



Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers) in Britain

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations: Towards a faith-based understanding of gender diversity

Spoken introduction given to Meeting for Sufferings, 6 December 2025

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

John Woolman, 1762.Qf&p, 26.61

The standing committee of BYM that is the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, was asked nearly a year ago to discern how the Quaker way that is embodied in Minute 31 of YM 2021 could be supported and realised. What you have before you is about 10 months' work amongst Friends to arrive at a draft guidance, based on our faith witness, that reflects, we hope, our Quaker integrity (in both senses of that word, i.e. cohesion and fidelity.)

Religious faith does not always lead to right action, but it is used by all of us to justify opinions of right and wrong, as informed by our lived experience.

Yet human experience is subject to the social context of our times, including the barrage of news and unbridled media trends that raise sensitivities, fear, anger and anxiety across many age groups, especially the under 30's who are most exposed to relentless exploitation and abuse. In what some social commentators describe as an age of moral decay, our ambition as a spiritual people to build a fairer world, justice for all, is a high-minded ideal that is rightly located in a faith that inspires social action.

QCCIR had to consider what contribution liberal Quaker faith and practice can make to the progressive life experience of its own adherents. Whilst we discerned that we needed to remain anchored in the dissenting Christian heritage that spawned our practices and testimony, we acknowledged fully that, as a YM, we now need to

express our faith and practice in terms of an ethic that is not confined to Christian Quaker experience.

We are conscious of the diversity of religious beliefs and spiritual experiences amongst us that is itself a product of our Quaker heritage. There is a richness in the kaleidoscope of our faith perspectives that, through our shared discipline, can hold us together in extraordinary, spirit-led, gathered unity. This precious gift is not exclusive to this or that faction but is the source of a shared refuge of peace and community available to everyone.

The quality of any lived spirituality is that it can lift us out of the mundane and give us a different, one might say 'higher' vision of hope, kindness and well-being. There is much to be angry about in the world around us and we can allow a destructive rage to be fed by uncontrolled sources of complex facts and misinformation. Frustration and fear are part of our human condition and it is not easy to find the courage to contain our anger and live according to our faith testimony as a people of peace. As a YM, we may need to be radically counter-cultural in our own faith witness against a corrupted expression of religious faith and indeed a supposed righteous Christian heritage that lures so many into an ugly rhetoric of prejudice, injustice and oppression.

It is almost existential and of the essence of Quakerism, that we express our faith in terms of the spiritual experience it offers to everyone to rise above the trauma, noise and anger of the human condition – an offer of something richer, sustainable and more wholesome, that is reflected in the Advice "Seek to know one another in the things which are eternal...."

QCCIR engages constantly, as central to its role, in exchanges and narratives of faith identity with those with whom we often disagree, sometimes personally and often corporately as one faith body amongst many. We do not preach that we should be all the same, nor that one's own identity be swallowed up by that of another, but we recognise that our spiritual health lies in relationship. We remain in the room in relational belonging, so that the potential for love is not lost.

So, we asked ourselves what can we say, in faithful upholding of our YM Minute on subject matter that is, out there in the world, socially, culturally and politically deeply controversial, and shown to be divisive and harmful?

Throughout our history as a church movement, there have been divergent opinions on elements of our practices that have come close to threatening our identity. We are human first, but we can aspire towards higher ideals that sometimes seem beyond us in the moment, but which we can hold on to as leading into a sense of community fulfilment and reassuring peace in our own hearts.

In this sense, the guidance before you talks about the leadings of the Spirit in the search for kinder ground. It is all we can ask of each other. The guidance concludes

with some ways in which we can mine our hearts for how we put our long-held Quaker testimony into action in our own lives and meetings.

Through *Sufferings*, QCCIR offers Quakers in Britain a faith-grounded guide on love as the first motion, that is confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from anywhere the heart stands in perfect sincerity.

Elaine Green

Towards a paper on gender diversity in our church: *Our differences are a blessing*

Our work benefits when it is carried on by people who bring with them a range of lived experiences and spiritual insights. (Epistle of Britain Yearly Meeting 2024)

Preamble

This document is for all Quakers in Britain who are exhorted, through our church government, to respect and take account in the way they live of the discerned conclusions of our Yearly Meeting in session. Minute BYM/2021/31, reproduced in the body of the guidance, is a declared commitment to love and respect each other across our community, irrespective of our diversity of theology and belief.

The Yearly Meeting will recognise that this document, offered for guidance and continued discussion amongst Friends, is unlikely to remain confidential to the Quaker community in Britain. It is most likely to reach the public square, where people of all faiths and none communicate. In particular, it may be shared with our partner churches. In such a context, it needs to carry authority on behalf of Quakers in Britain in its exposition of a subject of faith commitment that is not yet universally socially settled or uncontroversial.

In setting out any faith position that reflects more than opinion, there is strength in referencing our faith tradition that is deeply rooted in western Christianity. We explain our faith conviction to ourselves and others more fluently when we reflect the source of our words and liturgy. This guidance necessarily draws heavily on our Christian heritage, as the origination of our form of worship, church government and testimony. It is hoped that the spiritual and moral insights anchored in the Christian scriptural citations that support this guidance speak authentically to all Quakers, howsoever they understand the foundation of their personal faith.

Section 1 Our Yearly Meeting Commitment

1. The Religious Society of Friends in Britain is the chosen or home faith community for many people who are LGBTQIA+¹. As a result of societal and systemic oppression, the life experiences of LGBTQIA+ people can be complex and stressful. All queer and trans people are welcome to find a faith home within the community of Quakers in Britain, whose discipline requires that we,

“Respect the wide diversity among us in our lives and relationships. Refrain from making prejudiced judgments about the life journeys of others. Do you

¹ LGBTQIA+ is generally explained as *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual*. The “plus” represents other sexual identities.

foster the spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness which our discipleship asks of us? Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God." (Britain Yearly Meeting, *Advices and Queries* 22)

2. In gathered worship, our Yearly Meeting has acknowledged that, in becoming a more inclusive faith body, Friends were still striving fully to respect gender diversity. Minute 31 of Britain Yearly Meeting 2021 reads:

"Our testimony of equality stems from the religious conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth, that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God. In 2003, Meeting for Sufferings responded to the Gender Recognition Bill, based on our testimony of equality, and encouraged Quaker Life Central Committee to promote the pastoral care of transgender people, their families, spouses and children, their friends and meetings. In 2015 the Tabular Statement started to record 'Other' as well as men and women as one step to acknowledging the diversity among us. More recently, following consideration of trans and nonbinary inclusion in a number of meetings, Quaker Life drafted an initial statement in 2018, inviting all Quakers in Britain to discuss and reflect together on gender diversity. These discussions and reflections have not always been easy. Our consideration has coincided with wider consideration of legislation reform in Britain, and the associated conflict has been reflected among Friends in our yearly meeting. We recognise that we need to keep listening and searching together.

In an atmosphere of trust, we need to listen, to share our journeys, in silent worship, and in prayer. We all have human gifts and friendship to offer. We need to rejoice in the things that make us different, not be ashamed or excluded. Our differences are a blessing, and we must all work to ensure that the support is there in each meeting to allow this blessing to bear fruit. We seek to provide places of worship and community that are welcoming and supportive to trans and nonbinary people who want to be among us. Belonging is more than fitting in. With glad hearts we acknowledge and affirm the trans and gender diverse Friends in our Quaker communities, and express appreciation for the contribution and gifts that they bring to our meetings, which are communities made up of people with a diverse range of gender expressions. The end of our travelling is for differences not to divide us. We rejoice in recognising God's creation in one another. This is what love requires of us."

3. For some, the implications of this discerned leading remains confusing and troubling; our faithful discernment process, however patient and disciplined, demands more prayerful support from and for us all in order to fulfil the Yearly Meeting's commitment.

4. This paper is an endorsement of the requirement placed upon us to keep listening and searching for God's truth and unity together. It may serve as a guide, to support Friends in building our peaceable relationships within our community that, through faith and love, bridge the differences that we may experience between us. It is available for Friends to share with other churches and faith groups as a way of explaining to others the religious grounding of our discerned position to respect gender diversity within our faith community as a moral imperative.
5. Quakers in Britain aspire to be able, without hesitation, to welcome difference across the range of personal characteristics, including gender, sexuality, race, disability, age, and so on. There are nonetheless some worshippers who find it difficult, even impossible, to engage readily in effective, generous and inclusive discourse around gender and sexuality that goes to the heart of human identity and security. Some are shy in the face of deeply personal experiences they do not understand and may reject the alternative experiences of other Friends. Some may be shielding themselves from hurtful experiences in their own lives, which remain private and hidden. They too seek respect and love within our community. We must all listen to each other, so that we might feel safe enough to share and support our faith journeys together.
6. Jesus's insistence on loving one another as an overriding rule of faith was recorded repeatedly:

"³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35, New Revised Standard Version [Anglicised], NVRSA),

7. The rule that we should care for one another appears in our Quaker heritage as fundamental to all that we strive to achieve as a faith body and overrides all personal interest and opinion. *Quaker Faith & practice* 12.01 reads [in part]:

"All of us in the meeting have needs. Sometimes the need will be for patient understanding, sometimes for practical help, sometimes for challenge and encouragement; but we cannot be aware of each other's needs unless we know each other. [...] Loving is not something that those sound in mind and body 'do' for others but a process that binds us together. God has made us loving and the imparting of love to another satisfies something deep within us."

Paul, in his letter to the Christian community in Rome, wrote: "¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law", (Romans

13:10, NRSVA, UK). To the Greeks of Corinth, he directed on how to build a faith community:

"²⁵there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it." (1 Corinthians 12:25-26, NRSVA)

8. Only by allowing ourselves to be led by grace can we really know how to live up to our Quaker testimony of equality that stems from the religious conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth, each one of us a precious child, loved by God.
9. In this guidance we seek to illuminate the decision we reached together in 2021, so that Friends in Britain can find a way to live fully in that experience. We do not seek to address the legal or biological arguments around the concepts of sex and gender, nor to propose any political or social view on these matters.

Section 2 Seeking the leadings of the Spirit

- 10 Within our tradition there are threads that point beyond the hard gender boundaries we may construct. We are mindful of Paul's words that, when we are unified in Christ, "there is no longer male and female." [Galations 3.28, NRSVA].
11. Early Quaker leader Margaret Fell said, in her argument for the legitimacy of women as ministers of God's word, that "God joyns them [man and woman] together in his own Image, and makes no such distinctions and differences as men do; for though they be weak, he is strong." ² In continuity with Fell, we are guided to perceive humanity as created both male and female in the image of a God who is beyond gender. Indeed, the very form and essence of Quaker worship that is rooted in silent waiting embodies a radical equality of all humans before God. Our worship together should be our focus.
12. In our fractured existence, we allow stereotyped perceptions of difference and expectations of each other to lead to flashpoints of conflict. Through our human fear, we can be drawn in by dark spirits of oppression, such as racism, misogyny or queerphobia. We witness the pain and anguish that flows from our disagreements and disappointments.

² Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures. By Margaret Fell, 1614-1702. London: Printed in the Year, 1666

13. Yet we are told that our differences constitute the Body of Christ:

¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (1 Corinthians 12:17-19, NRSVA)

14. We recognise that we should rejoice in the things that make us different, and not be ashamed, fearful, nor judgmental. From our Christian heritage, we take forward the principle that, made in the image of God, our human differences are a blessing. We must all work to ensure that the support is there in every one of our Quaker Meetings and communities to allow this blessing to nourish us. We bear witness to the experience that belonging to a faith body is, for each and all of us, more than "fitting in".
15. We may disagree over our immediate responses to social concerns that we perceive and understand through our human sensibilities. Yet, as a faith community, we remain united in our search for the things that are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18), such as the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSVA)
16. We profess our faith testimony to guide our temporal and spiritual lives, including the equality of all before God, and we try to live up to our highest values in our dealings one with another in community. We are called to be reconciled and to reconcile.

Section 3 Living out our commitment

17. Our witness is to be a faith body that is radically inclusive. The Light that is within everyone illuminates and brings new revelation to all seekers, such that our diversity makes us a stronger, richer, more vibrant and authentic faith community. Regardless of issues of gender, many younger Friends recognise an acute need to be transparent in living out their own truth, without imposing it carelessly on their neighbour. We are in unity in testifying that none of us is called to be something that we are not.

"You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." (Psalm 51:6, NRSVA)

18. We are called to heed the advice that, in living authentically, we must allow each of us to present our whole selves, sure that we are received in love. Love and respect mean that we can safely nurture and challenge each other on the things that matter. Through openness and humility, we may offer up much more towards the unity we seek.

“We have heard in ministry that the strength of a church lies in how it is able to disagree with itself. In Quaker discernment, unity is not the same as unanimity. Minority views may well continue to exist. Among ourselves, we need to find kinder ground for our disagreements. Can we find joy? Can we bring joy?” (Epistle of Britain Yearly Meeting, 2024)

- 19 In striving to build the peaceable kingdom on earth, we long to establish Quaker Meetings in worship and community where each of us can be authentically ourselves, without being rejected by our Friends for doing so. We should choose our words carefully, so as to nurture our sense of togetherness. This calls us to be brave as well as kind, as we share our stories and experiences with each other in a faith community that feels safe for each of us. In 1987, Friend Rose Ketterer wrote,

“Articulating my faith is hard enough; living it is often beyond me. But we are all connected. Strength seeps in from everywhere and amazing things happen. The sense of participation and communion sweeps over me like ocean waves.” (Quaker faith & practice, 26.35)

- 20 We should not seek to deny another Friend this companionship and we are reminded of our primary duty towards one another by Edward H Milligan from 1951,

“I can think with thankfulness of Friends who have brought light to my darkness – perhaps a single sentence, a friendly letter, a walk on the downs: their help was perhaps given unconsciously, but it was because they were sensitive to God’s leadings that they were able to do it. Do we seek to be the channels of God’s love and caring? Caring matters most.” (Quaker faith & practice, 21.20)

- 21 As a people of faith, we can turn our minds towards how we might behave towards any person presenting a difference that we individually cannot understand, to whom we cannot immediately warm, or towards whom we feel defensive, wary, even aggressive. According to our discerned testimonies and faith precepts, it is not permissible for us to reject or harm any Friend or visitor to our Quaker Meetings, in worship or community, because of how, most intricately and wonderfully, each of us has been made. These differences are part of the richness of the unconditional love the Inner Light offers and by which we seek to be guided.

- 22 We can listen deeply to one another, yet we must guard against weaponising that dialogue by coercing the person of difference constantly or repeatedly to justify their own lived reality. If we are truly willing to learn about each other, we are all better able to engage in genuine discussion that can heal relationships between those who endure living in pain and fear.

"²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.^[a]"
(Ephesians 4:29, 31-32, NRSVA)

- 23 None of us should use hurtful language that is prompted by human frustration or aggression against a Friend whose experience and history has brought them to a point of disagreement with the positions we may have reached through our own. We need the courage to learn and accept that something we said has hurt another, and the wisdom to be generous and gracious, seeking kinder ground for our exchanges in the spirit of the ministry of reconciliation that we have been given.
- 24 **Local meetings**, where worship happens and community is fostered, might consider how they can be a vehicle for restoration and repair amongst Friends and offer gifts of love to the stranger. The process of rupture and repair is not easy for anyone, and, where harm has been done, relationships may not be immediately recovered. Yet, with good intentions and prayerful generosity to one another, Friends may be able to repair and deepen relationships. We might ask together:
 - a. Do we offer, through love for one another, truly safe communities for open exchanges of personal faith experience and how the Truth prospers with each of us? Do we listen deeply and generously to one another, thinking it possible that we may be mistaken, hurtful or careless?
 - b. Do we invite the sharing of pronouns and gender self-identification amongst our worshippers? Do we enquire with kindness and sincerity how a person wishes to be named and recorded, without making any conventional assumptions of which gender that may suggest?
 - c. There is a difference between not understanding trans identities and actively disrespecting them. Our places of worship need to be welcoming environments. If we allow groups to use our buildings when their actions or words intend to hurt or exclude, then we risk becoming complicit in hurt and exclusion. We have a testimony of equality, and we can use it to guide our discernment on how to use our meeting houses.
 - d. Do we check back sincerely and lovingly through our pastoral care and eldership service on how newer Attenders and Friends are beginning to feel they belong?
 - e. How do we build our understanding of what can be hurtful ministry in our worship and community? How do we build trust enough to address the conflict that can result from misunderstandings of gender and queerness?
 - f. Do we check back sincerely and lovingly through our pastoral care and eldership service on how some Friends feel unsettled by others in our meeting

community? Do we offer a loving hand in accompanying others to walk their faith journey at their own pace?

- g. Are we open to change in the light of new revelation? Are we willing to make the extra effort this change requires of us? Are we able, as a people of faith, to grow in the Spirit ?

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand. Isaac Penington in 1667 (*Quaker faith & practice*, 10.01)

Drafted by QCCIR, in consultation with QLCC and BYM Trustees
Elaine Green, QCCIR Clerk
October 2025