

Getting ready for Quaker worship



For Quakers, worship (sometimes called Meeting for Worship) is at the heart of what it means to be a Quaker. It is and is the source of inspiration and the root of action in the world. It is also a shared experience that is probably different from what is normally associated with the word 'worship'.

Rather than the hymns, set prayers and sermons we might expect in other churches, Quaker worship begins as people come together in stillness and silence. It is a quietness that helps to settle those who are there, to calm thoughts and open hearts; it is a way to find inspiration and insight and to communicate directly with what some call God or the divine. Worship is a way to connect profoundly with the deepest reality and with each other.

It is difficult to describe Quaker worship and the best way to understand it is to experience it firsthand. For anyone visiting a Quaker meeting for the first time, here are some suggestions about how best to prepare and hopefully to get a sense of what is going on.

Before worship

Practise being still

Quaker worship normally lasts for an hour, and an hour of silence and stillness can seem daunting. It is possible to feel anxious about it and so a little practice might be valuable. It is worthwhile in the days before visiting a Quaker meeting for worship to try to take a few minutes out each day to be quiet and settled. Don't struggle with it or try to solve problems, but simply use it as a time to get used to the quiet.

Plan to get there on time

Attending meeting for worship will be a much more fulfilling and rewarding experience if there hasn't been a rush to get there. Whether travelling there alone or with others (and especially when taking children) plan to give plenty of time both to get ready and to get there. Arriving flustered or rushed means it can be much harder to settle down and make the most of the time.

When you arrive

Coming to meeting for worship gives a sense of stepping away from the busyness and stresses of day-to-day life; switching off mobile phones can really help this. Switched off is better than silent, to avoid being conscious of anyone trying to get in touch! It also avoids the risk of disturbing the peace of those around you.

Arriving at the Quaker meeting, it is very likely that there will be someone at the door greeting everyone who arrives. For anyone coming for the first time there may well be some leaflets or other literature to read. These can be helpful as a way of focusing attention and settling down at the beginning of worship, but it is important to try to spend at least part of the time simply being still and open.

The worship space

The worship space will probably be arranged with chairs or benches in a square or circle around a table. Quakers do not have a hierarchy so there are no reserved or special seats.

On the table (and perhaps on some of the chairs) there may be a copy of the Bible and some copies of both a red book and a small red booklet. The larger book is called '*Quaker faith & Practice*' and is a collection of writing and experience from and about Quakers from across our 350 year history. The small red booklet is called *Advices & queries* and is a collection of prompts and questions that Quakers read regularly as both challenge and inspiration. It can be helpful to read a few paragraphs from this at the beginning of worship; again, it may help to settle and focus thoughts.

During worship

It is almost impossible to describe in words what is going on in a Quaker meeting for worship. Quakers will often use words like 'gathered', 'expectant', 'waiting', but these are only shorthand for an experience that really is beyond words. The following are just brief explanations about things that may happen and suggestions about how to use the time well.

Don't struggle

Everyone finds stillness and silence difficult. Even for people who regularly meditate or spend time in silence, there are often times when it is a struggle to focus, and the mind can wander to a recent argument or to what is for dinner. For anyone trying this for the first time, it is good not to strive or struggle. It is best to relax, settle down and sit comfortably (back straight and feet flat on the ground is usually best). Focus on a particular thought or idea. Many Quakers talk about holding people or situations 'in the Light' and this can be a helpful image.

When thoughts start to run away in all directions (and they will) it is best not to chase after them but simply accept that it happens, let them go and try to re-focus again.

Be gentle with yourself and don't expect it to be easy straight away.

Ministry

Sometimes during worship, someone will stand and speak; in their speaking they will be giving words to something that is really beyond words. This is called ministry and, at its best, it results from a profound feeling of something of real importance and a sense of being called to share it with others. Their words will come from deep place and might refer to a situation in the world that concerns them deeply or to a small, personal experience; they might share something they find difficult or offer an insight into what nourish our spiritual life.

Sometimes this ministry will be helpful and even inspiring; sometimes other people will say something connected to it or springing from it; sometimes it won't appear to mean very much at all. The best thing to do is to listen to it and turn it over in your mind; if helps, hold on to it, if not, let it go.

Sometimes no one speaks and the whole meeting for worship can be silent.

At the end

Meeting for worship finishes when two of the Quakers there shake hands and then others shake hands with those around them. It is usually followed by words of welcome and perhaps an opportunity to share news or thoughts. Most meetings then have notices about forthcoming events and news from people who aren't able to be there.

Afterwards, over tea and coffee and biscuits, there is an opportunity to talk to others who are there, perhaps to ask about their experience or talk about things in worship that might have been difficult or puzzling. Don't be afraid to ask.

Some people love Quaker worship from the first time they experience it; more often it takes much longer to get used to it and to learn to use the time well. For most people it is a learning experience and these are can be both rewarding and difficult.

If you would like to find out more, you can visit us at:

www.quaker.org.uk

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