to get to know new people [A Friend] came to midweek once and didn't recognise anyone there; there was no obvious attempt to get to know each other [and the Friend] walked in and walked out without being acknowledged; they did not feel they wanted to go again. This can also happen on Sundays, though welcome by notice giver is terrific.

**“** ‘Meeting is very polite – sometimes hospitable; welcome is problematic; there is no asking about life/work/etc. – welcoming is not saying ‘how are you’. It is not unwelcoming, smiley, polite, but not welcoming. Its years since I was asked “how is your life/ your work”.

[A Friend mentioned the] lack of opportunity to ask deeper questions from knowledge of each other; aware of existence of small groups but hasn't been encouraged to take part.

[A Friend mentioned that they have] small knowledge of people in meeting after 7 – 8 months.

It takes years to settle in; people ask how you are, but don't offer themselves as friends.

This is big meeting with a strong core; many people not in core are not included – ‘I never get outside core and don't get to know those who slip away’.

**Other comments about welcome included:**

**“** ‘Welcome to meeting is two sided – it needs to be presumed/accepted as well as offered.’

## Theme 3: Being open to new ideas and a willingness to try new things

### **This was specifically mentioned in three stories:**

- “ ‘...if you see something that seems good you bring it back, it may work here, it may not.’ ‘Different things work at different times and we are working to find the best way for us. We’re flexible and fluid and we’re open to trying new things.’ ‘I feel held by the meeting, and we can try new things because we share this holding together.’

### **Far more frequently, openness to new ideas and a willingness to try new things were apparent through examples shared within the stories. These included redevelopment or building projects, community involvement or sharing a building with others:**

- “ ‘One of the spin-offs of the redevelopment has been more bookings, and that means more people are aware of Quakers. We have had someone come to us from the Buddhist group, and from the yoga group. They attract people who might become interested in Quakers.’

... circumstances demanded that they do things differently. They developed a vision together of a Meeting House that was available to the community while protecting the Meeting’s heritage... Friends had to turn to the local community to help them with fundraising. It was only when they did this that they discovered the level of goodwill and support from others who had had no previous connection with Friends.

There was a comment that letting things peter out was a great strength of the meeting, as it gave space for something new for which there was more energy; this had happened with programmes to “share a book”, ask questions about peace, or play music.

The meeting house is also used by many groups who say they get a lot from the place, not just in practical ways but from the quality of the place, including its quiet atmosphere.

Friends who remembered that time talked about holding meeting for worship in the nearby Almshouses and about a great spirit of friendship and resourcefulness, a sense that the meeting was not the building

The meeting house itself was seen as a great resource: it raises money and provides an invaluable opportunity for outreach and connection to the wider community. There is a balance between regular, income-earning use and also the offer of free use [to some groups] and at low rates to other local groups.

Friends’ involvement in the wider community was seen as a source of enrichment for the meeting. It is a meeting where people ‘turn up and get stuck in’ and ‘there are enough of us to go around’. Quakers are actively present in so many things that are going on in the town.

- “ ‘We are grateful as a Meeting not to own premises, which can be so expensive. We value meeting in this beautiful building.’

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[The meeting] is well-connected with the local community. The meeting house is a very busy venue with lots of bookings and events and the meeting itself has a busy, lively life. The variety and nature of (over 100) local groups and organisations that use the meeting house was recognised as a real spiritual benefit to the meeting itself.

The nature of many of the individual and corporate involvements with the local community has served to connect the meeting to a wider, intricately connected network of groups and organisations concerned with issues around justice, sustainability and peace. An example of this is when the Occupy movement gathered at the university, a good number of those involved were Quakers.

**“** ‘The building project? A Friend who has now moved away did a lot of the preparation. We had a couple of meetings for clearness. It was a very profound process, an option appraisal. The miracle was that we had made the decision to go ahead before we were notified that we had a fifty thousand pound bequest.’

‘We used to meet in each other’s houses – it was very close, there was a great sense of being with a group of people, which is a little missing now, in the comfort of the MH...but now we are an identifiable presence – much valued as an offering to the community, to those who are not Quaker...it is more than just a building.’

‘In many ways [the meeting house development] has shaped the kind of meeting we are today. It created all kinds of possibilities – not just to do with the building. It give us a richer, stronger life together.’

The meeting has a Heritage Room, which is regularly used for events, coffee mornings and a range of meetings by the local community, and it has done a great deal to heighten the sense of presence and connection and ‘usefulness’ in the community. They are very involved in Churches Together...

The variety of users of the building – AA, Tai Chi, Mums and Toddlers – was valued and especially the Muslim community using it for food during Ramadan.

**This does not always mean that meetings have strong on-going relationships with individual community groups or that community involvement does not present difficulties, particularly in terms of Friends living far from the meeting house and the communities nearby:**

When asked whether the Meeting engages in corporate witness or community involvement beyond the use of the meeting house, people seemed clear that they do not. However it then emerged that not only are many individual Friends engaged in voluntary work in the community, but also the meeting has done so corporately in the past.

The Meeting does not engage directly in community work, except through the financial support which it provides to the ... Centre and to the ... project. But several individuals explained that their daily working life e.g. as a teacher or local government worker, was focused on improving wellbeing for the people of [the town].

**“** ‘...Churches Together like us to be involved, but once again, there is a difficulty, with so few of us living locally...’

‘[The fact that none of us live close to the meeting house].. makes it hard for us to be really present here.’ ‘I’m never sure just how much we are really part of this community.’

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This was accompanied by an acknowledgement that most members of the meeting came from quite a widely scattered area and this was a challenge in terms of both engaging deeply with the local community, being visibly present and also maintaining a meaningfully close life as a community of friends.

**“** ‘Most – though not all - of us come here alone and that means that we are always struggling with competing commitments, especially on Sundays or on special occasions.’

They miss the presence of local residents – virtually all Friends live [outside] the town, and the meeting covers a very wide ‘catchment area’.

It was felt that transport and the scattered nature of the membership was a real problem in terms of what they could do together as a meeting...

## **Neither does it mean that the community groups always have an understanding of Quakers:**

**“** ‘When you tell them, people are quite shocked that it is a place of worship.’

‘It is a sadness to me that most of the asylum seekers don’t even realise that it is a religious building, nor do [those] who come here to work with them, e.g. the people from Social Services.’

So often those who Friends talked to were surprised that Quakers still existed or, if they did know, assumed they were a puritanical, fundamentalist sect.

## **Sometimes new developments had been painful for Friends and in some cases, caused them to leave the meeting:**

**“** ‘...some longstanding members left the Meeting at least partly due to their strong feelings about this issue.’

‘But sometimes, if someone sets themselves against something, it can be hard to move forward without casualties.’

## Theme 4: Care and support of people during times of difficulty

### **Many stories included examples of care and support of those within the meeting:**

- “ ‘We are encouraged to share our joys and our sorrows. Being human it’s mostly our hard times. There is a feeling of being held by the Meeting. I’ve experienced it. A feeling of being held by the Meeting in your time of difficulty.’
- ‘There are two people nominated to give me support if I need it. I feel that the whole Meeting is a support. That has grown over the years.’
- ‘One thing that brought us together: there was a family with two daughters. Both parents died, one after the other. When the mother died the girls both needed to finish exams – O & A levels, before they moved away to the care of their extended family. The Meeting supported them.’
- ‘There are other individuals I can think of, people who came with very specific needs. We have to have someone listening to them. Not giving advice. Listening. And in the end asking “and how can we help you right now”?’

There is much mutual support within the meeting. When a Friend recently asked for a MfW at the local hospital to support the family through a critical time for their daughter, she was deeply affected by the level of support; 12 people turned up at two days' notice. Another Friend spoke of how coming here once or twice a week over a long period had helped her overcome mental illness. Practical support was also mentioned as important – for example when the mother of a young family was ill.

Two very moving personal stories were told of love, acceptance, welcome and friendship; this 'constant flow of kindness' had extended through periods of serious illness, loss and grief and had been of immeasurable value.

- “ ‘I was becoming homeless at one time, and [two Friends] took me into their home.’
- ‘I have had a very difficult year, and many Friends ...have provided amazing strength and support.’
- ‘It’s the individual friendships you make. They extend out of the Meeting – and feed back into the Meeting. Individual Friends do things for me, but in the [other non-conformist churches] I attended they did things to me.’
- ‘People are caring. There is something which you just don’t get anywhere else.’

The depth of care and support given in times of need or illness was shared and spoken of as a vital part of belonging to the meeting.

Gestures of care, which keep it all going. Each doing what they can. Being upheld through difficult personal times.

- “ ‘When I came here, I was so bruised, covered in sharp edges. They let me be, accepted me, gave me space to recover, helped me move forward.’

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**Care and support of people in the local community was also apparent in some stories. It might only be carried out by a few individuals within the meeting but has the support of the meeting as a whole.**

“ ‘Once a week we open the Meeting House to asylum seekers and refugees.’

‘Two of us go once a fortnight to the local prison. We meet up with a member, an attender, and another chap too. Because of the regulations there can only be two of us. But I feel the Meeting is with me.’

‘Without Quakers coming in to prisons, I wouldn’t be here today. Hooray for Quaker chaplains.’

‘I feel I should say about this Meeting: if there is a need, this Meeting responds. Just a few months ago, a family from Afghanistan was refused legal aid. The Treasurer sent out an e-mail asking for money so they could receive legal advice. It was more than 900 pounds, but he had it in days, and more.’

One member of the meeting is a chaplain ... and the meeting prayerfully supports his ministry.



## Theme 5: Valuing diversity

**Within a number of meeting stories, Friends spoke of valuing diversity in terms of Quaker experience, belief, age, gifts and views.**

The “quality” of the people [enrich the meeting]: a good mix of seasoned Friends and those who are newer explorers of Quakerism; people who have a good grasp of what they believe but are also open to other ideas, and to value and listen to newer or less sure Friends; an ethos of teamwork rather than competition; and deep respect for one another.

... a community that is egalitarian, richly diverse with a vivid mix of people, gifts and experience.



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“ ‘Our differences enrich the Meeting.’

‘In the other meeting I attend, I can’t be myself as I can be here. It’s more the restrictions. For instance I can’t mention the words ‘Christ Consciousness’. It’s become so normal not to talk about Jesus Christ that I would be thrown out.’

“There is an acceptance here of who you are.”

Friends spoke of the diversity of the meeting; its variety of people and views, of age and experience. When people had come from other churches or faith groups, the meeting had been helpful and supportive and ‘refugees’ from other traditions felt valued equally alongside lifelong Friends.

“ ‘Different people bring different gifts.’

‘I come because there is acceptance of my dropping in and out. That is enormously important to me.’

‘I am grateful for the spiritual diversity...’

‘People come wanting to know people’s spiritual journey. There is lots of diversity.’

‘There are many strands in this meeting.’

The wisdom and depth of lifelong Friends was valued by those newer to Quakerism. The enthusiasm and energy of newer Friends was valued by those who had been there for much longer.

Friends spoke of the equality of voice that the meeting enjoyed. Experienced, life-long Friends listened attentively to the voice and insights of much newer attenders.

Using material from Diversity Conference gave a ‘Friends House stamp of approval’ to local discussion of diversity.

## **In three meetings there were aspects of diversity that were viewed as a challenge or questioned:**

“ ‘We have various people who have come in from various places, but not a lot of diehard Quakers to continue this growth. There are a lot of people from other religious cultures, and a lot who drop in and drop out. We love having them, but we wish they would give more of themselves.’

“ ‘We ended up here because there was no-where else to go. I see myself not as a Quaker but ‘just for now’, so I don’t feel able to take on some tasks.’

‘First thought Quakers were all the same, but now realise many sorts – gay/Christian/left wing/right-wing/ atheist/etc. Is this enriching or not?’

Elders had to deal with anti-Christian rhetoric in meeting.

“ ‘Jesus Army members came with mini sermons – we let them, and they went away.’

‘Quakers can’t tolerate intolerance.’

‘Where are the limits of diversity?’

## Theme 6: Time spent together socially

### **The importance of sharing time together was frequently mentioned. This included sharing food:**

Shared lunches are important... They enjoy eating together! Lunch was smoothly organised, lovely relatively simple food, and clearly part of a pattern of being together. They sat round tables (with tablecloths!) refectory-style and conversation over the meal was inclusive.

There was a real enjoyment and value in eating together (we had just shared a wonderful lunch) and the sharing of food has clear spiritual as well as social benefits.

**“** ‘Meeting for worship is nicely rounded by shared meals – these enable conversations.’

Regular shared lunches were recognised as an important part of the enrichment of the meeting; they were seen as an opportunity to go deeper, to get to know about each other's lives.

**“** ‘There is something generous about a shared lunch, about bringing food for others. And we have some marvellous cooks here; it's always a treat.’

‘Shared meals bring us together. Any excuse for food makes us a better community, makes us better together. Whether it's to discuss weighty stuff or just to chat, eating together always helps.’ [This meeting mentioned] 5th Sunday breakfasts and soup before business meeting.

### **It included social activities and outings:**

**“** ‘And as a Meeting we have had really nice days together. An arts and crafts day – we learned more about each other, in a different way.’

‘Something that has brought us together is tending to the garden. We have had Meeting House jam and herb jellies.’

Monthly poetry and music evenings [are an enriching activity].

**“** ‘Some of our outings have been really good.’

‘Oh, and there are poetry evenings and music evenings, and other activities. We like to get to know each other in the things that are frivolous.’

### **It included weekends away:**

**“** ‘We try to go there every year in spring. Fresh air and food and drink and exercise and conversation. We go for a long walk on the Saturday and a short one on the Sunday and we sit about and we talk. Some years there is a table tennis tournament.’

‘The group going away together. Last time there were 19 of us. Some of it was just chatting.’

‘For the past ten years we have had an annual youth hostel weekend. We have shared lunch every 3rd Sunday.’

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes



## **It also included laughter and fun:**

Another Friend added “and gardening” which brought laughter but an agreement that the most important things were those done together.

- “ ‘At one Meeting for Business every item was greeted by uproarious laughter. Yes, laughter is a help.’  
‘Quakers have a sense of humour!’

## **Exceptions to this theme in some meeting stories were:**

- “ ‘Quite a lot of Quakers don’t like the word ‘fun’.’  
‘The small activity groups (painting, sacred song etc.) have been very dependent on the enthusiasm of individuals – when they go, the group goes. Number of groups has shrunk.’

## Theme 7: Valuing the presence of children

### **This was apparent in almost all meeting stories:**

One Friend mentioned a “glorious moment” when the Meeting House was full of 50 schoolchildren on a visit, and the joy of the ministry of a young child.

Friends valued, too, the experience of being an all-age community, where all were equally valued; this was evidenced by the presence of two very young children throughout the meeting.

Children were felt to have been a very valuable, continuous and ever-changing presence in the meeting that had given it life and energy. There are fewer children now than in the past, but their presence and contribution is valued. (Two were present at the meeting and made very valuable contributions). The value of children in the meeting was returned to throughout the conversation; the blessings of working with them in the children’s meeting, the insights they bring, thinking of them as friends and as Friends.

The children’s meeting is also a significant part of the story. Having dropped to a small number it increased when several Friends had babies around the same time. Now families travel quite a distance because of the children’s meeting (it is the only meeting with children’s activities in the area). A Friend said “any meeting without a children’s meeting is unlikely to be here in 30 years’ time”.

Another Friend spoke movingly of her... ‘explosion of joy’ when the children come in at the end.

A happy small children’s group [is part of the story of our meeting that has brought us to the place we are now].

**“** ‘Children’s Meeting is pivotal. Children’s Meeting makes it possible to be more Quakerly, to be a Quaker family.’

‘In the past, the children have been really core, but they are getting older now, and there are not the new young families. At some time we will lose the critical mass of young people that draws the others along.’

‘There is a Moodle Link Group. A vibrant teenage section, they themselves do the work. I have been a member of meetings with none of that.’

[One Friend said that they] came to this meeting over 40 years ago because it is a vibrant meeting with lots of children and it’s still the same. Two others agreed.

There is a monthly all age meeting.

An 8 year old child has asked to stay in ‘big meeting’.

Another child asked a question in meeting and was responded to in meeting- very affirming for all.

**“** ‘There have always been youngsters here, children who have been part of our lives.’

‘The children’s meeting has been so involved in the life of the meeting; it’s not just about having children around, it’s about them really being part of shaping what we do.’

‘My children quickly became part of the children’s meeting... What I loved most was how Friends listened to my children, really valued what they said.’

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes

Children were valued and heard and made substantial contributions to the discussions of the business meeting. A minute from a children's meeting had asked for the meeting to have a residential gathering, which the meeting accepted and the children were instrumental in shaping what happened there.

All-age worship was valued as an experience of learning and enrichment for the meeting, even those who found it challenging: - 'I can't pretend it's my cup of tea, but then again it isn't about me. It helps to integrate children and families and we all learn through it. That must be a good thing.'

## **In some meetings currently without children, their presence was missed and commented on:**

**“** 'It would be lovely if we had a Children's Meeting now. That's a sadness. We would love to have a Children's Meeting. But it hasn't been laid down. It is in the wings. There is a readiness.'

'We valued the children when they were here...one of the things I miss is the opportunity to support young families.'

## **There were some exceptions to this theme:**

However, another Friend walked out of the Meeting in annoyance of a new baby's noise, and this has clearly been a hurtful issue.

There was no sign of children at the Meeting House and none were present at Meeting or mentioned as being absent, though their website does suggest they would be welcomed.



## Theme 8: Exploring Quaker spirituality together

### **This was an important part of the story of many meetings.**

**“** ‘After Meeting we have a kind of worship sharing meeting, when people say what they think about the topic. There is about half an hour for discussion.’

‘We had an Experiment with Light workshop. I got a lot out of that.’

‘Underlying every Meeting for Worship is the spiritual life of the Meeting. Yes friendship is good, but especially in this day and age what does the Religious Society of Friends mean? It means nothing if you can't see ‘that of God’ in people.’

Two series of Quaker Quest meetings have been held recently, and the preparation for them had a big impact on deepening the Life of the meeting and making people more confident in opening up to others

I felt there was a high level of ‘spiritual/theological articulateness’ in the group – people seemed comfortable using whatever religious language they wanted, some of which was biblically based (often coming from prior church experience), and there was free use of terms like ministry, prayer, etc. Although there was reference to theological difference as a significant feature of the meeting’s story, the group we met with seemed at ease with themselves and to have reached a place of being ‘OK’ with their theology.

Several series of study groups have been held in the recent past.

The programme of ‘Learning and Growing in Faith’ was mentioned, where people share their journeys, their stories, their insights and experiences of living as Quakers. There were opportunities to openly discuss the experience of meeting for worship or the demands of living out our testimonies. Others are then given the opportunity to share and discuss. This was felt to be a deeply enriching experience.

[It is] ...a Meeting where there is a habit of learning, about spiritual growth and about Quaker history and concerns. At present there are groups engaged with Experiment with Light, Becoming Friends, and a Quaker Economics study group. New books are regularly bought and circulated within the Meeting.

**“** ‘There is a culture of learning in the Meeting. Every person is a learner in the Meeting, and that includes the ones who don't much read books.’

The opportunity to share stories and experiences of faith and to learn more about living our Quaker faith were seen as hugely valuable. Age gathering at Glenthorne, Quaker book group, Becoming Friends and other events enabled a sense of profound knowing and deep connection.

The exploration (Becoming Friends) groups are also considered very important.

**“** ‘The Experiment with Light group is enriching and grounding.’

‘I know more about how people here think than at other churches I have attended.’

‘Study groups are amazing. Even though I am too busy right now to go to them, I still feel sustained by them. I still write the date in my diary, even though I can't go.’

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes

- “ ‘For the past two or three years we have run a 6 week course for newcomers. We don’t do Quaker Quest here. The programme includes fun things, and getting to know each other.’  
‘I want to learn with the people I worship with.’

The opportunity to learn, to share insights and experiences, to discover more about each other and about the Quaker way were recognised as deeply enriching for both individuals and for the whole meeting. The meeting arranges talks, discussions, shared lunches and study days. The meeting has also hosted Woodbrooke on the Road and done Hearts and Minds and accompanied attenders through Becoming Friends. These were seen as deepening the fellowship of the meeting and also allowing new enquirers and attenders to find out more.

A monthly meeting for learning was mentioned: - ‘It’s a chance to talk about high and low things; the big issues and the everyday nitty gritty. As a new Quaker it has been so important. Everyone gets a chance to contribute and people share so generously.’

- “ ‘Sometimes we have an outside speaker; sometimes one of us; sometimes we just turn up and see what happens. It usually works.’  
‘I’ve never not found it an enriching experience.’

Other opportunities for learning and enrichment were valued as much for their cohesive quality as for what was learnt; these include Bible study, Yearly Meeting discussion groups and Friends Fellowship of Healing.

## **There were some exceptions:**

The meeting lacked anyone with an in-depth knowledge of Quaker theology and history. In the same meeting one friend mentioned needing to go outside the meeting to explore spiritual beliefs.

Concerns included the attitude to membership (processes and the standing of non-members?) and a perceived need for more study and discussion and a low level of knowledge about Christianity and Quaker theology (?), and lack of study.

## **There were also some comments related to this theme:**

There was a good session on the history of Quakers ... ( c 30 people present); but need more opportunities like sessions on Advices & Queries; need to find out what Quakerism means to Quakers today

- “ ‘There is general fear of teaching among Friends – fear it could turn into preaching’.

[Friends] don’t want to be told what to believe.

- “ ‘When leading a study group it is important that it is not your voice which is heard but a meeting voice.’

## Theme 9: Engaging effectively with each other during times of disagreement

### Many meetings gave encouraging examples of this:

“ ‘I know that there were tears and factions a few years earlier about the decision to refurbish. But because of those tensions we asked the consultants to make sure that they talked to everyone – the people who came and the people who no longer came to Meeting.’

Recent years have seen debates within the Meeting about an alcohol policy (a no alcohol policy is upheld, in response to the experience of a former alcoholic) and a piano (there is now a grand piano in the Meeting House). It seems that the whole meeting engages with these issues rather than a small committee, and that they gain life from the engagement.

During the consideration of the project to develop the Meeting House, the open elders' meeting led to the holding of a crucial threshing meeting facilitated by an external facilitator, which enabled the Meeting to move forward from what had seemed to be an impasse. [There was] a recognition that conflict is 'normal' and can lead to growth.

A story was shared of a very difficult and disruptive episode in the life of the meeting that had been costly and distressing for many in the meeting. The meeting felt that they had been lovingly, firmly and wisely held through a really challenging time; the difficulties had been known, named and faced; they been talked about, worked through and the meeting felt they had emerged stronger. Their systems and structures had been challenged and had been found to be robust and effective. The clerks were described as people who 'refused to walk away and refused to take the easy path'.

In describing this time and this process, the word 'challenging' was used repeatedly. However, it was by openness, by a willingness to face this challenge, to listen and be open to others that the meeting learnt a great deal and it was regarded as an experience through which the meeting grew significantly in its spiritual depth.

There have also been conflicts, and they have been acknowledged and stayed with.

“ ‘About 8 or 9 years ago we made a stand about serving for only three years in a role, and then standing back. The next person may be better or worse – but they will be different. There were one or two bruises at the time, but it was an important step in the growth of the Meeting. Some Friends didn't want to let go. It led to one or two people leaving the Meeting. But it was important.’

There was still a memory of rifts and arguments that had been very difficult at the time. Being honest about those conflicts was important as a way of working more constructively in the future.

“ ‘We know we get it wrong; we fall out and I often find it hard to forgive and let go. But we have to let go of our egos and worshipping together as Quakers is a good way to do that.’

‘It's been like waves; good patches, rough patches. They all blend together. You just need enough love and enough hope to get through that rough stuff.’

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes

“ ‘There can be pain, disappointment, discord expressed, but it feels like it is heard in love. We have had some very painful and costly times, some really difficult struggles, but we share a belief that there will be a way forward, that we will get through.’

‘When bullets are flying – and they do, not always in a Quakerly way – I still feel we are being held by a greater power.’

‘People listen because they want to – not just elders and overseers, but everyone – they don’t have to, they choose to.’

‘I remember a business meeting when one Friend went off the deep end; I mean really went off. It was quite alarming and I don’t think I’d ever heard anyone speak in public like that before. What was extraordinary was how well it was held, how lovingly. Some very difficult things were said, but in the end both she and the meeting were cared for and listened to, and we were held together.’



## Theme 10: Sharing responsibility

### **Meetings frequently mentioned the importance of sharing out responsibility and of teamwork:**

**“** ‘...responsibilities are shared more widely, with roles such as clerking being shared by teams of Friends rather than individuals.’

There is a “can do” attitude and lots of people seem to take initiatives and hold responsibility.

While it is undeniable that the origin and early growth, character and survival of [the] Meeting is at least partly attributable to the vision and tenacity of an individual Friend with leadership qualities, it would appear that the Meeting by now has a life of its own, with a cohort of Friends who take responsibility, grown within the Meeting.

It is a meeting where it is possible to offer or suggest an activity and there will others who will support, encourage and enable. It is a meeting that says ‘yes’. An example was the Sunday breakfasts that had recently begun and had proved very popular. As a community the meeting is felt to be positive and creative.

[The named Friend] has actively stood down from responsibilities and other people have been willing to take them over.

The opportunity to serve the meeting, to be an active part of its life was regarded as an opportunity and not a chore. The meeting has enough substance in terms of numbers to allow the opportunity just to be present without feeling responsible; yet the life, the vibrancy of the meeting encouraged a feeling of participation and a desire to become more deeply involved.

There is an equality of involvement and opportunity; the meeting isn’t dominated by any one person and feels crucial to the life and health of the meeting.

A sense of everyone carrying out jobs and roles.

**“** ‘I am grateful to be here, having had an experience of a really unhappy Meeting. There is no coven of elders holding onto power. I did belong to a Meeting where that was the case.’

‘Sometimes you can carry things for the meeting, sometimes not. This meeting understands that.’

‘People’s living situations have changed, and people have busy lives. Some can take on an on-going task, but others are often willing to do one-off jobs. For instance, one person is away a lot, but is willing to take responsibility for managing the website. We need to configure our tasks to meet the capacity of the people around. That is to say, not just the people around the age of 60 with energy. If we think imaginatively everyone can be engaged, even in a small way.’

‘The opportunities for service as a group are limited. But we do have a huge initiative coming up for a Green Festival. There is an organising group of seven, but we have never had all seven at a committee meeting. So the group emails, and I co-ordinate. And people work in twos and threes. It is a big project, so we need lots of time to plan ahead.’

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes

Friends spoke of their practice of each person in the meeting having responsibility for a patch of the garden, for maintaining and caring for it. It was seen as an emblem of their life together, as a means of both inreach – strengthening their community and outreach – offering a place of beauty and peace to visitors.

There was a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the meeting...

## **Within two meetings there were stories about providing newcomers with opportunities to become involved:**

**“** 'I was asked to help with the booklet after I had been coming for only a very short time. Photography has been my hobby for many years, so I was useful. It made me feel I belong.'

The meeting had found gentle ways to help them to feel a sense of belonging; an invitation to bring flowers, being asked to a social event, the opportunity to share their story, being asked to be part of a committee or working group. They then spoke of the many openings and opportunities that had helped them to feel embedded in the life of the meeting and for Quakerism to be embedded in their own hearts. The opportunity to serve, perhaps through committees or in other less formal ways, was vital in coming to feel truly part of the life of the meeting.

## **In two meetings there was recognition that it is difficult to fill posts:**

Friends busy and ageing.

**“** 'There is an issue about getting people to take responsibility; there is often comment about how it should be done, but not much volunteering to do it.'

Occasionally meetings recognised that a failure to share responsibility had, at a particular time, played a part in their story:

**“** 'Towards the end of the '80s something happened. I don't know – a power-play. The 1990s were spent in survival mode. A closing down of joy. A group which said "if you are a Quaker, this is what you do". A small group clung to jobs in the Meeting "because no-one else was worthy or capable".'

After the death of this Friend the meeting 'remained static and small for quite a while' and at another point in their story Friends in this meeting said, 'For the health of the meeting as a living organism, it needs a bigger spread, so that not so much falls on too few...'

In another there was a suggestion that some significant events within the meeting depended on a small number of individuals to a greater extent than was helpful: -

The small activity groups (painting, sacred song etc.) have been very dependent on the enthusiasm of individuals – when they go, the group goes. The number of groups has shrunk.

There are regular all age events – e.g. crafting and soup evening; but again this depends on the energy of individuals.

## Theme 11: Effective eldership and oversight

**Effective eldership and oversight was also an important part of some stories, with some meetings taking a creative approach to this.**

**“** ‘The elders and overseers meetings. I find them very nourishing, and I take that back into Meeting. Including the one we held in a pub.’

The whole meeting agreed that the open elders' meetings (on an ad hoc basis about twice a year, which everyone was invited to) have been very important for the meeting. They have allowed issues to be brought into the open rather than being directed by one or two people, or resulting in one or two strong objections, or being dealt with behind people's backs. It has put the spiritual health of the Meeting at the centre of their work together. Elders still hold separate meetings as well.

We talked about the particular practice of Circles of Eldership and Oversight. It created a community of mutual, shared responsibility. A corporate system of eldership and oversight is supported and held. This sense of shared responsibility meant that over 70 roles were filled and that the community had a sense of mutuality, equality and energy. It was felt, too, the Circles had facilitated real friendship.

**“** ‘A group of elders and overseers work together...They work as a group, and are not reliant on a single person.’



Good eldership and oversight has helped to resolve things.

The meeting operates corporate oversight in local clusters and Friends also try to keep in touch with those who don't come to meeting.

Circles of Eldership and Oversight...had been controversial and experimental and had often had to be tweaked and adjusted, but it had survived and proved robust.

Elders and overseers meet regularly to discuss and reflect on the pastoral and spiritual life of the meeting and this then becomes a regular item on the agenda of business meetings.

Two meetings expressed a number of anxieties and comments about elders and overseers: -

There are oversight groups, but some exist, some don't; less than half of the meeting responded positively to approach about oversight groups.

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Elders validate learning opportunities 'I couldn't initiate [a] discussion group without going through elders.'

In theory there are 8 elders, but in practice only 3 are active...

There was a challenging conversation (challenging for a number of those present) about the quality and nature of eldership and oversight. There was acknowledgement that eldership had been weak and 'poorly organised', 'uninspired and uninspiring'.

**“** 'I would have no idea who elders or overseers are.'

## **Another meeting acknowledged that oversight had some challenges:**

**“** 'Oversight is difficult for us – we are so spread out, and some Friends just are a challenge!'

## Theme 12: Connection with the area meeting and with Quakers nationally

**Feeling connected with the area meeting and the work of Quakers nationally was clearly important to some Friends in some meetings:**

**“** ‘I go to as many Area Meetings as I can. You learn so much. I think you have to get your attitude right, not ‘I wish they would get their act together’, rather, try to see it as a day out.’

Although the key founder of the meeting, no longer has an official role in the meeting, eg as elder or clerk, he is still a strong presence in the meeting. As a past member of Quaker Life central committee, a Swarthmore lecturer, and a past Friend in Residence at Pendle Hill, he provides a direct link with the wider Quaker world in Britain Yearly Meeting and in the USA. He also helps to provide a constant stream of books and Quaker publications which are circulated and discussed within the meeting.

Links to AM were felt to be good; [The Meeting] is a large meeting and a confident one and makes a good contribution to the wider life of the AM and with the Yearly Meeting too.

Friends going out into the wider Quaker world [enrich the life of the meeting] – committees, Kindlers, BYM – being part of the wider family of Friends.

**“** ‘The wider community of Friends is also important...’

They were also enriched and encouraged by their sense of connection to the wider Quaker world, both in Britain and beyond. They expressed reserve about the ‘management structures’ of BYM but valued being part of a worldwide Quaker family. Having a sense of themselves as a strong, cohesive meeting, they have a willingness to support the life of the Area Meeting, sharing their sense of strength and fellowship with the wider Quaker community. At the same time, the AM has been supportive of them, too.

However, it was obviously far less important to some Friends in a number of other meetings and sometimes Friends within the same meeting expressed contrasting opinions about this:-

**“** ‘Friends in the Area Meeting are very satisfied with their way of doing things. There is not much life in that meeting, and I am not attracted to spend time on it.’

...even long-standing members rarely engaged with area gatherings or felt any connection to the work of Friends House.

Some continuing concerns about relations with the Area Meeting (though not many Friends seem to have a view on this). Some other local Meetings are struggling but seem reluctant to accept help, for example with outreach. One Friend asked whether, having received support from other meetings themselves, Friends should now be putting energy into support for other smaller meetings in the AM. One Friend is active at a national level, but few Friends attend Area or Yearly Meeting.

The relationship with the wider Yearly Meeting was seen as something of a two-edged sword. In some

# Sharing our meetings' stories: Themes

ways the meeting felt there was a distance – physical and structurally – from the 'centre', but this was also experienced as something that gave freedom and opportunity. There was a sense of closer connection at the moment and this was valued.

**“** ‘The wider Quaker world doesn't seem particularly relevant at the moment.’

A sense of connection to the wider Quaker family was valued, but there was sometimes a sense of isolation, and an acknowledgement that the Area Meeting didn't feel as strong or well-gathered as it had been.



## Other issues

Beyond the common themes that emerged from the stories, there were several other notable issues:

### Meetings for Worship for Business

**It is interesting to note how little these were mentioned and when they were, it was sometimes in a negative context:**

**“** ‘Meeting for Worship for Business is not an important part of our Meeting. Many people don’t like it. Historically it has been two or three people and a dog in a dark building - why would you do it? So now we have it about every 6 weeks, just when we need one. But for many people it is still not important.’

### One meeting commented positively, however:

Meeting for Worship for Business was recognised as an important aspect of the life of the meeting, combining both the spiritual and the practical and recognising both as part of the same thing.

**“** ‘It’s a sign of the strength of our meeting that so many people attend and contribute so much.’

### The impact of sharing the stories

#### **In several cases, an impact of telling the meeting story on those who took part was recorded:**

Towards the end of the story-telling it became clear that some parts of the history of the Meeting – and its sometimes traumatic ups and downs – were new to some Friends. Some newer Friends heard for the first time of the impact of an influx of new people to the meeting and the challenges and new energy that resulted, and were keen to explore wider outreach to groups not usually involved in the Meeting.

...one person who had explicitly defined themselves as a Friend, and spoke about the importance of both meeting for worship and the meeting community in their life was not actually in membership – but at least one seasoned Friend noted afterwards that having heard how they felt, it was probably now appropriate to encourage that person to apply for membership.