

Simpler meetings – role-holders

Introduction

This document is about possibilities. It shares many ideas collected from Quakers around Britain about how we can simplify the way we organise ourselves. You can find more topics here: www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. For each topic there is a document and a short video. All the topics are collected in “*Simpler Meetings – what is possible*”, which also explains ways you can approach the topics.

How are Quakers making life simpler for role-holders?

One way is to share the role between more than one person. In many meetings we have become used to having a co-clerking arrangement. We get the benefits of two heads (or more) being better than one. You can use different people's skills, and benefit from people's availability. The clerk is not left entirely on their own.

Another way is to divide up the roles a bit more formally. Take the treasurer's role for example. The bookkeeping part of what treasurers have traditionally done does not need to be done by the treasurer. It could be done by a bookkeeper (paid or voluntary). That changes the nature of what it is to be a treasurer. They can focus more on our finances as a whole, and on the good use of our money.

Some meetings have also found it works to combine some roles, instead of having lots of roles. You can spend a lot of time co-ordinating between many different people or sending things between one person and another. Bringing them together might be work better.

Another question to ask is: Do we need so many of a particular role? For example, do we need 12 trustees? Do we need to have quite as many elders? Do we need to have two representatives to this body - could we make do with one? There may be other ways of doing things.

How can we make some roles less "unattractive"?

One potential area meeting clerk said recently “There must be things we can do so I could take on this role, and make it more do-able. Do roles always need to be for three years? Perhaps if they were offered for one year with the potential to extend, people might be more prepared to take it on. They could see how it goes, rather than taking on the whole three-year commitment if they don't quite know what the size of the job's going to be.”

Then she said “It would make a real difference to me if I didn't have to be the clerk at every meeting - if I knew I could have a gap or step back”. That is easier to do if you have co-clerks. Of course, if there are fewer meetings, then it is less of a commitment for the role-holder as well.

Do we sometimes approach filling roles in a very traditional way?

Sometimes we do. The classic way Quakers often use is to say “Here is a role. Here is the stack of tasks we expect this role to do. Here is another stack of tasks for another role. And another stack of tasks for another role.” Then we try and find the person who can do all the tasks in one stack. That can be hard. It is rather like a jigsaw puzzle where we are trying to find a person of the right shape to fit into the particular missing piece in the puzzle.

Some meetings have been saying “Let's get the tasks out of their stacks and out on the table. Let's see who we've got, who's interested in or could be good at various tasks. Can we match up more of the tasks with the people in that slightly more flexible way?” That can be more fruitful than “All these 10 tasks have to be done by this non-existent person.” It can make it easier to find people, doing things they really enjoy, and where they find fulfilment.

Could we reduce the burden by arranging more support?

You often hear stories of meetings where people crashed out of a role because the burdens became too high. Perhaps they didn't understand things at the beginning, or they didn't have a good start. So it's important to have a really good handover, making sure that there is a clear induction and things are explained.

Ongoing support is important too. Some meetings use a buddy system where you know you can ring up one or two colleagues who've been there before, and understand how things are done, or to find alternatives. They might be in your own meeting, someone who has done the role before, or it might be in another local or area meeting. It can help to get a different perspective and ideas.

Cake is another thing that people use! In a survey of area meeting treasurers several of them said “We get together as a group of treasurers every six months or every year over cake and coffee. We just talk through issues that people have got, in quite an informal way.” So doing that with people from other meetings, or other area meetings, can be a very good way of providing informal support.

Some meetings have a support person, to support a role-holder with something that they are less able to do, or less available to do, or something they're not so confident in. That could be a volunteer, or it could be somebody paid. Quite a few area meetings are beginning to have a paid administrator. One is doing it on ten hours a month – so not a big financial commitment. They cover things like membership matters, contacts lists, Gift Aid, or insurance - things that otherwise would land on the clerk, or the treasurer, or clerk of trustees.

Finally, as we cover in the section about trustees, relationships are really important. One example is between the area meeting clerk and the clerk of trustees. Helping those relationships work well can be useful support from others in the meeting.

Could we share some role-holders?

Here is an example. We have 70 area meetings across Britain and they all need to have a registering officer. So we have 70 registering officers. Most of them have an assistant registering officer so that may be 120, 140 people that need to understand how the process works, often have some training, perhaps a quite intensive weekend training for this important role. In 2018 in Britain Yearly Meeting we had 27 marriages. So 120 - 140 people are preparing for 27 marriages. Maybe we could share that between area meetings? Maybe you could have a registering officer from one area meeting and an assistant registering officer from another? They could be appointed to each other's area meetings as role-holders. (It is allowed!). In that way we can make better use of the time and careful preparation people put into the role.

Another example might be a safeguarding co-ordinator, where some people have particular skills and experience. Perhaps other people could take on parts of the role for them, working together across two area meetings.

What about our neighbours?

It can be really enlightening to ask people in other meetings what they do. Often one meeting has some particular way of doing things which is a product of a special circumstance in the past (or one person). Discovering that other meetings do not have a particular committee, or a role or a process, can be quite liberating.

There are lots of ways we can relieve the burden on our role-holders.

Questions to consider

- Are we designing roles to fit modern circumstances?
- Could some roles be shared by two people?
- Could we divide up or combine roles differently?
- Do we need to have fixed stacks of tasks for each role? Would it help to be more flexible?
- Are we supporting our role-holders properly?
- Would it help to have buddies, and times when people get together from neighbouring meetings?
- Could we have a support person, whether paid or a volunteer?
- Are we helping to develop good relationships between role-holders?
- Do we need all these roles? Are we trying to cover too much? Do we need as many people in this role?

- What would happen if we didn't allocate this task to anyone? Would people step in? Might we find the task didn't need doing the way we thought it did?
- Could we do this another, simpler, way?
- Could we share some role-holders with another meeting or area meeting?
- Shall we talk with our neighbours?

Can you help?

The Simpler Meetings project is gathering and sharing ways that Quakers find work well for them. The aim is to liberate the joy of being a Quaker. You can learn more at www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. Please send your ideas and suggestions to Jonathan Carmichael, Simpler Meetings Project Manager at JonathanC@Quaker.org.uk.

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