

Supplement of responses from area meetings and central committees on use of the term ‘overseer’

In 2019 Meeting for Sufferings received a minute from Central Yorkshire Area Meeting regarding the use of the term ‘overseer’ to describe those in our meetings who hold responsibilities for pastoral care (MfS 19/12/14). Sufferings referred this to Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC) and following a wide consultation QLCC reported back to Meeting for Sufferings in April 2021.

QLCC’s report indicated that there is general support for a change to the term, partly because of the historical connotations dealing with hierarchy and oppression.

Meeting for Sufferings minuted (in part):

... We unite with their [QLCC’s] discernment that this is the time for a change and we encourage meetings to continue experimenting with the structure of the roles and the terminology used until the end of 2022, when we look forward to hearing the results. (MfS/21/04/12)

We have heard from 48 area meetings (of the 70 area meetings in our Yearly Meeting), as well as Quaker Life Central Committee and these minutes are presented below. (Please forward any further minutes to sufferings@quaker.org.uk.)

Digest:

Area Meetings

45 responses because several AMs are counted in more than one category – e.g. AM welcomes national guidance and shares that local meetings have made their own decisions on use of the term.

Pastoral (care) Friend	Pastoral (care) team	Other term adopted across the AM	AMs would welcome national level guidance	LMS making their own decisions	No decision as yet
21	7	4	5	6	10

Local meetings

(This data included only where the relevant AM minute indicates that constituent LMS are making their own decisions)

Pastoral (care) Friend	Other term adopted	No change wanted
29	9	1

Banbury & Evesham AM

Minute 2022: 32 Terminology for pastoral care

Meeting for Sufferings has asked area meetings to report back on the terminology being used for those responsible for pastoral care within the meeting. Banbury and Evesham Area Meeting is now using the term Pastoral Friend for the role formerly known as Overseer.

In friendship
Lynne Richardson

Bournemouth Coastal AM

Minute 21.38 The terms Elder and Overseer

We revisited the naming of the two groups responsible for ensuring that the spiritual and pastoral needs of all who worship with us are considered and that Meeting for Worship and our business meetings are held in right ordering.

After a lengthy discussion on the term “overseer” we were not in unity with a name at present but would like to use the term Pastoral Team and understand that Yearly Meeting will be making a national decision soon.

Sarah Early is standing aside from this minute.

In Friendship
Penny Estall

Brighouse West Yorkshire AM

Minute 22.7.6 Alternatives to the term ‘overseer’

Following our May Area meeting, local meetings have reflected on the term ‘overseer’, as requested by MfS. Friends have reported discomfort with the racist / slavery overtones of ‘overseer’, as well as local usage in relation to work in the mills.

In summary, current terminology in use is as follows:

Bradford: pastoral carer
Halifax: Pastoral Friend / Care Team Member
Hebden Bridge: Link Friend
Huddersfield: Pastoral Carer
Scholes: Pastoral Carer

Hebden Bridge Meeting have fed back that they recognise the pastoral function of the role and the team, but prefer to use an alternative term – Link Friend - for individual Friends carrying out this function.

We have been reminded that the role of the pastoral care team is to oversee that support is offered within the Meeting.

We will feed back these findings to Meeting for Sufferings, to help them in their discernment of next steps on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting.

Richard Jarvis
(BWYAM Correspondence clerk)

Bristol AM

Minute 21.47 Alternatives to using the term Overseers

Our Area Meeting Elders and Overseers have received a minute from Bedminster Local Meeting on this matter and, in our May Area Meeting Newsletter, our representative to Meeting for Sufferings reports that "Area meetings are asked to experiment with different terms".

We have received the following minute from AM Elders and Overseers after their recent meeting in April.

Bedminster Minute concerning the use of the terms "Elder and Overseer"

We have read Bedminster's minute concerning the use of the terms Elders and Overseers and we have been apprised of the discussion on the subject at Meeting for Sufferings and in other Areas. The sense of the meeting was that the term Overseer was outdated and was inappropriate. The word Elder was also difficult in today's environment. We became aware of the difficulty of finding a suitable term for each role. But such a term might be 'Friend' or 'Companion' or 'Accompanier'. We note Bedminster LM's comments and ask that Area Meeting consider this at an Area Meeting.

We agree the terms Elder and Overseer are outdated and need replacing but need to explore this across a wider area and with young people in particular..

We have heard several alternative suggestions but none on which we are all agreed.

We are reminded that whatever the names we assign to the roles we all share the responsibility to care for one another and that our actions are more important than the terms we use.

It is rather inconclusive and we have moved no further forward except that in several of our local meetings we are now combining the roles of elder & overseer or working in teams and in November 2021 in our minute appointing Elders and Overseers for the triennium we noted that

21.72 Special Nominations

We note that we have different approaches to Eldership and Oversight across our Local Meetings.

- Central, Frenchay and Horfield have separate Elders and Overseers
- Redland and Thornbury have Elders with Oversight
- Bedminster work together as a Support Group with separate Pastoral and Spiritual support roles.
- Portishead does not have named Elders and Overseers but a Caring Support Team that works together and in support of the clerk.

I have copied this email to our Meeting for Sufferings rep and alternate

Yours in Friendship

Richard Drake
Clerk

Cambridgeshire AM

Cambridgeshire Area Meeting held on 12th November 2022

Minute 22.11.74 Minutes of Es & Os meeting 8th October 2022

4. The names of elders and overseers

We have been asked to consider whether the terms 'elders' and 'overseers' should be changed. We have received minutes from St Neots and Jesus Lane meetings. We accept that some people have difficulties with these terms, especially 'overseer'; it may be less necessary to change the term 'elder'. However, although we have heard many suggestions, there is no unity on what alternative terms might be used.

Any new names should be descriptive of the functions of the roles, and this is not necessarily simple. There needs to be a strong Quaker rationale for the terms we use. It would be helpful if they were clear and short, and not open to misinterpretation through their general use in the world. They should indicate that the role-holders support Friends but also that they have a responsibility for the discipline and right ordering of the community.

We send this minute to Area Meeting.

We clarified that, whilst Area Meetings are free to make their own choices about what we name these roles, the revision of the Book of Discipline will also have an impact on what decisions may be made at Yearly Meeting level.

We are prepared to change and be fit for our own time. The criteria set out in the minute from Elders & Overseers are helpful in giving us guidance as to how to evaluate the merit of alternatives. We ask our convenors of Elders and Overseers at Area and Local Meetings level to continue the work of receiving and evaluating suggestions, test them against the criteria discerned, adding to these transparency, and bring us thought through recommendations.

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Marisa Johnson
Clerk

Central England AM

Minute 2022.101 The change of name of Overseer

Following a request from Meeting for Sufferings we have asked our Local Meetings to consider changing the name of Overseer and we have heard from seven of them. Four have adopted "Pastoral Friend" instead (Bournville, Bull Street, Cotteridge, Walsall); one refers to its "Pastoral Care Group" (Coventry), and another to its Pastoral Support Group (Warwick);

The seventh (Sutton Coldfield) chose Pastoral Carer initially but subsequently decided on Pastoral Friend, making five LMs that have adopted that terminology.

Our Elders & Overseers Support Group has been renamed Elders & Pastoral Friends Support Group.

We agree to check with Elders & Pastoral Friends Support Group before sending the details to Meeting for Sufferings.

Change of name of Overseer

At our Area Meeting held on 19 November we considered the responses from our Local Meetings and attach the table showing these. You will see that the term Pastoral Friend is the most favoured alternative.

Barnt Green - On next LMB agenda
Bournville - Pastoral Friends
Bull Street - Pastoral Friends
Cotteridge - Pastoral Friends
Coventry - Pastoral Care Group (appointed by LM)
Hall Green - To be on LMB agenda in Nov
Hartshill - Pastoral Friends
Kings Heath - Pastoral Friends
Selly Oak - Pastoral Care Friends
Solihull - Pastoral Friends
Stourbridge - Pastoral Friends
Sutton Coldfield - Pastoral Friends
Walsall - Pastoral Friends
Warwick - Pastoral Support Group

John Sheldon
Clerk

Central Yorkshire AM

Minute 11 Quaker terminology – overseers

Jonathan Doering has presented a concern about the present-day suitability of the term 'overseer' to describe those in our meetings appointed to provide particular pastoral oversight, support and care of Friends and attenders. A briefing document is attached, together with minutes received from local meetings.

We recognise this concern, but there are differing views on the issue. We feel that that the continuing use of the term Overseer, and others, should be considered and discerned at a national level so that the use of such terms is consistent and accepted by all rather than adopted only at local level. We ask the clerk to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Briefing Notes: Quaker terminology – overseers

As CYAM Friends are no doubt aware, there has been a lively and ongoing discussion about the continuing suitability of the term 'overseer' to designate the role accepted by some Friends to provide particular pastoral oversight, support and care for the Members and Attenders at our Meetings.

In various quarters there has been a growing sense that perhaps the term 'overseer' carries unfortunate connotations for people who might potentially visit our Meetings with a view to attending and worshipping regularly.

Some arguments for change:

- For BME worshippers, there is the historical association with slavery, where overseers literally oversaw the work of slaves in the fields and elsewhere, often employing threats and actual physical and sexual violence against them;
- For worshippers with working class backgrounds, or left-wing views, there may also be unfortunate connotations of factory and work overseers, many of whom again employed abusive behaviour in order to ensure maximum output by workers, particularly during the Industrial Revolution;
- It may well also be that the term 'Overseer' may feel overly-traditional and perhaps unclear in terms of what it means. Furthermore, many people in a modern context may not welcome the notion of someone 'watching over' or 'overseeing' them in their lives, almost in terms of an adult-child relationship, but may very well welcome the sense that there is someone who can offer support, advice, guidance and practical help should they feel in need of it;
- We do have a precedent for certain, thoughtful changes in terminology, for instance as part of RECAST the terms 'Preparative Meeting' and 'Monthly Meeting' were changed to 'Local Meeting' and 'Area Meeting'. Indeed, Quaker faith & practice is currently undergoing a revision of its content.

In view of our espoused hope that Friends can be an outward-looking, welcoming faith community, it may feel right to many of us to consider a change to the name for this vital role. It must be stressed that should a change be made, no one is in any way wishing to change or diminish any of the content of the role, or the trust vested in those exercising pastoral oversight. The role itself will remain the same alongside - and interacting with - that of Elders.

Some arguments against change:

- The term 'overseer' is an old one, employed for an extremely long time within the Society, with specific, supportive meanings to Friends, which can be glossed for newcomers;
- There is a 'slippery slope' argument, whereby if we begin to change some terms, we may find ourselves unreasonably pressured into changing more and more, until we find the tone of our Society entirely changed;
- It could lay Friends open to charges of making superficial changes to appeal to a wider constituency of people.

National discussion

This has been played out in the Letters page of The Friend over several months, initiated by Eric Walker's letter on 2nd February, questioning the use of the term, which then led to various opinions and arguments on both sides of the question. For instance on 2nd March Ruth Corry stated that her view was that the term had had its day and that with the impending revision of Faith and Practice Friends should consider an alternative: 'The words we use are not set in stone, and apparently only the most conservative Friends Meetings in US still use the word 'overseer'. In Australia overseers are sometimes known as 'carers'.' These sentiments sat alongside a contribution from Martin Drummond, where he told of an Attender who stopped going to a Meeting after being told that they had been assigned an Overseer: 'I wonder whether the attender in question was feeling patronised or

imposed upon, rather than reacting to those negative connotations of the word 'overseer' which have concerned subsequent correspondents.'

Other Meetings have been considering whether it would be appropriate to update/change certain terms, including those of Elder and Overseer.

Lewes Meeting offered a discussion document entitled 'What's in a name?' in 2018, where it was remarked, '...these terms constitute 'Quaker-speak' that is not well understood by many in our Meeting, while some Friends are uncomfortable with the connotations of the word 'Overseer' which in its Quaker usage significantly deviates from its other usages.' The alternative name for the team is Spiritual and Pastoral Resource and Information Group (SPRIG). Whilst acknowledging that this new term has not been officially adopted by Lewes Meeting or by it AM, it asks if 'maybe reverting to traditional language would cause misunderstanding of its real role and linguistic discomfort, and hence a fresh start with 'SPRIG' is better.' Through contact with Lewes Meeting, I now understand that they have an Eldership and Oversight Resource Group (EORG), partly as a result of the use of the term 'SPRIG' leading to some confusion, and EORG has been a clearer term. This concern grew from the experience of Exeter Meeting.

I have had a conversation with Nancy Wall of Lewes Meeting, who has explained that their change of terminology was born from the necessity to explore new models of pastoral oversight. This led their Meeting to experiment with a model of 'Circles' of support, with Convenors being nominated as the providers of pastoral oversight within each. There are, therefore, a variety of different responses to this discussion, as we are clear that in CYAM the traditional pastoral oversight model works well for us, and it is purely the term that we are considering in terms of changing.

Oxford Meeting has renamed its Overseers as the 'Pastoral Care Team' without renaming overseers officially (although the f(F)riend who passed this information to me remarked that she thought '[the term] Pastoral Elder sounds good'. However, I do believe that I have seen the term 'pastoral elder' used on posters at Oxford Meeting House.

YFGM has for some years referred to its Eldership and Oversight team as 'Quintessential', and I understand that they are currently engaged in a process of discernment over how to change/ update the terms Elder and Overseer.

Ruth McTighe
Clerk, Central Yorkshire Area Meeting

Barnsley LM's Discernment Process

This issue was first raised last year at Barnsley LM for discussion by myself; there were various positions on it, and it was brought to Meeting for Worship for Business on at least three occasions, across six months, before Barnsley Friends united behind the idea of a change. Various alternative titles were mooted:

- Pastoral elder
- Pastoral carer
- Member of the Pastoral Care Committee/ Team
- Member of the Pastoral Oversight Committee/ Team

- Member of the (Eldership and) Oversight Committee/ Team
- Member of the (Ministry and) Oversight Committee/ Team
- Member of the Care and Counsel Committee/ Team

The term 'Pastoral elder' was settled on as being sufficiently clear, and signalling the equal status of this role with that of Elders, which in itself could be argued to offer a clearer sense of what the role constitutes.

Conclusion

There have been eloquent arguments on both sides of this issue, and certainly anyone wishing to consider changing the term should not do so lightly, or as part of any wholesale changing of terms.

Nevertheless, ultimately the general feeling amongst Barnsley Friends has been that although the term 'Overseer' was clear and useful previously, unfortunate connotations for certain people, plus relative in clarity over its meaning these days, would recommend a new term being employed. At a time when Yearly Meeting has discussed the various issues around privilege with the Religious Society of Friends as well as wider British and world society, this may be one small way in which can bring privilege into consciousness.

We place the matter before Friends.

Jonathan Doering
Co-clerk, Barnsley LM
22/08/2019

Barnsley PM 3.3.2019 minute 9 sent to Elders and Overseers

Over the past months, in response to an ongoing national debate around appropriate language, Barnsley LM has considered the issue of modifying the term 'Overseer' to 'pastoral elder'. We have felt overall that this is the appropriate way forward, in view of the fact that changing social, cultural and linguistic conditions have rendered the older term, although applied perfectly legitimately in its own time, potentially hurtful and exclusive to new Members and Attenders who might be uncomfortable with overtones of power and exploitation – especially those of BME, working class or politically left-wing backgrounds and/ or persuasions. We therefore requested our E&Os to consider this issue, and it has been recommended that this change be effected, which is one that has occurred at other LMs, including for instance Oxford LM. We have therefore agreed to change the term from 'overseer' to 'pastoral elder'. The role of overseer/ pastoral elder is an extremely valuable one, and will continue in the very successful and beneficial form that we all know and appreciate. We forward this minute to you, notifying you of our decision. Please do let us know your thoughts if you have any.

Minutes received from other local meetings:

Ackworth PM September 2019 Minute 3

Given the use of the term "overseer" in the context of slavery, we have been asked, by Area Meeting, to consider whether we feel the term is an appropriate one for those having pastoral responsibilities in our meetings. We have discussed this matter and feel no great strength of feeling about the inappropriateness of the term

“overseer”. We do, however, feel strongly that our vocabulary should be determined by the guidance set out in Quaker Faith and Practice. If the term is to be changed then we should wait until we have some clear guidance from BYM.

High Flatts PM 25.8.2019 minute 12

We have been asked by CYAM from a minute from Barnsley Meeting to consider the implications of the continuing use of the term Overseer, given its connection to slavery. We ask CYAM to send a minute to Meeting for Sufferings that the continuing use of the term Overseer, and others, should be considered and discerned at a national level so that the use of such terms is accepted by all rather than adopted only at local level.

Wakefield PM 8.9.2019 minute 5

We have not had a formal discussion about the use of the terminology “overseers” but we are aware that there are differing views on this within our meeting. We do agree that any change of terminology needs to be agreed nationally so that it can be used consistently throughout Britain Yearly Meeting.

Wooldale PM 30.6.19 minute 7

Following initiatives by Oxford and Barnsley Meetings to rename their Overseers as Pastoral Elders, Central Yorkshire Area Elders and Overseers enquired whether other meetings wanted to follow. We feel it needs to be a society-wide decision rather than one taken at a local level. We agree to forward this minute to Area Meeting.

Minute 11 Quaker terminology – overseers

Jonathan Doering has presented a concern about the present-day suitability of the term ‘overseer’ to describe those in our meetings appointed to provide particular pastoral oversight, support and care of Friends and attenders. A briefing document is attached, together with minutes received from local meetings.

We recognise this concern, but there are differing views on the issue. We feel that that the continuing use of the term Overseer, and others, should be considered and discerned at a national level so that the use of such terms is consistent and accepted by all rather than adopted only at local level. We ask the clerk to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Chilterns AM

22.11.06 Meeting for Sufferings

ii) Minute to Sufferings re Naming of Overseers

Following the Meeting for Sufferings in March, all Quaker meetings were asked to consider the use of the term ‘overseer’, which is at odds with the commitment made at YM 2021 to becoming an actively anti-racist faith community. This matter is to be considered at the next Meeting for Sufferings, to be held on 1st and 3rd December, informed by minutes received from Area Meetings.

Chilterns Area Elders and Overseers reflected on this matter at their meeting on 8th November. They proposed the term Pastoral Support Team as their preferred

alternative. In some Meetings, the jobs of Elders and Overseers have been combined; in that case the term might be used to encompass both.

Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting supports this choice.

We ask our Clerk to forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Many thanks,

In Friendship,

Catriona Troth

Clerk

Cornwall AM

Minute 10a Overseer term: what are our thoughts

Most of our local meetings are not now using the term overseer some are using variations on pastoral friend/ team which seems to be the norm for AMs that have responded so far to Meeting for Sufferings' consultation. However we do still use the term at an area meeting level. Following the prompt from Meeting for Sufferings we have reviewed this practice and have decided to move away from the use of the word overseer at Area Meeting level. We recognise that the role is complicated and involves actually caring for each other and also ensuring that caring is taking place.

We are all responsible for this and need to continually find new ways to do this. We need to be aware of communicating clearly to new comers what the term means. Finding a new term is very difficult, and all terms are problematic. We are not currently in unity on this and will continue to consider this matter. We ask our Elders and Overseers to attempt to find a new name for this group.

Craven & Keighley AM

2022/41 Report from AM elders and overseers on use of 'overseer'

We receive Minute 2 from AM elders and overseers, meeting on Saturday 26 March 2022, which has been read to us. The consideration of the use of the word 'overseer' is one which is taking place throughout the Yearly Meeting but was brought to us by Settle LM in September 2020 [minute 11 of that meeting refers].

We accept the recommendation that 'in our area meeting the current title of 'overseer' is replaced by either Member of Life of Meeting Group, or Friend for Pastoral Care'.

Chris Skidmore

Clerk

Craven & Keighley AM Elders and Overseers

At a meeting held at Keighley Meeting House and by Zoom on Saturday 26 March 2022

Minute 2. Use of term 'Overseer'

Area Meeting has asked us to consider the use of the term 'Overseer'.

We have been reminded that the role of elders and overseers has evolved as British Quakerism has changed. Originally Friends were appointed “to inspect Friend’s faithfulness in the Truth” (Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting in 1691). There was considerable overlap between the two roles. Gradually elders became mainly responsible for the spiritual life and overseers for pastoral care and community building. The term ‘overseer’ was used as a short way of saying that they were responsible for the oversight of the care of Friends.

The Religious Society of Friends today is made up of members from a wide variety of backgrounds and this has led to less reliance on the significance of historic reasons for the use of specific words. We have become sensitive to language, particularly where words have inappropriate historic connotations. The word ‘overseer’ was used in the British slavery period to describe people who oversaw slaves. The slavery period in British history is one which makes us ashamed as it is contrary to our testimony to equality.

In considering alternative names, we note that there does not seem to be a single word to describe a person who undertakes pastoral care and community building.

We affirm that overseers are now mainly responsible for pastoral care, in contrast to elders who are mainly responsible for spiritual care.

We recommend that in our area meeting the current title of ‘overseer’ is replaced by either Member of Life of Meeting Group, or Friend for Pastoral Care.

David Olver
26 March 2022

Cumberland AM

Minute 22/27 Meeting for Sufferings matters

b) Local Meetings were asked to consider other ways of organising pastoral care in Meetings and to suggest alternatives to the term Overseer.

One of our smaller Meetings does not appoint Elders or Overseers and functions happily with shared mutual care. Another Meeting appoints a Life of the Meeting Team, including members and non-members, who between them carry out the roles traditionally done by Elders and Overseers. The other Meetings currently appoint Elders and Overseers.

Alternatives to the term Overseer included the use of Caring Committee or Pastoral Care team. Not all Meetings agreed that it was necessary to change the term and lose its historic Quaker usage.

Best wishes

Christine Sutherland
Clerk

Devon AM

Sidmouth LM, Devon AM

Sidmouth LM discussed this topic in April 2022 and agreed the enclosed minute. Since that time a letter appeared in 'The Friend' suggesting words not in use, namely 'Heeders' for overseers and 'Holders' for elders. Some of us felt this was a good idea as the words could have no other connotations.

In Friendship,
Judy Thurgood

Tavistock LM, part of Devon AM

Minute 20/2022 Our use of the term 'overseer'

All local meetings in Britain have been asked to consider their use of the term 'overseer'. We have thought carefully about this and agree to drop the word, 'overseer' and replace it with, 'pastoral care group'. We ask Elders and members of the pastoral care group to meet together regularly.

Ken Orchard

The name 'overseer' – deliberations of Sidmouth LM

Quakers have long been known as, and indeed have happily accepted the term of being 'a peculiar people'.

We considered whether we could use a phrase to describe the role, such as 'ministry for caring for one another', but concluded that this would be too cumbersome. We then tried considering alternative single words, coming up with words such as 'pastor', 'accompanier' and 'seer', but thought that these too had meanings in other places so could be open to just as much misunderstanding.

Many words have opposite meanings, for example 'hot', 'cool', 'wicked'. We were taken with the old fashion saying "as sure as eggs is meat": at first sight this appears nonsense, but in this context meat means food.

The dictionary definition of oversight as "mistake, error, unintended neglect, failure to notice" is the total opposite of our understanding of the work of overseers. In a similar way it is definitely not intended for overseers to "inspect, supervise, manage" those within their care. We have our own Quaker definition of the role and it behoves us all to take time to understand what is intended by what is said, and to challenge anything we do not understand.

We hope that when everyone has had their chance to fully explore this matter it will be decided to continue with our existing word, encouraging all to do more to explain all our peculiar ways to those who join us.

Dorset & South Wiltshire AM

East Cheshire AM

Minute 22.03.14: Alternative to the term 'Overseer'

Minute 5 received from meeting of Elders and Overseers on 17 March recommending making a change.

Use of the term “Overseer”: Some of our Local Meetings have moved away from the term “overseer” as having negative connotations. We have been asked to consider the term by Meeting for Sufferings. We agree that the term “Pastoral Friend”, used by Disley, is one we should adopt throughout Area Meeting. The Clerk will inform Area Meeting of this, and Area Meeting will communicate our recommendation to Meeting for Sufferings.

We accept this recommendation.

Hilary Brooks
Clerk

East Kent AM

East Scotland AM

Extract from minute 20.02.09, concerning use of the word ‘overseer’

‘We have discussed this matter and we were reminded that the Book of Discipline is not a rule book and that already different meetings are using different words. The revision of the book of discipline presents an opportunity to capture any changes that might be made.

We understand the concern and wish to listen, but consider a fairly modest change to language, for example a change from ‘overseer’ to ‘oversight friend’ could answer the concern. Quakers use words in different and distinctive ways and we value this.’

Pam Apted
AM clerk

Extract from Minute 22.08.10. Reflections on alternatives to the term ‘overseers’

The use of the term ‘overseer’ was brought to our Area Meeting in February 2020 when we suggested a modest change from overseer to ‘oversight friend’. A copy of this minute was sent to MfS at the time. Since then, all three local meetings have considered this in their business meetings; St Andrews adopting the use of ‘oversight friend’ and ‘oversight group’ (29/01/21), Perth using the term ‘circles of support for oversight’ (31.01.21) and Dundee adopting the use of ‘pastoral friends’ (52/21).

We have reflected on our current experiment with using alternative terms. It is clear that there is not agreement on the choice of an alternative term to overseer. We acknowledge the difficulty in finding a term that is acceptable for all. The move to the term ‘pastoral care’ in Dundee was seen as a smooth one. The term ‘pastoral care’ is being used more widely in society now, as in education. Other Friends expressed concern about the use of ‘pastoral care’ due to the perceived links with the church. St Andrews has held an interesting discussion on what it feels like to be an outsider; viewing the change of name in the wider context, in relation to building community. One Friends suggested that it is also about simplifying things and modernising, including what we call each other, other words like ‘elder’ can also have unhelpful connotations. It’s about renewal.

Pam Apted
Clerk

Gloucestershire AM

Minute 22/49 Use of the term 'overseer'

Meeting for Sufferings has asked AMs to report on our use of alternative terms to 'overseer' "in response to our growing understanding of the hurt felt from historical connotations of hierarchy and oppression".

Most of Gloucestershire Local Meetings have been using the term 'Pastoral Friend' in preference to 'overseer' for some years. Several of our meetings now have a pastoral team of Elders and Pastoral Friends working together or have combined the two roles.

We now agree as an Area Meeting to adopt 'Pastoral Friend' instead of 'overseer' and ask our clerks to forward this minute to MfS.

Jane Mace,
Gloucs AM Link Clerk

Hampshire & Islands AM

Minute 2022/46 Use of the term Overseer or alternatives

Most, but not all, Local Meetings have become accustomed to using the informal term Pastoral Care for the group, or Pastoral Friend for individuals, instead of the term Overseer.

We agree to use Pastoral Friend in written communications by Area Meeting when making appointments. We accept that one or two Friends stand aside from this practice and prefer to use the term 'overseer' when speaking informally.

We ask our Meeting for Sufferings representative, Jane Wilde, to forward this decision from our Area Meeting to Meeting for Sufferings.

Hardshaw and Mann AM

Minute 41/2020 Use of the Term Overseer

Friends feel that the term Pastoral Team is useful for the joint work of Elders, Overseers and Clerks, but that a distinction between the roles of Elders and Overseers needs to be maintained. It was agreed to use the terms Elder and Pastoral Friend until there has been further discernment in the wider Quaker community.

In Friendship

Liese van Alwon
Clerk

Minute 49/22 Discussion regarding the use of the term "Overseer"

Further to AM minute 38/22 where further thoughts on the use of the term "Overseer" were requested from Southport and Wigan local meetings, minutes have been received from both.

They reflect a similarity to those received from Liverpool and St Helens in that no clear view or recommendation is apparent. Some Friends in St Helens and Wigan have not experimented with alternatives while others have. There is a clear recognition that the term "Overseer" could be seen as associated with slavery and could, therefore, be upsetting to some Friends but no clear choice of alternative is strongly favoured. Although Southport Friends recognise the need for change and find the terms "Pastoral Friend" and "Pastoral Team" acceptable, in the discussion at Wigan problems were found with all individual terms offered.

As minuted previously Friends spoke deeply about the word "Overseer" and its etymology and origin. Oversight is about care and loving concern and about proper administration and organisation. The role of oversight is a position of great responsibility.

Language is very important and the connotation of servitude and its relation to slaves is just one of the meanings of the word "Overseer". Language changes and we need more understanding of this word in our formulation of an alternative.

In Friendship

Eric Silk

Clerk on that occasion

Hertford & Hitchin AM

Ipswich & Diss AM

Minute 60/20 b) Pastoral teams/ overseers.

As an Area Meeting we agree that from January 2021 each Local Meeting will appoint its own pastoral care Friends. In the light of the discomfort surrounding the use of the word "overseer", particularly in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement we shall no longer use that term. When Pastoral Care Friends are appointed by Local Meetings their appointment should be notified to Area Meeting Nominations. We send this part minute to the Book of Discipline Revision Committee.

Martin Pennock

Clerk

Kendal & Sedbergh AM

Our minute 22.11.16 says:

Kendal and Sedbergh Area Quaker Meeting is in the process of looking at the way it carries out the pastoral and spiritual care of its members and attenders.

The system currently being explored by Local Meetings, before being agreed by AM is a corporate one, based on caring circles.

This would obviate the need for Friends to be designated as overseers, so the use of the word would cease.

In Friendship,

Meg Hill
Clerk

Kingston & Wandsworth AM

Lancashire Central & North AM

As an AM we don't use the term Overseer, we have a Pastoral Care Team. This happened as an organic process really.

This notice went to AM in July 2021:

"Finally, Lancaster Meeting's Pastoral Care Team's decision to call themselves Pastoral Friends prompted the Clerk to ask all Local Meetings to consider how they want to refer to the 'people formerly known as Overseers' and to try to find a wording that all LMs could agree on so as to make life easier for both the Clerk and the Area Meeting Nominations Committee."

I don't recall, nor can I find a record of a minute that said we formally adopted this practice. But ever since our nominations committee has nominated a Pastoral Care Team. The AM directory in 2022 listed Pastoral Care Teams not Overseers. Lancaster and I believe Yealand calls them Pastoral Friends, Bailrigg has a very light version of shared Eldership and Pastoral Care. I don't know about Garstang.

Leeds AM

Minute 2021/076 Use of the term "Overseer"

Further to minute 2021/061, we have considered which alternative term we can use to describe those in our meetings who hold responsibilities for pastoral care

We have heard support for the terms "Pastoral Care", "Pastoral Care-takers" and "Pastoral Care Team". Rawdon are using the term "Pastoral Caretaker" "for the person supporting their shared Pastoral Care.

We have agreed that we will use the term "Pastoral Care Team" "instead of "Overseers".

In Friendship

Martin Ford
Clerk

Leicester AM

Minute 22.78 Review of the names and functioning of elders and overseers.

We have heard from the deputy recording clerk that MfS wishes to hear from Area Meetings what Friends feel about the use of the term “Overseer”, which some feel is at odds with the commitment made at YM 2021 to becoming an actively anti-racist faith community. We have been asked to respond by 31st October 2022. We have asked our four constituent local meetings to deliberate on this and report back by minute to Leicester Area Meeting. While some Friends feel that our traditional use of the term “overseer” has been misunderstood and there is value in retaining language which is associated with longstanding traditions of care and nurture, others feel that it is outdated jargon and that it has implications of hierarchy and colonialism. On the whole, we find that Friends are prepared to let the word go. There has been less difficulty with the word “elder”, which does not seem contentious. We have found no agreement on which term should replace “overseer” but many suggestions.

As to the functioning of those groups, there is a variety of approaches taken across our local meetings. Some meetings have separate and appointed overseers and elders committees. Another combines the roles and another does not appoint to those roles but encourages all members and attenders to participate by choice in an Oversight Circle, join ad hoc discussion groups, and respond to needs as they emerge. We are content that each constituent meeting should find its own way in this matter. As an Area Meeting we currently retain the traditional distinction between Elders and Overseers and have an AM convenor of eldership and oversight.

In Friendship,

Julian Rees
Clerk

Lincolnshire AM

London West AM

LWAM minute 2022/90 A New Name for “Overseers”.

Further to LWAM minutes 2021/38 and 2021/83, which asked Friends to suggest an alternative name for Overseer, for use in the revision to the Book of Discipline, we have received the following communication from Elders and Overseers, who met as a group at Ealing on 5 November.

Local Meetings are experimenting with various new names for oversight and eldership, whether combined or separate. Some are very happy with their choice, but we have not reached a single conclusion. We look forward to hearing from Meeting for Sufferings what other meetings have discerned.

We forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings for consideration at their next meeting.

In friendship

Jonathan Lingham
Clerk

Luton & Leighton AM

Minute 22.03.10 Report from Meeting for Sufferings held 4-6 March 2022

.... 'Overseer' – the term: Meeting for Sufferings has requested a brief report/ minute from Area Meeting about the use of the term and whether the term Overseer has been replaced. The clerk will forward the relevant part minute 21.11.10 (i)

The term 'Overseer'

Most Meetings which have responded have stated that they wish the term Overseer to be replaced by one of the following terms: Pastoral Friends, Pastoral Team, Pastoral Care Team, Pastoral Team, Pastoral Care (instead of Oversight). It is noted that the BYM website uses the term Pastoral Care and Eldership (rather than Elders). BYM describes these functions as Spiritual Nurture and Quaker Community.

We agree to change the term 'Overseer/ Oversight' to 'Pastoral Care' for Area Meeting as a whole. Each local meeting is welcome to call those who offer pastoral care, a name which suits them best. For the purposes of Area Meeting, we will now call Elders & Overseers, 'Eldership and Pastoral Care'.

I hope this minute from Luton and Leighton Area Meeting held in November 2021, is helpful. Please let me know if you require further information.

In Friendship,

Gloria Dobbin
AM Clerking Group

Manchester & Warrington AM

Minute 2022.16 Meeting for Sufferings.

Hilary Tucker has given a short update on her experience at the most recent blended Meeting for Sufferings, 4-6 March 2022. Meeting for Sufferings has asked all Area Meetings to share how they have responded to concerns that the use of the term 'overseer' is at odds with the commitment made at Yearly Meeting in 2021 to become an actively anti-racist faith community. We confirm that we no longer use this term in our area meeting and instead use the term "Pastoral Care Team". We ask the clerk to share this minute with Meeting for Sufferings.

As you can see, in our meeting we have stopped using the term "overseer". Hope this information is what you needed as per your request below.

In Friendship

Ben Lukey
Clerk

Mid Essex AM

MEAM minute 2022/37: Use of the term 'overseer':

We are asked by MfS to consider the use of the term 'overseer' because of the historical associations and in response to the commitment made at BYM 2021 to becoming 'an actively anti-racist faith community', and to report back by the end of October 2022.

Maldon and Chelmsford LMfWfB and AM E&O have considered this and E&O have forwarded a minute of their discernment to AM. The E&O minute was circulated in advance of this meeting.

Not all Friends find the language difficult but we recognise that the language we use should be appropriate and while we have not tried using an alternative, we understand that the review of *Qf&p* might be a time for change.

The phrase 'pastoral support' could be helpful.

Susan Garratt,
Clerk

Mid Wales AM

Mid-Somerset AM

Mid Somerset Area Meeting Minute 08.11.22

We were asked by Britain Yearly Meeting to explore an alternative term for our Meeting's Overseers and report back to BYM by the end of 2022. This issue was discussed at length by Street Friends and Long Sutton Friends and we ask our Clerk to forward their responses to Britain Yearly Meeting and to say we have considered this concern in our Meetings and Friends loved the term 'Pastoral Care team'. We feel the importance should be placed on doing the role well and not on the title.

Kevin Redpath
Clerk

Street Local Meeting Response

This was discussed in a Hearts and Minds set up for Street Friends by a member of the local Clerking team to explore alternatives to the word Overseer:

Hearts and minds discussion on Overseers change of name

This was attended by 8-10 Friends in the Meeting room and joined by 4 on Zoom. Thanks to all who took part in this lively discussion.

There was agreement on the following points

- Although many of us are used to the term Overseer in its Quaker usage we agree with a change of terminology because of its very negative historical associations, not only with slavery but with class and hierarchy.
- We hope that a term will be agreed by Britain Yearly Meeting that will then be adopted throughout BYM.

We explored the view that it might be time to combine the roles of Overseer and Elder, and that the new name might embrace both. Although we did not reach a conclusion on this, some of the suggested names do assume a combined role.

We agreed that any name should avoid connotations of hierarchy and seniority, and that it should reflect the group function of the role not just imply individual support. We favoured the idea of a group name, of which the individual role holders would be members.

The following terms were rejected (not necessarily by all)

- Pastoral – too much associated with churches
- Care, welfare – too much association with social care
- Team , facilitator – associated with work
- Mentor, companion, co-Friend, Counsellor, - all reflect individual support given by Overseers but not their role as a group within the Meeting.

We considered names like Elderseers (used by some meetings) or Oversight group.

Then we began to think about names that did not attempt to describe the function of the group but were just an easy way to refer to it (two examples given were primary school class names e.g. Squirrel class, and the Conservative Party 1922 Committee)

We began to consider names that do not describe the role but have a Quaker connotation. e.g. the 1652 Group.

The Index of well-loved sayings in QF&P could provide some ideas.

As with other roles it could have a general role description – e.g. nurturing the life of the Meeting, and a list of specific duties based on the current duties of Elders and/or Overseers.

(These are notes rather than Minutes and Friends who were present may have other views on what was said/agreed).

Sheila James 30.10.22

Long Sutton Meeting's Minute 34.22 Minute for Area Meeting on the use of the word 'overseer'

The following minute from Long Sutton will go forward to Area Meeting.

At "Hearts and Minds" held at Long Sutton Local Meeting on 21 August 2022 we discussed the term "overseers" at the request of Area Meeting. The discussion took place in the context of Quaker attitudes to slavery, though historically the term may not draw its origin from that root. The meeting considered various terminologies and favoured the term "mentor" which it commends to Area Meeting. Other terms considered were "peer", "companion", "listener", "elderseer", "befriender" and "welfare".

It was agreed that Long Sutton Meeting be asked to determine a means by which Local Meetings, and later Area Meeting, could continue a review of slavery and reparation as an issue.

Mid-Thames AM

Minute 20/10/11 A concern from Reading LM to change the name Overseer to Pastoral Friend

Reading Local Meeting sent a Minute to Area Meeting which says:-

2020/09/06 Elders and Overseers, and the Social Witness Forum, have considered our use of the term “overseer” to cover the role of providing pastoral care for Members and Attenders at our Meetings. To quote from their report:

“We dislike the term and many of us avoid using it. We do not feel we can defend its use and we do not want to. We are also aware of the ongoing discussion amongst Friends nationally about the suitability of the term to cover the role of providing pastoral care.

We know that the use of the term “overseer” is offensive to many people due to its historical connotations of the exercise of abusive, often violent, power in slavery and in exploitative factory settings. Moreover it has overtones of ‘checking up’ on someone, based in historical Quaker practice - and that does not describe our role today.

In the light of Advices and Queries 18:

“How can we make the meeting a community in which each person is accepted and nurtured and strangers are welcome?”

and number 33:

“Are you alert to practices here and throughout the world which discriminate against people on the basis of who or what they are or because of their beliefs?.....Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life”

- in the light of these Advices & Queries, we feel it is inappropriate to continue to use the term ‘overseer’. This is underlined by the fact of living in a multicultural area.

If we 21st century Quakers wish to be inclusive to people of a wider variety of backgrounds, then the use of the term is counter-productive

- for the offence it can, and has, caused
- for its lack of clarity about the nature of our role
- and for its implied relationship of inequality.

We have therefore brought the issue to AM Meeting for Church Affairs to recommend changing the name. We are not suggesting any change to the role itself.

Elders and overseers have found the term “Pastoral Friend” to carry the meaning of the role and the sense of supportiveness and equality that we wish the relationship to have.”

The local meeting agreed:

1. to adopt a new term for those who hold this role in Reading Meeting, accepting the term “Pastoral Friend” proposed by Elders and Overseers; and
2. to inform AM of the decision, and ask AM to consider sending a Minute to Meeting for Sufferings in support of those Area Meetings calling for a change throughout BYM.

We support this change. We also ask our clerk to send this minute to MfS for consideration.

In Friendship
Naomi Iliff
Clerk

Norfolk & Waveney AM

North East Thames AM

Minute 22.58 Minute for Meeting for Sufferings change of name of Overseers
Meeting for Sufferings have asked all AMs to consider renaming Overseers. Further to AM minute 22.05 we confirm that we will change the name of Overseer to Pastoral Care Friend and Overseers to Pastoral Care Team.

We forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Anne Smith
Assistant Clerk

North London AM

Minute 22/13/08 Replacing the term “overseer”.

Many in our Area Meeting have stopped using the term “overseer”, finding its association with the historical practices of slavery too uncomfortable in the wake of the recent Black Lives Matter protests. Also, we have been asked by Meeting for Sufferings to consider this matter. We are content to adopt the term “Pastoral Care Team” to replace the term “Overseers” across the Area Meeting.

In friendship,

Wendrie Heywood
Acting Clerk Support

North Scotland AM

North Somerset AM

Minute 22.32 Use of the term ‘Overseer’

We have heard from our three Local Meetings concerning the use of the term “Overseer”. We find that each Meeting has decided to replace ‘Overseer’ with ‘Pastoral Friend’. We intend to continue using this term.

We ask our Clerk to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings, as requested in MfS 2022 03 26.

Adrian Shephard
Clerk

North Wales AM

Minute 21/43

Trustees were considering the word 'overseer'. This is something being looked at across BYM, the word having a strong association with slavery. Our trustees' minute reads:

“21/10 During our discussion of the membership procedures it became apparent that the term overseer was not acceptable to many. We ask Area Meeting to consider stopping the use of the word 'overseer/ s' as descriptive of our pastoral care groups. We ask our clerk to send this minute to Area Meeting clerks.”

We have received a minute from Bangor meeting who have considered this:

“Minute 7. The term ‘Overseer’

We agree that change is necessary; the replacement wording should be gender neutral, and we would be happy for the term 'pastoral care' to be adopted. One friend, however, was not completely comfortable with the word 'pastoral'. This minute will be sent to Area Meeting clerks.”

We invite all our local meetings to discuss the term Overseer in Welsh or English.

Minute 21/56

Further to minute 21/43, Meeting for Sufferings is now asking all local meetings to discontinue the use of the term 'overseer'. No replacement term will be formally agreed for Britain Yearly Meeting – local meetings are free to use whatever word they wish. 'Pastoral care team', and 'pastoral carer' for one of such a team, have been suggested and we agree to adopt these terms. We ask nominations and trustees to replace the word 'overseer' in all documents that will be used in future, e.g. role descriptions.

Angela Arnold
Co-clerk

North West London AM

Minute 2022.11.21.11 The term ‘Overseer’

Our local meetings have experimented with various alternatives to the use of 'Overseer' including a member of the Care and Community Team, the Undersight Team and the Oversight Team.

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to adopt the term 'Member of the Oversight Team'.

In Friendship

Tim Heath
Clerk

Northamptonshire AM

Minute 22/32 Meeting for Sufferings.

At our March meeting we asked AM Elders and Overseers to consider the use of the term 'overseer', as requested by MfS. We received the following response which will be forwarded by AM Clerk to MfS:

Minutes of Area Meeting Elders and Overseers held online March 18th2022

4.Use of the word ‘Overseer’.

It was felt that all organisations have their own ‘labels’ and Quakers have ‘overseer’ which many like. We can, however, see that it has connotations that make it unacceptable to some. We can think of no other word at this time but will continue to try to find another term that sums up the role.

In Friendship

Annette Candy,
Clerk

Northumbria AM

Nottinghamshire & Derbyshire AM

At its meeting for worship for business in March (13/03/21), Notts and Derby Area Meeting made the decision that it would no longer use the term 'Overseer', substituting in its place 'Pastoral Friend'.

The area meeting minute reads (Minute 2021/19):

"Area Meeting has received feedback and minutes from seven of our nine local meetings on this topic and this information is included in the 'Reports Relating to Minutes' at the end of these minutes. We have heard that all the Elders at Nottingham meeting have responded that they are in favour of changing to the use of 'Pastoral Friend' rather than 'Overseer'.

The local meetings who responded were unanimous in recommending to stop using the term 'Overseer' but we also acknowledge that some friends hold different views and also feel strongly about this issue.

We agree to stop using the term 'Overseer' and instead use the term 'Pastoral Friend'.

We agree to replace the term 'Overseer' with 'Pastoral Friend' in our documents and policies as these come up for review.

We ask Judith Nilsen, our website administrator, to create a new email address pastoralfriends@nottsandderbyquakers.org.uk and to run this alongside the current email address for overseers during a period of transition. We ask her to publicise the new email address to local meetings when it is available."

This minute was subsequently amended by Friends at the Area Meeting in May (8/05/21) (Minute 2021/35):

"Following correspondence received by the area meeting co-clerks (attached below) and with reference to *Qf&p* 3.15, the co-clerks suggest the following amendment be made to the minutes, to correct the second paragraph of minute 2021/19:

“Of the seven local meetings who responded, six responded via minutes from their local Meeting for Worship for Business and suggested or supported changing to

another term and felt that use of the word 'Overseer' was no longer appropriate. One local meeting (Bakewell) sent a record of a meeting held to discuss this topic where a variety of views were expressed.

"The meeting asks the correspondence clerk to forward both minutes to Meeting for Sufferings for their information."

The meeting accepts the above amendment.

We have also received a further email from Rachel Melland clarifying that her email in respect of use of the term 'Overseer' (recorded in 'Reports relating to Minutes' below) was a personal letter, and not the views in particular of Bakewell Meeting."

As requested I forward both minutes. Documents referred to in the minutes are in the attachment.

Kind regards and in Friendship

Paul Nicholas

Co-clerk (correspondence)

Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Area Meeting

Area meetings for worship for business held 13/03/21 and 8/05/21:

Background papers relating to the use of the term Overseer

ITEM 2021/19 Use of the term 'Overseer'

Bakewell Meeting

Bakewell Quaker Meeting

Summary of points made in discussion of use of the term Overseer

March 9th 2021 7.00 pm by Zoom

Those present: David Cook, Jeni Edwards, Judith Green, Chris Holbrook, Joan King, Helen Jagger, Maggie Lightowler-Cook, Pat Scampion, Ros Stokes, Gill Tishler

A small group of Friends from Bakewell Meeting met to share thoughts on the use of the term 'Overseer', to feed into discussion at Area Meeting on 13th March.

Friends offered a wide range of views:

Concerns

- There was discomfort with the term because of its associations with slavery.
- One Friend mentioned the historic use of the term in relation to the 'relief of the deserving poor'.
- Quakerism has been willing to move with the times – perhaps this is the moment to review the term, particularly when it is causing offence.
- Friends were also concerned that the obscure language was potentially a barrier to understanding and accessibility for those new to Quakers.

Support

- On the other hand is it right to ban words on the basis of one meaning or to lose the richness of the Quaker language – is the word any more archaic than terms used in other faith denominations?
- Is this the most important issue to focus on when we have so many other things to do?

Alternative options

- Alternative role names were briefly considered: is ‘oversight team’ an option? (Although of course ‘oversight’ can also mean ‘something left out by mistake’ so perhaps not such a good idea either!) Pastoral Friend has been suggested. Some Friends wondered whether this did justice to the depth and gravitas of the role.

Wider issues

- Moving back a step further, does it help to review the very wide range of tasks Overseers are expected to perform and consider whether they all sit happily together?
- We were reminded that a review is in progress of the whole of Quaker Faith and Practice. This will inevitably encompass recommendations on language – but will take a long time to reach any conclusions.

Beeston Meeting

Individual Friends were invited to send in their response and the following was received:

Looking at other countries’ websites I saw a neat solution to the problems of the word “overseer.” One of the US YMs simply has a “Committee for Oversight and Counsel.” This includes echoes of the old term without its connotations. To say “I’m on the Oversight Committee” is much more acceptable than saying “I’m an overseer.” I wonder if this would help the AM discussion and discernment.

Minute from additional Business Meeting held on 7th March 2021:

Use of the Term Overseer

The Meeting feels that the term ‘overseer’ is no longer appropriate because of its many negative connotations, and how these relate to racism within the Society in general.

The Meeting felt the most appropriate term to reflect what now happens is pastoral friend.

The Meeting feels that there is future work to be done on Quaker terminology and roles.

Chesterfield Meeting

Minute from Business Meeting held on 7th February 2021:

21/11 The title of Overseer

We suggest the alternative title of Pastoral Friend.

Derby Meeting

Minute from Business Meeting held on 7th February 2021 (21/9):

Area Meeting (minute 2021/05) has asked us to consider whether the term 'Overseer' is still appropriate in view of its associations with slavery, and whether another term such as Pastoral Carer might be more appropriate. We agree that the term 'Overseer' is no longer appropriate, both because of its historical associations, and because it seems the wrong way to describe the role. We suggest that Pastoral Friend might be a more accurate and appropriate title.

Fritchley Meeting

Fritchley meeting has previously sent a minute saying:

We feel, in Fritchley Meeting, that the term overseer is archaic, likely to be misunderstood, and offensive at the present time. This is because the term was used within slavery in the United States. It should therefore be changed.

Mansfield Meeting

Minute from Business Meeting held on 21st February 2021:

21/M1.4 Use of the term 'Overseer'

We have had a discussion over the continuing use of the term Overseer.

It was felt that the word itself could have negative connotations for some, and that it does not reflect the changes in the role over the years.

'Pastoral Carer' was thought to be a more relevant and inclusive title for this role.

Nottingham Meeting

Minute from Business Meeting held on 7th March 2021:

2021/15 'Oversight' –is it time to change the word?

- Should the term be changed?
- If so, what should it be changed to?

We acknowledge the hurt that the terms 'Overseer/Oversight' have caused some Black Friends and feel that changing this term is one small thing we can do to become a more welcoming space. We recognise that this change should be backed up by further anti-racist action in line with our Equality testimony.

These terms harken back to a time when Overseers were more concerned with the discipline of members and monitoring their adherence to our Advices & Queries. The role of Overseers has now changed to one of pastoral support rather than of policing 'Quakerliness'.

The Meeting has discussed potential replacement terms and Pastoral Friend/Pastoral Friendship is the replacement we feel most happy with. Barring dissent from the Overseers we will use this term until another is chosen by Area Meeting and/or Britain Yearly Meeting. We ask our Convenor of Overseers to consult with the Overseers this week and pass her findings along to the Clerking team before Area Meeting next weekend.

Our discernment on this issue will be passed back to Area Meeting. We also hope that this issue will be tackled in the new revision of Quaker Faith & Practice.

Oxford & Swindon AM

Pendle Hill AM

Pickering & Hull AM

PHAQM/2022/30 Elders and Overseers: terminology

Further to minute PHAQM/2022/9, we have received this minute from our AM Elders and Overseers: AMEO 2022/09. We recommend “Pastoral Care Group” as the term we would like to put forward to Area Meeting 12th March. We suggest the remit of this group includes chapter 12.05-07, 12.09-11 Eldership and Oversight of Quaker Faith and Practice and that Nominations should bear this in mind before approaching a Friend to serve.

We are content with the term ‘Pastoral Care’ and recommend its use throughout our AM in future. We ask our Clerks to pass this minute to the Recording Clerk.

Thank you.

In Friendship.

Anne Birkett
Malton Meeting

Quaker Life Central Committee

QLCC 22.51 Use of the term ‘overseer’

We have given further consideration to how we describe those carrying out pastoral care in our communities, ahead of consideration by Meeting for Sufferings in December.

The roles of eldership and oversight are part of a greater whole of supporting and nurturing Friends in our meetings, and many meetings are already combining the two. We see advantages in this more flexible approach.

We suggest that the focus should be on the service we are asking of Friends and then finding an appropriate term to explain that service.

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Alan Pearmain, Co-clerk
Harry Albright, Co-clerk

Sheffield & Balby AM

Minute 8. About the term “Overseer” (a minute for Meeting for Sufferings)

All Quaker meetings have been asked by Meetings for Sufferings to consider the use of the term “overseer”, which is at odds with the commitment made at Britain Yearly Meeting in 2021 to become an actively anti-racist faith community. We agree to send the following minute to Meeting for Sufferings:

In Sheffield and Balby Area Meeting, we have moved away from the term “overseer” across all of our local meetings. In Sheffield Central, they are a separate group known as the “Pastoral Care Team”. At Nether Edge and Balby (Doncaster), responsibilities previously carried by overseers have been subsumed into groups named “Servants of the Meeting” and “Local Meeting Support Group”. At Hope Valley, there is a similar group approach, with a small number of Friends carrying responsibilities of overseers, elders, clerks, and the treasurer. We therefore uphold Meeting for Sufferings in exploring alternative terminologies for the important work of pastoral care, and hope that our small examples offer inspiration to others.

We ask our clerks to submit this minute to Meeting for Sufferings, by the deadline of the 31st of October.

In Friendship,

Moya Barnett
co-clerk

South East London AM

Part of Minute 22/31 reads:-

- Meeting for sufferings have asked what AMs are doing about replacing the term “overseers”. Forest Hill have changed to “Pastoral care team”, Bromley and Blackheath use “Friends Pastoral care”, Peckham and Plumstead Common do not specify the roles.

The clerk will send this minute to MfS.

In Friendship

Lesley Bacon
Clerk

South East Scotland AM

South London AM

South Wales AM

Minute 22.09.05 Pastoral care in our meetings: the role and the terminology.

Deborah Rowlands and Joan Derbyshire have written a clear overview of how Local Meetings are experimenting with both the terminology and arrangements for pastoral care in meetings, and the situation is fluid. This response may be due to the unease many Friends are feeling about the term overseer. Although for Quakers, the term

has related to pastoral care, it can be perceived as being associated with slavery and has become an uncomfortable term for many. We agree not to use this term across South Wales Area Meeting for this reason.

We understand that, at present, the Tabular Statement does not allow a variety of terms to be used, and hope that consideration can be given to making this more fluid.

We hope that Meeting for Sufferings will support further experimentation in area meetings and that some guidance might be given about the way forward while we wait for the new book of discipline.

Signed Pam Greenup and Deborah Rowlands, clerks

Pastoral care in our meetings: the role and the terminology. Responding to the Meeting for Sufferings consultation. (Supporting documents: Background papers from MfS: SWAM minutes)

Deborah Rowlands
Clerk

South Wales Area Meeting

Use of the term Overseer: the nature of the role and the terminology: response to Meeting for Sufferings

Paper for SWAM on 12.09.22 prepared by Deborah Rowlands, member of clerking team in consultation with Joan Darbyshire, convenor of the Area Meeting eldership and pastoral care group.

Background

There are 12 local meetings in South Wales:

Aberfan, Neath, Trealaw have not met regularly as local worshipping communities since March 2020, with their members meeting on line as part of the regular area meeting worship, or with other Local Meeting groups. It is likely that they will review their pastoral care needs once they are able to worship again. Currently they keep in touch informally. Those appointed to eldership and pastoral care roles are valued members of the area meeting support for this aspect of our community life together.

Milford Haven, Narberth, St Davids: these local meetings in west Wales each operate corporate systems whilst appointing a representative to attend area meeting Eldership and Pastoral Care sessions.

Bridgend, Cardiff, Lampeter, Newport, Penarth, Swansea have each discussed both how they provide this support in their Local Meeting, and what it should be called, and this has given rise to a number of changes, in both role and nomenclature as detailed in the attached minutes.

We have also been informed by the clerk of Bridgend LM that their meeting now operates a Pastoral Care Group which covers both eldership and oversight, and by the clerk of Neath Meeting that they wish to retain the appointment of elders, but that their appointed overseer should now be termed a pastoral carer. This meeting works with Swansea meeting in providing pastoral care.

Conclusions

Role:

It is clear that local meetings within South Wales Area Meeting are continuing to experiment with how they operate as worshipping communities and how they support this through specific appointments, some choosing to keep the role of elder separate from those providing pastoral care and some operating a system which combines the two roles.

The area meeting eldership and pastoral care group meets regularly to support those appointed and has arranged a 'Woodbrooke where you are' session to help us to explore these questions together.

We hope that Meeting for Sufferings will encourage ongoing experimentation, but that meanwhile it will authorise changes to the way information is collected for the Tabular Statement to reflect the changing and more fluid pattern.

We expect that the new book of discipline will incorporate these changes but hope that guidance might be issued to help area meetings in the interim, given that Quaker faith & practice is now quite outdated.

Terminology

Friends are united in the view that the term overseer should no longer be used because of its connotations with slavery.

Two meetings have incorporated the term 'Bugeiliaid' (Shepherds) in their name to reflect the fact that they are meetings in Wales.

We have been reminded of *Quaker faith & practice* 23.44

The language in which we express what we ... say is of vital importance; it both shapes and reflects our values. One result of the emphasis on plain speech by early Friends was to challenge the class hierarchy of the day. ... Our Quaker tradition enables us to recognise that our choice of language, and our reaction to the choice that others make, reveals values which may otherwise stay hidden.

(*Qf&p* 23.44 1st paragraph Quaker Women's Group, 1982; 1986)

Minute from Meeting for Sufferings

MfS/22/03/22 Use of the term 'overseer'

We have been reminded that we are currently experimenting with alternative terms to 'overseer' to describe Friends in our meetings with responsibility for pastoral care, in response to our growing understanding of the hurt felt from the historical connotations of hierarchy and oppression. In April 2021 we agreed to consider the results of this experimentation at the end of 2022. We ask Area Meetings to send minutes to Meeting for Sufferings before the end of the year.

The accompanying background for the March 2022 Meeting for Sufferings is pasted below. A subsequent email asked for all minutes to be sent by 31 October so that the question can be discussed at Meeting for Sufferings in December

Background paper from Meeting for Sufferings

South Wales Area Meeting (SWAM) minutes etc re use of the term "overseer" since

2020 is linked below:

South Wales Area Meeting, minutes re-the term 'overseer' 2020-22

South Wales Area Meeting (SWAM) minutes etc re use of the term "overseer" since 2020

Black text = Local Meeting (LM) minute

Blue text = SWAM minute

Red text = SWAM subgroup or other minute

September 2020

SWAM E&O Group:

2020:09:03 The Quaker Use of the word Overseer: (To be sent to SWAM for 12th September 2020) We have considered the Quaker use of the word 'Overseer' in the context of our history, our concern to be inclusive and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. We acknowledge the word 'Overseer' has negative connotations because of its connection with slavery. We do not wish to continue to use the word 'Overseer'.

This has been a deep, difficult and uncomfortable subject to contemplate, for many of us. We invite White Friends to share in our discomfort. We ask SWAM to consider bringing our concerns to the attention of our Local Meetings. We ask that Local Meetings consider the issue further, what word would be appropriate to use and to change the terms they use, if necessary. We will return to the issue at a future meeting.

South Wales AM 2020:09:09 Minutes from SWAM Groups

(a) We have received minute 2020:09:03 from our Eldership and Oversight Group (appended) regarding the Quaker use of the term overseer. We ask our local meetings to give further consideration to this issue and to report back to us / our Eldership & Oversight Group.

Penarth LM 2020.27.1 Quaker use of the word Overseer

We note the SWAM E&O Group minute 2020:09:03: "We have considered the Quaker use of the word 'Overseer' in the context of our history, our concern to be inclusive and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. We acknowledge the word 'Overseer' has negative connotations because of its connection with slavery. We do not wish to continue to use the word 'Overseer'. This has been a deep, difficult and uncomfortable subject to contemplate, for many of us. We invite White Friends to share in our discomfort." SWAM considered this matter on 12th September (minute 2020:09:09(a): "We ask our local meetings to give further consideration to this issue and to report back to us/our Eldership & Oversight Group. We will return to this issue at our November meeting."

We agree that we do not wish to continue using the words oversight and overseer. We feel that 'pastoral care' describes the current role of overseers within the Society, but remain puzzled about the most appropriate term to describe the role-holder. We agree to rename our E+O an 'Elders with Pastoral Care Group' in the interim. We ask the Clerk to send this minute to SWAM.

November 2020 Cardiff LM: 20.11.6 #Black Lives Matter

b) Further to SWAM Minute 20.09.09 We have considered the slavery connotations of the word 'overseer.' Our Elders with Oversight team suggest we try using Elders and Stewards for the next six months. Friends have a range of connotations with the word 'steward.' Some feel it has negative connotations of 'putting people in their place,' others have positive connotations with 'stewardship of resources and the earth.' Some friends suggest that the term Elders with Oversight is replaced by a Pastoral Care group. The consideration of the word 'overseer' has led us to also consider the word 'elder.' We are not in currently in unity regarding losing the use of the word 'elder,' nor use of the word 'steward.' We ask our clerk to forward this minute to SWAM clerks. We will return to the issue of terminology for the group.

South Wales AM 2020.11.10

(c) Further to minute 2020:09:09(a) regarding the use of the word 'overseer', responses have been received from the following local meetings:

Cardiff – minute 20.11.6

Newport – minute 2020.11.2

Penarth – minute 2020.27.1

We note that the Book of Discipline Revision Group and Quaker Life are also addressing this issue. We are informed that Meeting for Sufferings will also be considering this issue in December. We wish to return to this issue when we have adequate time to reflect on it and suggest it as a BQLQ topic

We recognise that the conversation also needs to continue in our local meetings as we try out the words under suggestion and others that occur to us.

Lampeter LM Minute between MfWfB 2020-11-13 Quaker use of the term Overseer

Ten of us have considered today the question of our use of the term Overseer to denote those who provide pastoral care within our meetings. Lampeter Local Meeting has used the term Pastoral Care Group for many years to describe those Friends whom we have asked to provide eldership and oversight for our meeting, but we recognise that the term Overseer is currently the standard one used within our Yearly Meeting.

"The language in which we express what we ... say is of vital importance; it both shapes and reflects our values. One result of the emphasis on plain speech by early Friends was to challenge the class hierarchy of the day. ... Our Quaker tradition enables us to recognise that our choice of language, and our reaction to the choice that others make, reveals values which may otherwise stay hidden".

(Qf&p 23.44 1st paragraph Quaker Women's Group, 1982; 1986)

Our use of language affects us as much as it does those who hear or read it. In that sense our continued use of historical language such as Overseer that we now know to be offensive as an expression of power, particularly related to the slave trade, can be spiritually damaging to ourselves as individual Friends and as a Religious Society.

It is important to acknowledge our historical roots and yet to look forward. To be open to new Light, and in this case, to the language that is most appropriate to convey the ways in which we support and care for each other and our Meetings.

We have been clear that we all share in the responsibility to care for each other in our Meeting, but it is important for a small group of us to ensure that this happens. Pastoral care as we practice it encompasses both eldership and oversight as traditionally understood. We have considered some of the power implications of this.

We have considered possible alternative terms for this service to our Meetings: supporting Friends, support group (as used by Meeting for Sufferings), co-ordinators, Pastoral Care Group. We are not yet ready to make a decision on any changes for our Meeting and are content for the present to continue with Pastoral Care Group for ourselves. This is about more than just a change of terms. We need to continue to reflect on our own thoughts and actions.

We have found this time together fruitful, and have also appreciated hearing Qf&p 23.11 and 23.46 during our considerations.

We forward this Minute to SWAM.

January 2021 South Wales AM 2021.01.03: Minutes from Local Meetings

a) Quaker use of the term Overseer. Further to SWAM minutes regarding the use of the word 'overseer', 2020:09:09(a) and 2020:11:10c, we receive Lampeter LM minute 2020-11-13. We send this minute to SWAM Eldership and Oversight Group, along with those already received. We encourage other Local Meetings to discuss this, and send their minutes to the Eldership and Oversight Group so that we can return to this matter informed by broader discernment later in the year.

From SWAM Eldership and pastoral care group. 21.02.10 Minute 4 To change name for the website (Minute between meeting) The SWAM Eldership and Oversight group has considered the name of the group and wishes to change it to the SWAM Eldership and Pastoral Care group until such time that a generally agreed substitute for the word Oversight is discerned. Quaker Life is currently carrying out a consultation process.

May 2021 Within papers received: 2021.05.22 SWAM Trustees Minutes

North Wales AM: Gerry Craddock reported that NWAM has decided to continue with providing a Zoom Meeting for Worship - which he fears may be the end of a number of the smaller Meetings, including Wrexham. All the meeting houses are now open for worship. At the May AM it was agreed to ask all local meetings to discontinue the use of the term 'overseer'. No replacement term will be formally agreed – local meetings are free to use whatever word they wish. 'Pastoral care team', and 'pastoral carer' for one of such a team have been suggested and the AM agreed to adopt these terms. Nominations and trustees are asked to replace the word 'overseer' in all documents that will be used in future e.g. role descriptions.

March 2022 2022.02 Cardiff re Elders and Bugeiliaid: 22.2.10 Elders and Bugeiliaid

Minute 21.10.8 recorded the “overwhelmingly positive response” to using Bugeiliaid and Bugail as an alternative to Overseer/s. “We think it supports accessibility and diversity in our meetings”

The SWAM Tabular Statement 2021 identifies the ‘system of eldership and oversight’ as ‘appointed joint eldership/ pastoral care team.’

We are grateful that Zélie Gross has collated and compiled the information on our behalf for many years.

The form is asking for the system used, not the name that the Meeting has given them. As such we are unable to include the term ‘Elders and Bugeiliaid (Pastoral care team)’ in the Tabular Statement.

We understand that it is the system that is being identified and are clear that, in Cardiff, the system is called ‘Elders and Bugeiliaid.’ This is part of our witness as an anti-racist church. Cardiff Meeting decided to seek new terms because the word ‘overseer’ has connections with slavery. We are the local meeting for Wales’ capital city and decided on this Welsh term with joy. It is part of our aspiration to be inclusive, and that includes the use of language.

We ask SWAM to acknowledge our witness as an anti-racist and inclusive church in Wales by using ‘Elders and Bugeiliaid (Pastoral care team)’ in future Tabular Statements.

We discern that the witness in the use of the term Bugeiliaid extends beyond the Tabular Statement and ask that our meeting clerk liaises with SWAM clerks to communicate the reason for the change, and what it means to us, to Quaker Life Central Committee and the Recording Clerk’s Office at Friends House.

We ask our clerk to forward this minute to SWAM Clerks.

2022.03.10 Minutes from Local Meetings: Cardiff Meeting re Elders and Bugeiliaid.

We receive minute 2022.02.10 from Cardiff LM concerning Eldership and Bugeiliaid: the name and how it is recorded on the tabular statement.

We also receive a paper which contains information about consideration of this topic at Meeting for Sufferings and about how the matter concerning the tabular statement might be taken forward within Britain Yearly Meeting. Minutes recording the discernment so far on this issue within Local Meetings and within the SWAM Eldership and Pastoral Care Group is included as an appendix. We ask for any further minutes on this topic to be sent to SWAM by the end of August 2022, so that we can return to a further consideration before the end of the year and send our discernment to Meeting for Sufferings.

March and April 2022 Cardiff 22.4.6 & Swansea 2022.03.02 re removing the words “overseer/oversight”

Cardiff

22.4.6 c) We confirm that the name for our team is ‘Elders and Bugeiliaid’ and ask our clerk to send this minute to our Area Meeting Clerks and Clerk of the SWAM eldership, oversight and pastoral care group.

Swansea

2022.03.20.2 Eldership and Pastoral Care: Further to: 2021.01.29.6.1 Eldership and Pastoral Care

Local meetings have been discussing alternative words for 'Oversight'. 'Eldership and Pastoral Care' as a name for SWAM and LM's groups, is being used for the time being, but SWAM would like LMs to discuss this and give feedback. It's also being discussed by the group involved in the revision of QF&P so SWAM is likely to feed back to them."

We have been asked to send a minute to SWAM on our LM's discernment about the removal of the word Oversight from the title Eldership, Oversight and Pastoral Care group for Swansea LM. We agreed that we should continue to call the group the Eldership and Pastoral Care and add Bugeiliaid in brackets afterwards because we want to acknowledge that we are a meeting in Wales.

22:05:08 Minutes from Local Meetings on the name of the pastoral care groups.

Cardiff and Swansea Local Meetings have both sent a minute concerning the term Bugeiliaid (shepherds). Cardiff have adopted it as a replacement for Oversight and Swansea wish to use it in brackets after 'Pastoral Care Group'. Both view it as a way of demonstrating our Welsh identity.

We have agreed (Minute 2022.03.10) to return to a consideration of this matter in our September meeting to provide feedback to Meeting for Sufferings as requested.

July 2022 Lampeter Meeting minute 2022/07/07 Quaker use of the term Overseer

AM has asked for any further minutes from LMs in consideration of this before its meeting in September. We heard again our minute 2020.11.13 that we forwarded to AM and will remind them of this. [see above]

We have begun to think about shared pastoral care within the whole meeting as an alternative to a smaller pastoral care group and hope to give this further and deeper consideration as a Meeting.

Southern East Anglia AM

Southern Marches AM

Staffordshire AM

Lichfield Quaker Meeting Minutes of the MfWfB 27th November 2022,

Minute 7. Discussion/study group

a. After our recent discussion of the term "Overseer" as used by Quakers, the outcome of our consideration was circulated to friends in Lichfield LM.

"Because of our personal histories and individual experiences, we bring different meanings of understanding to the term Overseer. Most people here in Lichfield LM think the term is unsuitable, yet for some there is a sadness of losing tradition.

We began to think about alternative terms, one suggestion being 'Befriender'.

The term Pastoral Care was not favoured because of connections with hierarchy and its use in other contexts.

This minute will be sent to BYM.

Rhoda Wharton

Clerking the meeting on this occasion

Surrey & Hampshire Border AM

Minute 22/07/03 E&O Minutes

a) Replacement term for 'Overseer'

We have considered E&Os suggested phrases to replace "Overseer" and agree that "Pastoral Friend" is our preferred choice.

We agree to use "Pastoral Friend" within our AM until a new one is agreed by Yearly Meeting.

We ask our Clerk to forwarding this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Stephen Crouch

Clerk

Sussex East AM

Use of Role Titles: Elder & Overseer 47.22

Three Local Meetings have responded to a call to discern upon the use of the titles Elder and particularly, Overseer. The general feeling is to keep the term Elder, but to change Overseer to Member of the Pastoral Care Team. However, there is not unity within Area Meeting, even to whether a change from Overseer is necessary at all. We ask AM clerk to send this minute to clerks of Meeting for Sufferings in time for the meeting on 1st October.

In Friendship,

Peter Aviss

Clerk

Sussex West AM

We do not yet have the formal minute as the meeting was very recent, but we have confirmed that all Local Meetings in Sussex West Area Meeting now use the terms "Pastoral Friends" and "Pastoral Team" instead of overseer/s.

Christine Habgood-Coote

Sussex West AM

Swarthmoor (South West Cumbria) AM

Teesdale & Cleveland AM

Minute 63/22 An alternative name for Overseers

Meeting for Sufferings has requested Area Meetings discern ideas for an alternative name for Overseers given that the name may be associated with slavery.

We offer the name “Area Meeting Pastoral Care Team”.

This minute will be forwarded to MfS.

In Friendship

Teesdale & Cleveland AM clerking team

Thaxted AM

Wensleydale & Swaledale AM

Wensleydale and Swaledale Area Meeting have discerned this replacement for the term Elders and Overseers

--“Pastoral Care Team which would include designated Elders and Pastoral Care Friends”

In your role as MfS Clerk please will you be able to ensure this arrives where it should.

Thank you very much

Gwen Clark

AM Clerking Team

West Kent AM

West Scotland AM

West Somerset AM

Minute 22/01

All Local Meetings in West Somerset Area Meeting have considered their use of the term Overseer and are content to adopt the term Pastoral Care from now on.

Ali Dominy and Lizzy Aveline
Clerks

West Weald AM

West Wiltshire & East Somerset AM

Wirral & Chester AM

In response to the request copied below this message, here are the relevant parts of minute 22.61 from Wirral & Chester AM which met on 11 September 2022.

Heswall are experimenting with the term Spiritual and Pastoral Care team (for elders and overseers); Chester and Birkenhead are experimenting with the term Pastoral Friend.

... We will report to Meeting for Sufferings that two of our local meetings have been experimenting with the term Pastoral Friend.

In Friendship

Yvonne Dickson
Clerk

Worcestershire & Shropshire AM

Minute 20.78.3 Role titles: pastoral care

Nominations Committee notes that the title 'Pastoral Care Friend' is being used elsewhere in our Yearly Meeting to denote the role previously known as Overseer.

We agree to adopt this role title in our Area Meeting, in place of the interim 'Pastoral Carer'.

In Friendship,

Lynda Prescott
Clerk

York AM

Use of the term 'overseer'

The use of this term among Friends is under renewed consideration at MfS. Our own privilege can prevent us from realising what a serious barrier this word is for those who have experienced it negatively. The revision of Quaker Faith & Practice currently being undertaken gives impetus to this discussion, as failure to address the matter in the new book could set any such decision back for thirty years or more.

We hope Meeting for Sufferings will agree the principle that a new name be found.

We send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings.

Barbara Windle
Clerk