

Simpler meetings – what is possible?

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1. Introduction

Simplicity is about shedding the things that get in the way, to make space for the things that matter most.

This could be in spiritual matters, or very practical ones. As Quakers we see the spiritual and practical as one. If we simplify practical aspects, this helps our spiritual life too. As our spiritual lives grow, this helps sustain the practical side.

This document is about possibilities. It shares many ideas collected from Quakers around Britain about how we can simplify the way we organise ourselves.

The document is going to keep changing and growing, as ideas and experience grow. So you may want to come back and find the latest version. It is linked to a series of videos you can find here: www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings, one for each topic. It started as a transcript of the videos, with answers to questions from the Simpler Meetings Project Manager. This document is broadening out as our ideas and discussions develop.

How you could use this document and the videos

You could read it straight through, or you can watch all the videos in one go (for about an hour). But that could be quite hard work, as there are a lot of ideas at once.

You could watch a few videos at a time, and read the matching sections here, to help you respond.

You could meet as a group and watch some of the videos and discuss them. It may help to watch two, then discuss them, then watch one or two more, and discuss etc.

You could send round the link to the videos and this document in advance of a meeting. This allows people to explore the ideas in their own time. Some people respond more to videos, and others to reading. Then when you meet, go over some of the materials again, perhaps showing some of the videos, and discuss what struck you most, and consider the questions posed on a topic.

It is best to read or watch the topics on Fundamentals and Role-holders first, and then pick some topics which interest you most. You can come back to other topics another time. Often, these discussions reveal that our ways of doing things are based on an underlying Quaker discipline and are linked to spiritual matters. So be ready for your thoughts and discussions to move into and out of those areas too.

The process needs to be a mixture of reflection and action – introducing and considering ideas, and then choosing which ones to take forward. So do leave time to focus on next steps and agreeing who will take them. Be ready to follow up with a careful process of consideration involving a wider group.

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.

2. Fundamentals – possibilities and permission

What is the Simpler Meetings project for?

It is trying to answer the questions:

- How can we reduce the burden of administration landing on a small number of Friends?
- How can we do things differently to release time for spiritual matters, for witness in the world, for outreach, for building community and generally 'having a life'?

People all round the Society of Friends have been recognising we do face some problems. But there are also many possibilities being used already or being worked on. The project aims to find some of those and share them with other Quakers. We know some Quaker ways of doing things are very simple. Other Quaker ways are not so simple!

The project started with a strong focus on area meeting level roles, particularly area meeting clerks, treasurers and trustees. That is because the pressure can be greatest there. If that layer of the Quaker structure crumbles, we face a big problem as a Society. But in talking with Quakers up and down Britain, it has become clear that many of the possibilities for an area meeting are very transferable to local meetings too. There is a section at the end specifically focused on small local meetings.

Can you sum up the situation in a nutshell?

The burden of administration is lying on the shoulders of a small number of Quakers, often in their 70s and 80s. At the same time there is another group of Quakers who find difficulty connecting with the ways in which we do some things. So they tend to stand back. That means the system is at times creaking and sometimes may snap. And if we continue just with the ways we currently do things, things are likely to get worse.

Is there any hope?

Yes, there is lots of hope. There are lots of possible ways of doing things that are already being used in different ways around the country. Many Quakers are involved in thinking through how that can be done well. One of the great strengths of the Society of Friends is that over the centuries we have been good at questioning things. We are good at finding new ways and new light. We need to do this now, because we are a different people from how we were several centuries ago.

How are we different now?

Compared with only one generation ago, or two generations ago, a lot more of us are the only Quaker in our families. Many of us are also older than we used to be! People are joining as adults and particularly in older adulthood. So perhaps they don't come with the depth of understanding and the familiarity that we used to

assume. As a group we are smaller than we were. Over the last ten years the number of members and attenders has fallen by 14 percent. Around us, society is now more secular. It is much more regulated than it has been. Lives are much busier. We have new technologies. Many more women are in the paid workforce than two generations ago. People are retiring later and so are less available. And many grandparents have more childcare commitments than two generations ago. So we need to think about new ways of doing things, to liberate us from some of our burdens, to release the joy of being a Quaker.

What have you found, talking to Friends around Britain?

It has been absolutely fascinating. I have been discovering there is a great deal of variety. This might be about our geography, or the size of our area meeting or local meetings. It could be our meeting houses, their age or location, or whether there's a meeting house at all – over a quarter of local meetings in Britain do not have a meeting house. There are also new expressions of Quakerism, people whose Quakerism is more about informal connections, with gatherings or online connections or special interest groups rather than the local meeting being the only way they relate to Quakerism.

There is also great variety in the way that area meetings are organised. I have been a Quaker most of my life and in four different area meetings. I had no idea until I started this project that you could hold area meetings on a Saturday! It just had not been in my experience. They were always on a Sunday, or perhaps on a Tuesday night.

I mention that because I keep finding there are Quakers who are very sure that *this* is the right way to do things and *this* is the way it's *always* been done, and this is the way it *should* be done. Yet in the next area along or the next meeting along, people are also sure *that* is the way to do things and *that's* the way it's *always* been done. Yet this one's way is not the same as the other one's way! So there's a paradox there, I think.

How can we respond to this variety?

Somebody helpfully put it recently that there is not one Quaker way, but there are many Quaker principles, and we should focus on those. This is not about finding one-size-fits-all solutions, but multiple possibilities. We are creating a menu which people can look at, consider for their own circumstances, then choose from the menu, as you would do in a restaurant – sometimes a little, sometimes more.

Are we allowed to do things differently?

We are. There is a lot more permission around than you might have thought - certainly more than I thought when I started. In '*Quaker faith & practice*' we have a lot of permission to find the right way for our circumstances. The lists there very rarely say "You must do this in this way". It is more about how you might consider approaching things.

I sat down with the people who are the "guardians" of our Church government, Paul Parker as Recording Clerk and Michael Booth as Church Government Advisor. I

asked them “Is it really possible to do this? Can people do it like that? How come this is being done in this way?” Their repeated response has been: go back to the principles. Is this in line with our general way of approaching things, rather than the specific fine detail?

We also have the opportunity in the revision of the Book of Discipline to record afresh the variety of ways in which things are being done, which work in people’s experience.

There are many possibilities, and a lot more permission than we often think.

Is this just about organising?

There are other sides to this too. It is worth investing time in developing our spiritual lives, learning together about the depth of Quaker ways, and building our Quaker communities.

Often there is much to be gained from reminding ourselves (or learning more) about the spiritual roots of the ways that Quakers do things.

Getting to know one another as a community is also key to working well together, especially when things are changing.

Focusing only on processes and structures is unlikely to be fruitful without these other elements.

Finally, change takes time, needs plenty of communication, and requires careful discernment.

Questions to consider:

- What burdens are we carrying?
- What would I do if I could spend less time on Quaker administration?
- Do we see a need to change?
- How do I feel about there being many possibilities, not just one (my) way?
- If I think some new idea is impossible, should I say “It cannot work because of this”, or can I be more constructive with “We need to consider how to take account of this factor”?
- Do we have permission to change?

3. Role-holders

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?

4. Poem – Simpler Meetings and Sustainability

This poem gives another way of looking at simplicity, with an analogy of sustainability.

Quakers round Britain are trying to simplify their meetings:
Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair, Refuse, Rethink, Rot

Reduce

Fewer overburdened Friends
More time for Spirit led witness and community
Less long tiring business meetings
Fewer separate area charities duplicating
Skype: less travel time and carbon, opens up access

Re-use

Good ideas from other meetings
Policy documents: stop re-inventing the wheel
Tried and tested Quaker methods
Buildings you have, and spaces others have

Recycle

Don't retain things for ever and ever
Melt them down
Re-form them for new shapes and purposes
Keeping the inner Quaker principles

Repair

Repairing saves energy
Spending a little can fix things you value
Other people may have the skills you need

Refuse

Say no to some things.
Just stop doing them. With joy.
There's always another way.

Rethink

Take a fresh approach. Include different people.
Divide busy roles: match people with tasks they like.
Do it differently. Experiment.
Believe it possible that you are mistaken!!

Rot

For a nutritious compost, lay some things down,
Stir, leave in the warm and dark
And in the quiet, listen for the Spirit:
Something good will grow from it.

Simpler Quaker meetings: make space for the Spirit!

5. Area meetings

Around the country, about a third of our area meetings are actively considering how they organise themselves this year (2019).

Where could we start?

You could consider four questions. The first is really important to discuss:

- What is the area meeting for?

Someone asked this useful question in a session recently:

- How can we make area meeting an occasion that people actually *want* to come to?!

The next question is even more challenging:

- How much is it the discernment of the whole area meeting, if the only people who can attend are those who can spare six hours on a Sunday (including travel time) or nine hours on a Saturday (including travel), eight or nine times a year?

A fourth question broadens that:

- Is it inclusive?

So, how can we combine worship and community, concerns and appointments, decisions and learning? (And of course food!)

Frequency

Quite a few area meetings are reducing the frequency from the more traditional pattern of nine or ten times a year, to five or six times in a year. Some of these have a significant element of community building or learning. Some are having five area meetings for business and two for learning. There is one that has recently decided to experiment with three times in the year for a whole day of the more meaty, business style approach and three focused on learning and community building. They will have a bit of urgent business at the end if they have to. Of course there are pros and cons to this kind of change, definitely worth considering.

Combinations

Some area meetings aim to cover all elements together. For example, they meet for worship, then have a speaker, and then lunch and a social time, and then an activity or workshop, and then some business. They are putting all those aspects together in a rounded package.

Being inclusive

Setting out to be inclusive may mean re-considering the location, time of day and the day of the week. Some areas move the day around so it not always the same every

meeting. Provision for children can be important in enabling participation. We are an all age community, and we are not just thinking about children. What are the needs and circumstances of young adults, middle-aged adults, people who are working or have family commitments, as well as older adults?

Travel

Several areas have recently decided to hold most of their area meetings at a central transport hub, so most people can reach it in a reasonable amount of time. This has replaced focusing on rotating between every single meeting in the area - there is no rule saying you must do that. Sharing out the delight of hosting area meeting may not be easy for small meetings. Public transport is important – though do check whether people are actually using public transport before ruling out meeting on a Sunday for this reason.

Telephone conferences

One area meeting has for many years held some of its meetings as a telephone conference - a conference call with everybody on the phone. They have found it possible to meet in a worshipful way to make decisions together, instead of all travelling. Could this work for some committees? See the section on Digital too.

Investing in people

Another area meeting made a decision to spend four thousand pounds on subsidising their residential event. They had a very successful time – fifty people came. It made the event work really well. There is an example of investing the area meeting's money in the people, not just in the buildings. It is often quite easy for us to make decisions about property matters for say four thousand pounds. But sometimes it is really hard for us to dare to spend that same amount on building the community that makes up the area meeting.

Combining for learning

Could you run some learning events jointly with another meeting? If you are going to the effort of arranging a speaker or a workshop, maybe you could combine two area meetings to learn about the same things at the same time. Some large area meetings do that in clusters of three or four local meetings together.

Eldership

Several meetings have experienced the importance of clarifying the role of elders for the area meeting in the session. It should not rest on the shoulders of the clerk alone to maintain the discipline of the worshipping meeting – elders have a responsibility. Some have taken quite clear steps to explain at the start of the meeting what our discipline is, the style of the meeting, and why. They encourage elders to play their role in area meeting, perhaps by introducing them. One area meeting puts out a sheet on the seats, explaining the discipline of business meeting, with some examples. They have found this encouragement really aids the meeting.

Length of business

Quite a few area meeting clerks say “We really try to get our business done in an hour and a half” or two hours. Sometimes if they have really cut down the frequency,

it is two and a half hours. Having that aim gives a sense of what you might need to adjust to make that possible.

Agenda-setting

Here are a few useful questions you might ask:

- Does this item really need the discernment of the whole area meeting?
- Could some preparation beforehand speed this item through to a fruitful decision point?
- Are there some items, perhaps more routine ones, which do not need a discussion in the area meeting?
- Could there be a draft minute circulated in advance or presented in the meeting for agreement? This 'consent agenda' approach can avoid protracted time on items that actually do not need lengthy discernment.
- How should we handle reports? Should they be sent out in advance and quite widely? Should they be spoken to or not at the meeting itself? Should some be spoken to more than others? C
- Could some be very brief or not taken with a spoken contribution at all? How much is this report really fundamental for people to talk about in the area meeting session?
- Is the area meeting in session duplicating the work that now rests with trustees? Are items going back and forth between trustees and area meeting too much? Big decisions need to come to the area meeting for a decision, but a lot of the work could have been done by the trustees. Being clear which decisions are appropriate for area meeting, and which for trustees, can make things work much more smoothly and save a lot of time, energy and feeling.
- Are we prepared to joyfully leave some topics for other people to consider?

Can there be something between the clerk and the area meeting in session?

Quite a few meetings now have ways of using some form of group, so that things do not only rest with the clerk, or do not come relatively unprocessed into the area meeting in session. This might be a preparation group; it might be an arrangements committee; it might be a committee of clerks. Some have a group where some key role-holders come, which is also open to any member or attender. In that way it is not a closed discussion, but there is a core of people present. They can help work through what business is needed, and what preparation and clarification beforehand would help. That can really focus (and shorten) the main area meeting in session. It can also enable there to be a lower frequency of meetings because there is a group who handle some things in between.

It seems important to be clear how the area meeting can have urgent decisions taken when that is necessary. It can be very helpful to define in advance that certain types of issue can be delegated to a particular group where a decision is urgent. This can enable more time between the main area meetings, and for them to be more fruitful.

These are all responses to the opening questions.

Questions to consider

- What is the area meeting for?
- How can we make area meeting an occasion that people actually want to come to?
- How much is it the discernment of the whole area meeting, if the only people who can attend are those who can spare six hours on a Sunday (including travel time) or nine hours on a Saturday (including travel), eight or nine times a year?
- Are we being inclusive?
- How often would it be good to meet?
- What are suitable days, times and places to meet?
- Shall we have a range of activities on one day, or divide them up?
- Could learning or workshops be shared with neighbours, or in clusters?
- Are we investing in building our community, as well as our buildings?
- Are there ways our elders can support the right holding of area meeting?
- How long are we aiming for our business sessions to take? Would the questions above about agenda setting help?
- Would it help to have a group that meets between area meetings?

6. Area meeting trustees

Relationships

The relationship between the area meeting and its trustees needs to work smoothly. There needs to be a common understanding of which kind of decisions need to be made by the area meeting in session, and which decisions are right for the trustees to make. Sometimes of course things will move between one or the other, with a bit of consultation. But they do not need to keep moving back and forth repeatedly. We need to trust our trustees.

Another key relationship is between the clerk of trustees and the clerk of the area meeting. Do they get on well? Do they talk often? Do they have the same view about which decisions are right in which meeting? Do things run smoothly?

Relationships between the trustees are really worth working on too.

Prioritising

Like any organisation, like any meeting, it is really important to prioritise which things are important to spend time on and which are less important. Some less important things can take up a lot of time. Are there some things that we can leave altogether?

Using sub-groups

Quite a few Quaker trustee bodies use sub-groups. They might for example have three: finance, property, and policy & people. Then each trustee does not have to think in detail about all of the issues. They can rely on their colleagues to go into the detail on a topic, while the high-level decisions come to the whole trustee body for discernment.

Involving non-trustees

Some area meetings involve non-trustees on their sub-groups. For example, they might have a human resources professional who is happy to share some of their expertise, being on the people and policies sub-group. They can contribute without taking on the whole of the trustee role. Involving non-trustees can be a useful way of being inclusive, and it can draw people into the trustee body.

Delegating

Not all of the trustees' decisions need to be made by the trustees in full session. Some issues can be delegated to a sub-group. This might be for smaller levels of spending, or certain types of item, either delegated completely to the sub-group or to be confirmed at the full trustees meeting. Another way of delegating, of course, is to pay some people to do some of the work. (See a later section)

Using video conferences and email

Some bodies will use video conferences to enable them to get together a group of people to make some decisions without everybody having to travel every time. This also reduces the carbon footprint, saves travel time, and can lead to shorter meetings. It also enables people to join in who would otherwise be prevented or

discouraged. That does not replace meeting face to face, but you might use it periodically. Certainly communicating by email frequently enough also helps things move along. Governing documents can be amended to allow decisions by electronic means.

Working with another area meeting

Some area meetings are exploring whether they could do some things in common with another area meeting. They might try to develop policies together. They might use the same suppliers, or processes. Or they might just check with each other how they do things. That can make things much simpler rather than everybody having to reinvent the wheel. (See a later section.)

Policies for area meetings

This really is an area where we seem to be reinventing the wheel a lot. So one part of the Simpler Meetings Project is to source a range of model policies that can be adapted and then adopted by area meetings rather than everybody generating them independently. They will be added to the BYM website, and can be found from the area meeting trustees' page.

Questions to consider

- How are our relationships? With area meeting in session, with the area meeting clerk, and amongst trustees?
- Is there clarity about which decisions are for trustees, and which for area meeting in session?
- Are we prioritising effectively?
- Would it be useful to have sub-groups? And include non-trustees?
- Are we delegating effectively?
- Could we sometimes have teleconference or video meetings, or use email for small decisions?
- Could we co-operate with neighbouring area meetings more?
- Do we have good policies, and do we need to invent them ourselves?

7. Treasurers

A survey of area meeting treasurers revealed a lot of different ways of easing the burden on treasurers.

Dividing the role

When the role of treasurer becomes a burden, or it is hard to fill the role, it can help to think about those tasks which could be done by someone else. At the trustees' and treasurers' conference 2019 we came up with these lists. The first list shows things that the treasurer needs to be doing. But the second list shows a lot of things that do not need to be done by the treasurer. These can be delegated. For example, making the appeal does not have to be done by the treasurer. In fact, somebody else might actually be better at it.

By the Treasurer

- Monitoring overall finances
- Reporting to trustees/business meeting
- Preparing budgets
- Advising trustees/business meeting
- Preparing for major decisions
- Oversight of accounts process and financial compliance
- Presenting accounts
- Working with colleagues
- Communicating and fixing problems

Could be someone else

- Counting and banking cash
- Making decisions on purchases
- Making payments
- Keeping accounts / bookkeeping
- Producing management accounts
- Producing end of year accounts
- Making appeals
- Applying for Gift Aid
- Paying employees, dealing with HMRC
- Risk management,
- Insurance

This approach changes the role of the treasurer from being somebody who has to do everything. Instead, the treasurer can focus on what the financial information is telling us, the decisions that are needed, and running the finances well.

Importantly, it is often easier to find a treasurer when they do not have to be the bookkeeper as well.

Paid bookkeepers

A lot more meetings use paid bookkeepers than you might think. 14% of local meetings in Britain already have a paid bookkeeper – and not just the big meetings. Some have volunteer bookkeepers too. 20% of area meetings have their area meeting accounts done by a paid bookkeeper. In about 10% of area meetings, all the local meetings use a paid bookkeeper.

Other paid assistance

There are other parts of the process that people can be paid to do. These include accounts examining, payroll, pensions, processing contributions and Gift Aid.

Electronic banking

Reducing the handling of cash and the number of times you have to take cash to the bank can really help. Electronic banking has really grown in the last few years. You can have dual sign-off of payments, just like having two signatures on a cheque. Electronic banking also allows more people to have online access to information. So the local treasurer, the bookkeeper, the area meeting treasurer and the accountant can all have access to the same information.

Online accounts packages

Quite a few area meetings now have online accounting packages, which the local treasurers use, or a bookkeeper uses, or in a combination. Once established, this can save a lot of time and energy, clarifying things, chasing up details, reconciling, and at the end of the year.

Local meetings not having their own set of accounts

At least 12 local meetings in Britain do not have their own set of accounts at all. Their few transactions may be placed inside another meeting's or the area's accounts. Alternatively the meeting may just not use money themselves at all. They make donations straight to the area meeting or to Britain Yearly Meeting, and maybe another meeting makes the payment for their rented room and the occasional bill.

Delegating

Many trustee bodies have a sub-group specifically for financial matters. Some decisions could be delegated to that sub-group. Some can be handled by the local premises committee and others by the local business meeting, or delegated to a budget holder. Not everything has to come to the full body of trustees or to the treasurer for a decision. This can also work at local meeting level, with clear budgets delegated to a committee or a person. On the other hand, sometimes it is simpler to delegate smaller decisions to the local treasurer.

Gathering consistent information

Some area meetings have an end-of-year sheet on which the local meeting treasurer fills in all the information needed to complete the accounts as a whole for the area meeting. They found that that works really smoothly and well.

Using the same suppliers

Using the same suppliers can make things simpler. Examples include property maintenance, or using the same bookkeeper. This can be within an area meeting or between neighbouring areas. Some area meetings have decided to centralise their purchasing of utilities things, like gas, electricity and found that easier to operate, and made savings.

Meeting and sharing ideas

One of the other things that came back in the survey as really important is meeting together as a group of treasurers from time to time. This might be once a year or every six months, having some cake and coffee, and informally talking over issues that are common to the group. This can smooth things along a lot.

Fewer meeting houses

Those meetings that do not have a meeting house have much less pressure on their treasurer. It greatly reduces the transactions, and the number and complexity of decisions that are needed. Of all the ways of reducing the burden on role-holders, this probably has the greatest effect. See the section on Meeting Houses Alternatives.

So there are lots of different ways that meetings have found to make the role of the treasurer less of a burden.

Questions to consider:

- Would it make it easier to be a treasurer, or find a treasurer, if we removed some tasks that do not need to be done by the treasurer themselves?
- Should we consider having a paid bookkeeper?
- Are there other tasks that could be done by someone who is not the treasurer, or reduced by doing things differently?
- Should we use online banking (or use it more), and/or an online accounts package?
- Could any of our small meetings avoid having their own set of accounts?
- Could we simplify some processes by delegating some decisions?
- Would it help if we used some of the same suppliers as our neighbours?
- Shall we get together with neighbours from time to time, to swap ideas.
- Are there meetings whose meeting house is a heavy burden? Would an alternative be better?

8. Small meetings – go to section 16

Small meetings are now covered in section 15. This has been extended to cover a wider range of topics than the video. You may want to consider some of topics 9 to 15 first.

(This heading is just here so the rest of the numbering matches the videos!)

9. Grouping meetings differently

Within existing Quaker structures, there are several combinations that can be used.

Pair a large and a small meeting

Both can benefit from working together, for example having joint socials, or learning events, or sharing some role-holders.

Link worshipping groups with local meetings

It can be very helpful for a worshipping group to feel a part of a local meeting, with both contributing and gaining.

A cluster of local meetings

Some larger area meetings group their local meetings into clusters of three or four. The cluster does some things together, like learning activities or socials, or some of their witness in the world, or to consider concerns.

Combine two or three meetings with a single business meeting

If there are two or three small local meetings, they might come together with a single business meeting. Technically, they would become a single local meeting, while retaining their meetings for worship in public in different places. This approach is actually quite similar to what already happens in some larger meetings, where they have meetings at different times in the same place – for example on Sunday and Wednesday. There are two meetings for worship with one business meeting. This could enable small meetings to continue worshipping in public where they wish, without trying to maintain all of the local meeting structure and roles on their own.

Questions to consider:

- Are there pairs of meetings that could help one another?
- Are worshipping groups supported by being part of a local meeting?
- Could we form a cluster of local meetings, and do some things together, like learning, socials, witness or to consider concerns?
- Would it help some small meetings if they came together with a single business meeting, while still meeting in their current locations?

10. Meetings changing

Meetings around the country are constantly changing – they ebb and flow. Here are several changes you might be involved in, each with its own opportunities for new life.

A **growing meeting** can be exciting, as well as a chance to re-think how the meeting needs to run, now it is larger.

Opening a new meeting in a new place can be energising. Perhaps it will be a better match for where the current worshippers live and travel from, and be more part of their community. Perhaps there is a new population, and people want to draw in new Friends.

Others are looking at **increasing the number of meetings** that take place at their existing meeting place. They might be at different times of day, or on different days. The key seems to be to experiment, see which work, trying it for a period and then reviewing.

Reducing the scale of a meeting's activities can be a sensible response to reduced numbers. This might involve fewer meetings for worship, or adjusting expectations of what can be done or how it is done. It might need a fresh look at which roles are needed now. This can require some focus on what is essential, and what is not. Essentials are addressed in the section on Small Meetings.

Some are in the stage of **recognising a point is coming** when their local meeting may be laid down, but not yet. The meeting may need some particular support in this phase.

Others are considering or have decided on **laying down a meeting**, with its members and attenders joining another meeting and its community. This can be a time of sadness, and also a step onto a new path and new discoveries.

Questions to consider:

- Are we in a new phase, where we should re-assess how often we meet, and what we try to achieve?
- Should we look again at how we do things, and what roles are needed, to match our size?
- Could we meet in a new place, to respond to where our current worshippers live, and where there is a population we could reach?
- Are we approaching a stage where we should be preparing for laying down our meeting? Do we need any support with this phase?

11. Property management

If you ask Friends what tends to take up the most time and energy, and what are some of the biggest burdens, very often the answer is “our properties”. Some of them do generate very useful income for us, or serve us very well, while some are absorbing our money and draining our time and energy. So getting the balance right is really important. There are many ways being used by area meetings to make life easier on premises.

On the BYM website

A good place to start is the property advice page on the BYM website <https://www.quaker.org.uk/property>. The Property Guidance Sheets there cover many topics. There is also the new Meeting House Handbook Template, with useful information set out in a way that each meeting house can use. You can also join an email group there, to seek advice from colleagues all around Britain.

Sharing suppliers

It can be hard for an individual premises committee to find good tradespeople. In some areas they use trusted traders to make it easier to for local meetings. These can be coordinated by an individual, working for the meeting or for a company. Another good method is for meetings to share which traders they use and provide good value. Often we are working in our own little boxes and we have traders that we want to work with. But perhaps we don't let our neighbours or those further afield know about the jewels we have found.

Some area meetings do this on a whole area basis. For example, they might use the same electrician to inspect all their properties, or the same company to maintain fire extinguishers. This will rather depend on the geography, and does not always work for every kind of trade – you might want a local plumber. But it can make life a lot easier for some tasks.

A property management service

Taking it a step further, some area meetings are engaging a comprehensive property management service for some functions. They can get reliable tradespeople, and the expertise of somebody to oversee the work. That can relieve local Friends from a task which can be quite a burden.

A really good example of this has been Norfolk and Waveney Area Meeting piloting working with the Churches Conservation Trust. This is a specialist organisation focused on historic buildings. The area meeting trustees arranged a contract so that each meeting house gets an annual visit. This includes a series of checks, and some planned maintenance like gutters, drains and clearing undergrowth. They also have a good discussion with the premises committee, or whoever the relevant people are, about further pieces of work that might need to be done. They have a pool of reliable tradespeople they work with, and as an organisation their team is really focused on historic buildings and faith communities. The costs is around £1,500 for a typical meeting house, plus a percentage to arrange and supervise

extra projects their tradespeople deliver. The reports from Norfolk and Waveney are very positive. They are sure the work gets done to protect their buildings, and Friends do not have to spend as much time and energy working out what to do. You can learn more here: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/examples/managing-listed-buildings-help-1>

Extending the role of Quaker property trusts

There are quite a few Quaker property trusts around the country. There is real scope for some of those to extend their role. They could perhaps cover a wider range of meeting houses than they do at the moment. Some areas might combine several small property trusts into one, or work together with the same trustees or staff, so they have a greater core.

Some Quaker property trusts are looking to expand their remit from just owning and overseeing property into practical support, for example managing utilities in common or managing lettings. There is also scope for becoming an employer of staff for a larger range of meetings and helping with administration and compliance.

Increasing income

It may be fruitful to work together to increase the income from certain meeting houses in an area. This could then pay for support for others, and reduce the volunteers' workload.

Having fewer meeting houses

Of all the ways of reducing the burden on role-holders, having fewer meeting houses probably has the greatest effect. It can liberate energy for other aspects of our Quaker lives. Over a quarter of meetings in Britain run without a meeting house. See the section on Meeting Houses - Alternatives.

Questions to consider:

- Are we making good use of the resources on the BYM website about property, and the property email group?
- Would it help to share suppliers with other meetings around us?
- Would it be good to use a property management company for some functions?
- Could we usefully extend the role of a property trust, to cover a wider area, or provide a greater range of functions, to support out meetings?
- Are there meetings whose meeting house is a heavy burden? Would an alternative be better? (See also Meeting Houses – Alternatives)

12. Meeting houses – alternatives

Some of our meeting houses serve us really well. They are in the right location, they speak to the world about us, or they bring in some money, or they provide a really good community function. Hopefully a meeting house fulfils several of those.

However, we know that some of them just do not serve us so well. Around the country, Friends are doing a number of different things in response:

- Moving to a more useful place, selling one and buying another
- Using their meeting houses for a social purpose and really focusing on that as the purpose for the building
- Meeting in a smaller room in their existing building and reusing the large space for another purpose
- Selling the meeting house and renting a room that suits them really well
- Meeting in their own homes
- You could simply meet in a barn, like we used to. At a conference recently someone said “Actually, we *do* meet in a barn”!

Experience of a small meeting

“I went to a small local meeting recently, in an Arts Centre. It was a really interesting experience. I arrived a little early, and after they unlocked the door, we got some chairs out. We put a table in the circle and a few books. We put a table on one side with some leaflets and books that might be of interest. And we worshiped. Afterwards we had a good chat, then the chairs went away and that was it. They didn't have to think about all those other things that go with having a building. In terms of simplicity, that is really big.”

How many meetings meet without a meeting house?

126 meetings in Britain Yearly Meeting meet without a meeting house. That is 26% of the 475. Many of them are thriving.

How do meetings without a meeting house find it simpler?

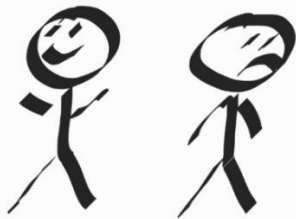
A quarter of Britain's meetings do not have people focusing on maintenance or lettings. They have fewer decisions to make. Nobody manages or supports a warden. The load on the treasurer is dramatically reduced, plus the load on trustees. Of course, using someone else's space does sometimes bring constraints. The meeting may also need to pay more attention to being known, and to building a sense of identity. There are pros and cons to be weighed up, and it needs careful consideration. It is probably the biggest way to simplify what a meeting has to do.

What questions might Friends ask if unsure about their meeting house?

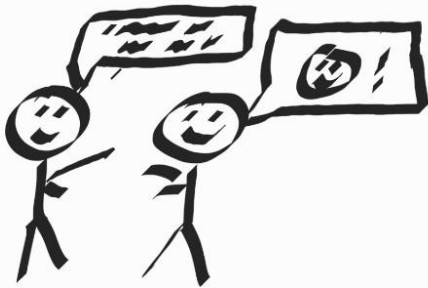
- Is this meeting house doing God's work? Is it doing good?
- Is it an asset, or is it really a liability?
- What else could Quakers do with the time and money we are putting into this building?
- What could we learn from the 126 local meetings in Britain who do not have a meeting house?
- Are we really called to be "The Religious Society of Community Centres and Historic Buildings"?
- What would George Fox make of all these historic buildings?
- Where would Jesus be?
- Friends, where would be a good place for us to meet?

13. Area meetings working together and structural change

Some area meetings are confident their current arrangement is just what they need. Others are asking “Are we really sustainable in our current form? Is this still the best arrangement for us? How could we work with our neighbours?” There are many ways area meetings can work together. Some involve being helpful neighbours, or co-operating. Some involve one of several forms of structural change. These ideas and sketches can help you see what is possible.

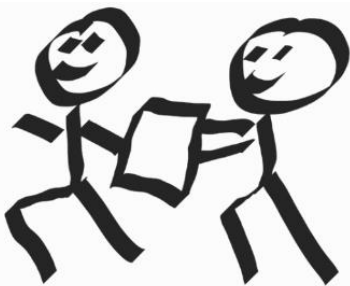


It is all too easy for two area meetings to ignore one another. Especially when one seems to be having trouble.



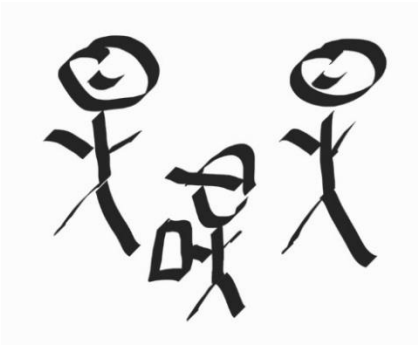
Offering each other advice and support

This could include providing buddies for new role-holders, and getting together to share problems and solutions.



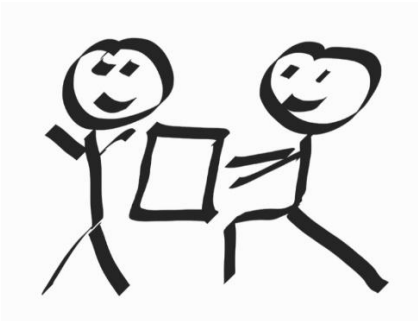
Doing things together

This could include some shared learning events, and sharing a few role-holders like registering officers or safeguarding co-ordinators. Areas could use the same processes or solutions to common problems.



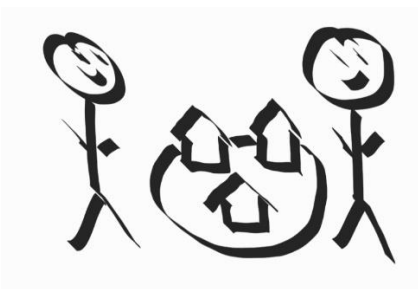
Using the same suppliers

For example tradespeople, a bookkeeper, or a property organisation.

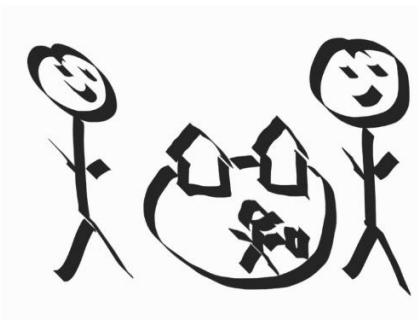


One area meeting does something for the other

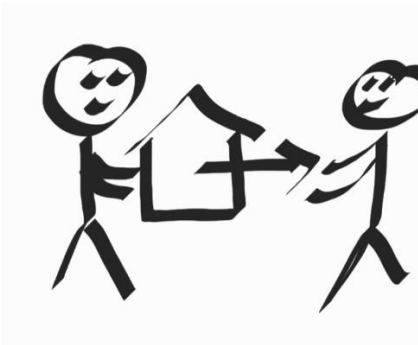
For example, one area meeting could employ staff who work for another, such as an administrator. They could cover several functions the other one needs doing too. Or it could avoid one area being an employer at all, perhaps paying a little for this reduced role.



A common property trust takes responsibility for properties across several area meetings, reducing duplication and enabling common solutions.



A common property trust also provides services like managing utilities, some maintenance aspects, lettings, bookkeeping or employing staff.



One or two local meetings switch area

Some local meetings may not fit well within an area's geographical boundaries. It might be better if one or two local meetings move into another area. All may gain from a more useful geography.



Merge two area meetings

– 1 charity, 1 AM, 1 trustees

Two area meetings could combine into a single one, and do all of their business as a single entity. There are quite a few conversations around the country gently going on about the possibility of doing this.



Disperse an area meeting

– 1 less charity, AM and trustees

An area meeting could lay itself down, and disperse its local meetings into the neighbouring area meetings.



Trustees in common

- 2 charities, 2 AMs, 1 trustees

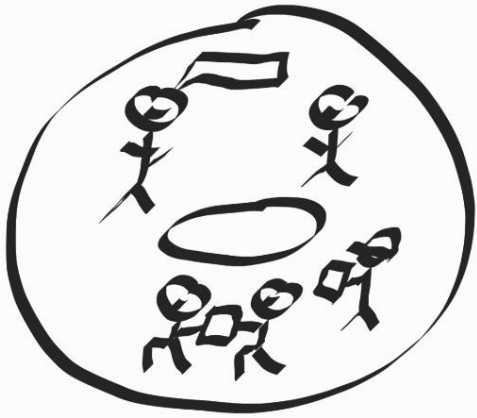
Two area meetings could have a common set of trustees, playing this role for both area meetings. They could have back-to-back meetings, or be given the powers to be responsible for both organisations in the one meeting. This could be an interim solution, while other options are being explored.



A single larger charity

- 1 charity, several AMs, 1 trustees

Several area meetings could have a single charity that goes around all of them. This would have a single body of trustees, covering all of the area meetings. Each area meeting could continue much as now, holding area meetings in session and doing many of their appointments, discernment, social and learning activities in the current format. This is likely to involve area meetings trusting their trustees more, and probably holding one or more large meetings of Friends per year for big decisions and annual activities.



Combinations

Some of these ways can be done together.

Some look different, and easier for trustees, if people are paid to provide some support as well.

The Simpler Meetings project can help area meetings considering these kinds of changes. The project is keen to transfer learning from one area to help others.

Questions to consider:

- Could we co-operate more with our neighbouring area meetings?
- Would it help to get to know one another first?
- Could we offer reciprocal advice and support, or do some things together?
- Are there ways of co-operating with staff, or adjusting how our property trusts work?
- Should we consider one of the possible structural changes?
- Would it help to talk this through with people outside our area(s), or the simpler meetings project manager?

14. Paying people for some tasks

There seem to be some jobs we are quite happy to pay someone to do. We have paid wardens, cleaners and gardeners, and we pay for someone to fix the boiler, or clear the gutters. But there are some tasks that we rarely pay people to do. We could ask:

- Would it really be so bad to pay people for some other functions?
- Which tasks could other people do, so Friends can spend more time doing what only Friends can do?

Administrators

Some area meetings have a part-time administrator. This might be very part-time, say 10 hours a month. An administrator could deal with membership records and transfers, contact lists and GDPR. They might do Gift Aid processing, arrange insurance, or type up agendas and distribute papers – things that otherwise land on the clerk, or treasurer, or clerk to trustees.

Bookkeepers

In the Treasurers section, you can read more about the fact that 14% of local meetings already have a paid bookkeeper, and how this changes the treasurer role.

Managing lettings and buildings

Some meetings pay people to manage the meeting house lettings, rather than a warden. Some have a caretaker instead of a warden. Some use a residential lettings agent for investment properties, or to do the property maintenance – see the section on Property Management.

Employees can work for more than one area meeting

By the time somebody has learned how to handle things for Quakers in one area meeting, they could usefully do that for another. This could save learning, share good practice, and avoid the second area meeting being an employer, with everything that comes with that.

Extending a warden's role

Some places have a warden who has a more extended role, providing a wider set of functions across the area meeting.

Independent Contractors

Some area meetings use independent contractors rather than employees for some functions. That can help to reduce some of the risks of employing staff.

BYM Employers Resource

On the Britain Yearly Meeting website at www.quaker.org.uk/employers there is an Employers Resource. It has a set of standard policies that area meetings can adopt, a set of standard terms and conditions for employees, and guidance on a range of

topics. Using reliable policies and procedures can save a great deal of time and effort.

Local development workers

Britain Yearly Meeting has been piloting a number of local development workers, helping meetings across a group of area meetings with the things that matter most to them. The number is set to expand, to put a worker in reach of every meeting. See www.quaker.org.uk/MCS

Youth workers and children's workers

Britain Yearly Meeting's Children and Young People's Team are experimenting with paid youth workers in two parts of the country. They are also helping meetings who want to have a paid children's worker.

Questions to consider:

- Would it really be so bad to pay people for some other functions?
- Which tasks could other people do, so Friends can spend more time doing what only Friends can do?
- Should we consider having a paid bookkeeper, or some administrator time?
- Could we do this at the area meeting level, or share with a neighbour, extend a warden's role, or use an independent contractor?
- Would it help to use the BYM Employment Resource to have reliable and standard policies and procedures?
- Could we benefit from a Local Development Worker?
- Could we benefit from a paid youth work worker, or someone to help with children?

15. How can we using digital methods to simplify?

Email lists are a very straightforward way of communicating with a large group of people. Email is now a very widely used technology.

'Printing buddies' can be very useful, where one Friend prints things off for somebody who is not able to access emails.

Social media is obviously a big thing for us going forwards. This has been an explosion for many of the age groups that we're wanting to attract into our meetings. Social media is also increasingly being used by older people too. So focusing on social media is really important.

Electronic banking is proving very useful for many treasurers. It helps them cut down on some of the work. In particular it can enable hirers or contributors to make payments swiftly and easily. This reduces time spent chasing up payments or resolving errors and queries. Two people can sign off payments, just like two signatures on a cheque. Electronic banking also enables several people to have access to bank statements, in real time – like a treasurer, assistant treasurer and bookkeeper or accountant.

Online accounts packages are increasingly being used. These enable people to enter transactions or view information, remotely.

Video meetings are probably the most popular topic in talks about simplifying around the country. They enable you to have a video conference for committees and other meetings. The technology has improved considerably now. Many people have phones, tablets and PCs able to join a video call. Having a video meeting can save a lot of travel time and money, reduce your carbon footprint, and allow more people to join the conversation – because they can fit the meeting into their lives, or they would not need to travel.

Using video calls for worship is also developing. Woodbrooke has held an online meeting for worship for some years. Friends have been experimenting in other settings too. It can enable people to join worship wherever they are, whether prevented by ill-health or travel. With good discipline and a little preparation, worshipping with a video connection can be calm and spirit filled – just like a typical meeting for worship.

Questions to consider:

- Are we using email as a convenient and widely used communication method?
- Are there people who would benefit from a printing buddy, if they are not email users?
- Could we be using social media more, internally and externally?

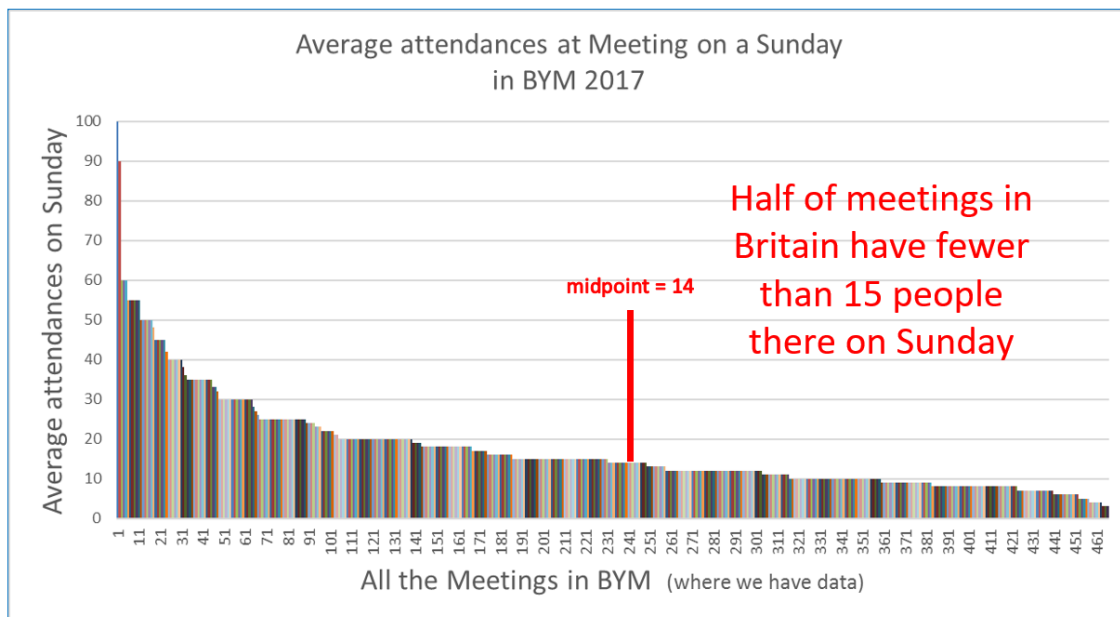
- Would using online banking and/or an online accounts package simplify the load on our treasurers?
- Could we use video meetings, to save travel time and cost, reduce our carbon footprint, and include people who could not join the meeting otherwise.
- Could we consider using video connections to enable people to join meeting for worship?

16. Small local meetings

This section brings together many of the ideas and possibilities in earlier sections, and focuses on small meetings. Many of the ideas come from an area meeting which wanted to think through how its small meetings could operate well.

How many small meetings are there?

Half of the local meetings in Britain have fewer than 15 people at meeting for worship on a Sunday. How can we adapt to this? What can we learn from them?



Permission

We have a lot more permission to do things differently than some Quakers think. A lot of what is contained in *Quaker Faith & Practice* is advisory, rather than being a set of firm rules. There are lots of **possibilities**, and plenty of **permission**.

One person said this in a discussion about simpler meetings: "I am often told that this or that is the Quaker way, but other than what is in Quaker Faith & Practice, it mostly this turns out to be just the preference of the person I am talking to, and often contradicts what the last person said. I think there is loads of scope for us to try different approaches, and every time I have a good idea someone tells me either that it is recommended in *Qf&p* or that it is something lots of other meetings are doing."

So for example *Qf&p* 4.33 begins "Local meetings differ greatly in size. Thus the scope of work undertaken will vary but every local meeting will give due respect to Quaker values, testimonies and practice and will provide regular opportunities for public worship."

As another Friend said recently: "There is not one Quaker way but many, while there are underlying Quaker principles".

Many of the sections in Quaker Faith & Practice give quite a lot of scope for variation. 4.33 goes on “The following responsibilities need to be considered by every local meeting although some of them may best be fulfilled in conjunction with another local meeting, or through the area meeting”.

Do small meetings have to do everything?

Here are four key things to remember, particularly for small meetings:

- You don't have to do everything.
- You don't have to do everything yourselves, on your own.
- You don't have to do things the way a larger meeting or your last meeting does things.
- You don't have to have lots of roles – many things can be worked out by talking together to sort out the essentials.

What is *essential*, to be a local meeting?

There seem to be six key things:

- Meeting for Worship that is open to the public,
- Being known and found – publicised, visible and easily found on the ground,
- Being a community – welcoming, doing, learning and caring together,
- Being connected to other Quakers – through area and neighbouring meetings, and wider networks,
- Having a clerk or a convener – a clerk is not essential, though business meetings do need to be clerked,
- Holding business meetings with the Quaker method, to make corporate decisions – though this does not have to be every month, or even three months.

Everything else can be worked out, locally and with your area meeting and neighbouring local meetings. Other appointments “may be found helpful” (4.36), and there can be “Friends to share these responsibilities” (4.35).

Some things are not *essential*

Notice that you do not always have to have a treasurer. Some small meetings do not use money themselves at all. Perhaps they have their rent paid by another meeting or area meeting, or they use a free venue. Friends can make their contributions direct to area meeting. Some meetings have their few transactions recorded within the accounts of another meeting (area or local) and avoid needing a treasurer. Perhaps you could share a treasurer, which is easier if someone else does the bookkeeping.

Another surprising possibility is to have one business meeting which covers two or three small public meetings for worship. Technically, this makes them a single local meeting, with two or three venues. This is rather like a larger meeting which has a meeting on Sunday and one on Wednesday - all part of the one local meeting. The Recording Clerk's Office has confirmed that yes, this is possible! This is more likely to work where there are fewer meeting houses, and meetings are relatively close.

Perhaps the biggest way in which small meetings can simplify things is to meet without a meeting house. Over a quarter of our local meetings in Britain Yearly Meeting do this, in a whole variety of buildings, and many are thriving. They do not need to have people focusing on maintenance or lettings; there are fewer decisions to be made; nobody manages or supports a warden; and the treasurer's load is dramatically reduced. Of course, using someone else's space does sometimes bring constraints. The meeting may also need to pay more attention to being known, and building a sense of identity. Since 126 local meetings in Britain meet without a meeting house, maybe you could find a meeting space that works well for you.

There are lots of **possibilities** that small meetings could consider, and ways that area meeting and neighbouring meetings can help. Take a look at the questions on the next few pages. To help us think about this, there is a list of ways the area meeting and larger meetings could help, together with a list of challenges that may face local meetings.

Which of these might be valuable for your small meeting?

Overall

- Can we accept that small meetings don't have to do everything the way a large or medium sized meeting does? Or the way my last meeting did things?
- Shall we focus on the essentials?
 - Public meeting for worship
 - Being known and found
 - Being a community
 - Being connected to other Quakers
 - Having a clerk or a convenor
 - Taking decisions using the Quaker business method
- Are we caring for the spiritual life of our meeting, along with the practical side?
- Would it help if we had a shared piece of witness, to give us a common purpose?
- Shall we re-frame the situation with positives (instead of doom and gloom)?
- Are there some things we cannot do ourselves or alone? Eg running special events or providing representatives on other groups. There may be alternatives.

When and where we meet

- Could we try experimenting with meeting at a different time or place?
- Should we hold fewer Meetings for Worship eg twice a month? Or more often?
- How about holding house meetings? eg once a month, or two months. These could be combined with eating meetings and business meetings.

With other meetings

- Can we handle some topics jointly with another local meeting, or two? Eg learning, discussions, socials, some roles, buddies, suppliers?
- Could we pair up with a small meeting, and meet on alternate Sundays?
- Could we pair up with a larger meeting, and do some things together?
- Would it help to have Friends come from other meetings, as inter-visitations?
- Could we ask for and accept help from other meetings and area meeting?
- Could we undertake our witness in the world with other faith groups?

Roles

- Could we match tasks to people's skills and availability, instead of fitting people into fixed roles which each have a long list of set tasks?
- Can we reduce the number of roles to be filled? Do they all need doing? Do they need doing this way? Are there some tasks where people would pitch in where needed, less formally?
- Could a role be shared? Or rotated?
- Could we have a convenor not clerk, and rotate the clerking of business meetings.
- Could we ask a team of three to cover the main functions between them?
- Might we move to a more collective approach to eldership and oversight? Variations include joining roles, corporate E&O, corporate oversight, loops, circles or groups.
- Could we appoint people for one year?
- Could we re-appoint people to roles after they have had a triennium break?
- Is there an element that could be done by someone who is paid? eg some property matters, or lettings.

Communicating

- Could we use a telephone tree or an email tree, to help connectivity? Or an email newsletter or a round-robin email?
- Could we have printing buddies, to help people who don't use emails?
- Shall we sometimes use video calls? Or telephone conference calls? They often save time, travel costs, carbon emissions, and include people who cannot travel.
- Can we use online methods for learning and building community?
- Could we use video calls to enable joining worship at a distance or when unwell?

Making decisions

- Are there some discussions or small decisions that could happen informally, outside the business meeting?
- Could we trust individuals, or pairs, to make small decisions and take actions on some things, instead of bringing everything to a business meeting?
- Could we hold meeting for worship for business less frequently – perhaps every three months, adding ones when needed? Some schedule just one per year.

Scaling down our organising

- Can we scale down some aspects, to match our numbers?
- Would a few key books and leaflets be read more than a library that is a burden?
- Do we really need lots of rotas? Will people step in for what is really necessary?
- Could one person cover several duties on Sunday week?

Doing money differently

- Would it help to have a paid bookkeeper, locally or for the area?
- Could we place a meeting's finances within a larger meeting's accounts, or the area meeting's, avoiding the need for a treasurer and separate accounting?
- Can we reduce or avoid using cash, using online banking and direct debits?
- Can we avoid using money at all? Eg another meeting pays a few bills; contributions go direct to AM; charity collections go direct to the charity?

Buildings

- Where would be a good place for us to meet?
- Could we meet without a meeting house - like over ¼ of local meetings in Britain? No maintenance, no lettings, fewer decisions, no-one to manage, and much less work for a treasurer. Can we find out how others manage it and yet thrive?
- Can we use our meeting house for another main purpose, and use the rent?
- Could we pay an organisation for some property management and maintenance?

Joining another meeting

- Could we join two or three small meetings into one local meeting, with a single business meeting, while holding meetings for worship in different places?
- Should we consider whether it is right to lay down (close) our meeting here, and join up with others?

What can Area Meeting and other local meetings do to help?

Overall

- Can we accept that small meetings don't have to do everything the way a large or medium sized meeting does?
- Can we help small meetings to focus on the essentials?
- Do we recognise the strengths and joys of small meetings?

Doing things together

- Can we handle some topics jointly? Eg learning, discussions, socials, some roles, buddies, suppliers.
- Would it help to have clusters of local meetings & worshipping groups for these?
- Could meetings pair up? Small with small; or small with larger.
- Could we appoint shared roles between meetings? Eg making appointments from larger meetings, who include the smaller meeting in their considerations.
- Could we arrange inter-visitations? Eg Once a year other local meetings send Friends to attend MfW at the small local meeting. Eg Arrange inter-visitation between several meetings monthly, with a small presence left in each meeting.
- Could several small meetings become one local meeting with a single business meeting, while holding several meetings for worship in different places.
- Could we organise premises maintenance across several meeting houses, with the same approaches and finding tradespeople from the same source?
- Would it help to have a paid bookkeeper for some meetings or the area?
- Could we place a meeting's finances within a larger meeting's accounts, or the area meeting's, avoiding the need for a treasurer and separate accounting?
- Can we help a meeting avoid using money at all? Eg another meeting pays a few bills; contributions go direct to AM; charity collections go direct to the charity.
- How do we respond when asked for help?

Adjusting expectations

- Are we open to different ways of filling roles, or doing tasks?
- Shall we excuse small meetings from hosting area events?
- Could we have a representative at area meeting covering two small local meetings?
- Should we hold meetings like elders & overseers at the same event as area meeting, reducing travel and events?
- Can we make greater use of video calls and telephone conference calls? They often save time, travel costs, carbon emissions, and include people more easily.
- Could we help meetings to use video calls to include people in meeting for worship?

- Do our models of eldership or oversight work well for small meetings?
- Can we reduce what must be done by each local meeting, by sharing, grouping, agreeing and deleting?
- Shall we clarify expectations between area and local meetings, with a memorandum of understanding, which reflects different circumstances?

Some particular challenges for small meetings

It can help to recognise that small meetings may find some things more difficult:

- Maintaining and growing a strong shared spiritual life outside meetings for worship and business.
- Keeping good communications between ourselves; some do not drive or have computers, or live a long way away.
- Passing on Quaker ethos and methods when there are few members acting as role models and patterns, in both meetings for worship and business.
- Filling roles within local meeting e.g. treasurer or clerk, and fulfilling the responsibility for eldership and oversight, also for such things as funerals, safeguarding, data protection, possibly children attending, dealing with postal communications from Britain Yearly Meeting and email from within area meeting.
- Straightforward but important responsibilities like opening premises and preparing the room for Meeting.
- Practical tasks like cleaning, maintenance, upkeep of grounds.
- Keeping good links with area meeting and trustees so as to be kept up to date with activities and responsibilities.
- Preparing reports for trustees and area meeting.
- Maintaining a presence at area groups such as nominations, conflict resolution, contributing time and skills to the area.
- Travelling long distances to area meetings, to Quaker events and to support other meetings.
- Travelling on Sundays: poor public transport and few able to give lifts.
- Holding area meeting, and annual events such as Quaker Week.
- Caring for people who are unwell or going through a crisis: a small meeting can be affected more by peaks and troughs.
- Losing a key role-holder, perhaps moving away or to ill-health, can leave a bigger gap.

17. End piece

Simplicity is about stripping away the inessentials, to focus on what matters most.

No-one is suggesting you should do all the ideas suggested here.

Choose those that seem to have merit for your circumstances, and address the bigger pressures on your worshipping community.

Try some, experiment and review.

And when you find things that work, tell your neighbours.

And please tell the Simpler Meetings project manager, Jonathan Carmichael,
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