

A sample group session plan

Extract from: *God, words and us* (2017) for Yearly Meeting 2026

This plan is for a two-hour session. It would also be adaptable to two shorter sessions (using a different opening-up activity to start the second session). For further ideas about running groups, go to <http://together.woodbrooke.org.uk> and click on the 'Ways of Working' tab.

1. Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

This will depend on the size of the group and whether members of the group already know one another. It could be a simple round of names, or expressing gratitude (eg. "One thing I am feeling grateful for today...").

2. An opening-up activity (15 minutes)¹

Materials needed: small sticky notes (or slips of paper and Blu Tack), enough for each person to have several; pens/pencils; two large sheets of flipchart-sized paper, headed 'Do use' and 'Don't use'.

It can be illuminating to reflect with other Friends on words or ideas that you have each found tricky or liberating on your spiritual journey. Some words used or not used by others may be very different from your own. It helps to bring this variety into the group's awareness before getting into deeper conversation, as you will then be less likely to trip over them.

a) In silence, write down words or ideas – one idea per note, as many as you like – that:

- you use or have used when you speak of 'that reality which is unnameable'
- you do not, or no longer, use when you speak of 'that reality which is unnameable'.

b) Stick these notes on the relevant sheet of paper, speaking the word or phrase into the silence as you do so.

c) When everyone has had a chance to post up their words, depending on the time available:

- either spend a few moments reflecting individually in silence on what the group has written
- or use creative listening to reflect together on what the group has written.

3. The language of theism' and 'nontheism' (40 minutes)

Ask participants to read in advance the chapter titled *Exploring the language of 'theism' and 'nontheism'* (pages 41-55).

If this is not appropriate, invite willing members of the group to read aloud a selection of passages – for example: Michael Hennessey, Ben Wood, Jennie Barnsley and David Boulton (pages 43-45); Marisa Johnson (page 50); Ben Pink Dandelion and David Boulton (pages 50-51).

¹ Adapted from the Becoming Friends companion handbook *Preparing to be a companion* (Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and Quaker Life).

Then, either reflect in pairs, sharing the time equally so each has time to speak and be well heard by the other:

- What are the experiences and beliefs that make you Quaker (or interested in Quakers)?
- Do you have a preferred term you use to describe them to others? Or do you prefer to avoid labelling them?

Or, as a group, discuss one or more of these discussion-starter questions:

- Do you find the language of 'theism' and nontheism' a help in clarifying different insights, on a hindrance, or does it all leave you feeling "Our energies might be better directed elsewhere"?
- How well do the terms 'theist' and 'nontheist' serve us? Would anything be lost if Friends were to try to avoid using them? Would it result in "hiding and refusing to face up to very real differences" or show that "we can simply all call ourselves 'Quakers'?"

4. Comfort break (5 minutes)

5. Reframing (40 minutes)

Either a) Visualise diversity (materials needed: paper and felt pens, crayons or paints):

Choose one of these visual metaphors:

- Quakers as a solar system (page 61 and opposite)
- the '*via positiva/negativa/creativa/transformativa*' model page 68 and opposite)
- the desert caravan (page 74 and opposite).

Invite participants to draw or map out where they would place themselves and/or their meeting in the context of this metaphor. Ask each of them to talk about their drawing and the reasons for it (this could be done in pairs or the whole group, depending on numbers and time).

Or b) Discuss:

Which metaphors or different ways of thinking come alive for you?

Explore together why each one appeals or does not.

(Participants need to read the whole of this chapter (pages 57-75) in advance – it will probably take too long for everyone to read it now.)

6. Closing (15 minutes)

Personal (silent) or paired (spoken) reflection: What fresh insights am I taking away? Offer participants an opportunity to say a few words into the silence afterwards.

And/or: Open worship

Helen Rowlands, *God, words and us: Quakers in conversation about religious difference* (2017) Quaker Books. Taken from pages 84-86. Available from the [Quaker Bookshop](#) (print £8, ebook £3.50)