

Shared with permission of Michael Forde and The Friends Quarterly

Why belonging matters: A young Friend's thoughts on Membership Michael Forde

Last summer, I stood in my kitchen awaiting the arrival of the Area Meeting representatives appointed to assess my membership application for Lancaster Quaker Meeting. I found myself arranging a selection of chocolate and non-chocolate biscuits on a plate and considering whether to re-hoover the floor. I poured a small quantity of sugar into a little bowl with a teaspoon in it. What absurd nightmare of domesticity had I fallen into? How had it come to this?

Of course, this pantomime of respectability was all for my own benefit. I know Quakers to be almost universally unpretentious, straight-forward and above all gentle. I knew this was not an inspection or a test. It was something else entirely. Nevertheless, there was a nagging sense in the back of my mind that membership equalled commitment, equalled a burden on my time, and with it a never-ending succession of tea, biscuits and committee meetings.

I first stumbled across a Quaker Meeting House in my late 20s; the silent worship was strikingly powerful but it was the community, the people and the sense of home which really drew me in. Like many, many of my peers, I found my 20s difficult. I also found them fascinating, boring, varied and lonely, but they were certainly difficult. As a cis-gendered, heterosexual, neurotypical, white male with a wonderful partner and a supportive family, I can barely keep track of my own privileges and would make no special claim to any brutality or severity of experience during this time. Compared to friends who spent much of their 20s lost in acute and miserable loneliness, my challenges seem thoroughly mundane. However, I think there is something universal about this period in our lives and about how we mangle ourselves through society's, and our own, expectations at this age.

Our society seems to offer an idealised life trajectory which tends towards social dislocation. We tell our young people to head off to some distant university city away from their family, friends and any sense of community belonging they have managed to foster through their childhood. Then, as soon as they have acquired some of the strongest and deepest friendships they will ever develop, we scramble them again across the country and the world as they follow careers, loves, missions or their own wandering feet.

During my 20s I uprooted myself endlessly, from Fife, to Macclesfield, to Sheffield, to Birmingham, to Lancaster. Whilst filling out innumerable DBS check forms for work and other projects, I remember struggling to recall the 8 different postcodes I'd had in the 5 year period of record. These places were each filled with fascinating people and experiences, and I probably wouldn't change this trajectory if I could, but this lifestyle which was shared by many of my peers felt thoroughly rootless. I felt no sense of commitment from any of these people or places and neither was any commitment expected of me.

This rootlessness is probably a recognisable experience for anyone who has passed through this period of life, whatever your age. However, as with all of these trends, technology

accelerates everything. When you have, in your pocket, a never-ending supply of alternative friendships, opportunities, partners and groups, why would you commit? Why would you bind yourself to a particular community, individual or place? And why would they bind themselves to you? The abundance of choice changes the logic and changes our behaviour. It gives us an endless supply of new experiences and opportunities and expects nothing more than our attendance. The little anarcho-communist on my shoulder might muse that this was the whole plan all along, to turn us into mere consumers of experience - or maybe this is a liberating world of choice and opportunity. However you frame it, this way of life makes us into ever more isolated, atomised, dislocated individuals.

During this period, in one of my many up-rootings, I began working as a primary school teacher in Birmingham. I lived in a grimy little flat perched one floor up from a very busy road with a lovely flatmate who was also beginning his teaching career. I'd been told (alongside the advice from my Gran not to smile before Christmas) that building a strong classroom community was absolutely vital. I threw myself into this idea, generating class colours and little class chants, a team mascot (PomPom the Ninja) and nicknames for the children. I loved the sense of being part of something and it worked for some of the kids too. For others it was less successful, but that was most likely a result of my fairly inexperienced teaching practice. I used to come home to the grimy little flat and think it would be nice to belong in some meaningful way to a real community. Then, quite a lot later in the evening, my flatmate, who was generally a much more dedicated and thorough teacher, would return home and spend a little time lying on the un-hoovered floor as he couldn't face doing much else. Sometimes I'd join him lying on the floor and, for a few moments, get a sense of what community was all about.

For ten years, in a completely ordinary and unremarkable way, I had successfully uprooted myself from every place and every community of which I'd been part. I wasn't broken, or even particularly unhappy, but I was certainly lost and I knew that I had a deep desire for a real sense of home and belonging. That's when I first wandered into a Meeting House.

At those initial Meetings, I was struck first by the silence but pretty soon I noticed the people, or 'Friends' as they cheerfully called themselves and each other. Drinking tea and eating biscuits after meeting became a highlight as each new Quaker I came across seemed so absurdly fascinating, gentle and wise. They were radical activists who'd spent their lives standing up to injustice, or people with an unfathomable spiritual depth who oozed warmth and calm, or they were just regular folks who were welcoming and kind and occasionally dropped the sort of everyday wisdom that shifts your whole perspective on the world. In this community, there were people with a personal relationship with the creator of the universe and others with a sharp metaphysical scepticism. And you could discover all these wonderful Friends chatting quietly with their teas and their coffees and their biscuits.

Slowly I realised that the silence was just as much about the community as the tea and biscuits were. At first, I approached worship as an opportunity to practise my meditative breathing. I sat in the circle and breathed and cleared my mind. The meeting was silent enough for long enough that I could really get deep inside my own head. Only occasionally would my internal spiritual journey be interrupted by a Friend standing up to give ministry. It took a long time for me to realise that I had it backwards. Meeting for Worship is much more than just people sitting silently beside each other. Silence is something you make or break

together. There is a shared commitment, a communal set of expectations on ourselves and each other. To sit in worship with someone else is to respect their silence. You can listen to their choice not to speak as much as to the voices bouncing around your own head. If you stand up to speak, you are expected to weigh your words and consider if they are what others need to hear but, conversely, if you break the silence, you will be upheld. Your voice will be taken seriously. Your words will be listened to with the same weight with which they were spoken. I realised that silent worship was a form of communion like breaking bread together but more intricate and collaborative and creative. Many of you will have understood this sense of silent worship all your lives but to discover this for the first time was breathtaking and beautiful.

At the culmination of all this wandering and rootlessness and new-found Quaker community, I found myself drinking tea with two lovely women from the Area Meeting. They politely took a biscuit from my arrangement on the plate and shared a little of their own journeys before asking me to explain what had brought me to consider membership. What burst forth from my mouth was thirty minutes of meandering and sketchily coherent pontification and blether. I'm sure I used the word dislocation a lot, and rootlessness was probably there too, and I may have even mentioned lying on the un-hoovered floor with my flatmate. I certainly babbled on about community for a fair while. These ideas don't exist in your head neatly ordered, arranged as 1000 words of narratively purposeful text. It's a mess, and you don't really know what's in there until someone sits you down and asks you. That's what's so valuable about the membership process. Someone sits down and listens seriously to your story until you manage to work out for yourself what being a Quaker means to you.

What I realised as I babbled from communion, to community, to commitment, and ultimately to committee, was that I wanted to be part of something that expected something of me. It's not enough to simply consume spiritual experiences. To be a meaningful part of this community, it is necessary to commit; to sign up for the rota, to join the committee. Instead of narrowing your options, this commitment deepens your experience and binds others to you and you to them.

This revelation seemed fairly ground-breaking to me at the time but, of course, it is not a new idea. Some people call it *growing up*, or maybe *settling down*. It is the almost universal experience of everyone who gets fed up with wandering and wants to set down roots, but that ubiquity does not make it any less important. My Quaker Meeting gave me a sense of home and membership was the moment when I realised that.

That was that. I was in. I proudly labelled myself a member of Lancaster Meeting on Woodbrooke Zoom Courses and post-YFGM Meetings for Drinking. I swaggered about the Meeting House with all the self-involved pomposity of someone who knows where the chairs get stacked and where the emergency supply of tea bags lives. I revelled in the marvelousness and mundanity of it all. Then, gradually, as I explored and interacted with a broader range of Friends, I began to meet people for whom the experience and concept of membership had very different connotations.

I met one Friend who felt they couldn't become a member until the Quaker community's action on climate change lived up to its historical radicalism. I met other Friends who identified deeply as Quakers but who had lost their connection or belonging to their Meeting.

I came across some Friends whose Quaker communities did not fit into particular geographical boundaries. These people are certainly Friends whether or not they're listed as members on any Tabular Statement. Those of us with the privilege of a loving and supportive Local Meeting community should be able to wear our membership lightly. Like Early Friends, we should be prepared to recognise "the seed of God" wherever we find it. More significantly, we should be able to recognise that categories like Member and Attender are nothing more than flummery. As Jon Martin suggests in his discussion "Reshaping our Understanding of Quaker Community",¹ we shouldn't worry about these categories. We should simply "Be a Quaker". If we can't recognise unnecessary religious rigamarole when we see it, are we even Quakers at all?!

Simon Best's research on the beliefs and practices of young Quakers describes "Communities of Intimacy"² as informal groups who share a sense of belonging and values. Many Young Quakers have intensely important connections and Friendships built upon shared experiences at Summer Schools and beyond. Many Quakers' primary source of community is not a Local Meeting but a group of Quakers with a shared identity, mission or experience. Quaker Support for Climate Action is a group of deeply committed Quakers from across the country who meet weekly, communicate daily, hold each other in the light and exhibit a deep sense of responsibility for each other in their brave and urgent radicalism. Just because these communities are not geographically located does not mean they are any less powerful than the grand old system of Local and Area Meetings. In fact, often the shared purpose of these groups makes them some of the most dynamic, active and exciting Quaker communities around.

It is deeply sad if any Friends feel excluded by the concept of Membership or, worse, by the self-importance of Members. A church of radical inclusion which can comfortably hold all shades of faith in one community should not be worried about who's 'in' and who's 'out'. However, these worries shouldn't lead us to lay down the whole idea of membership. I intensely value the blessings of membership, the deep sense of belonging and the opportunity to reflect on my place in this community. If some of our Friends are excluded by the institution of membership, we shouldn't eradicate it, we should reform it. We should seek ways to empower other Quaker communities to recognise their members.

Sometimes this line of discussion leads to calls for a sort of Digital Area Meeting which tracks our existing structures onto the Metaverse. For some, this concept might seem a little bloodless, but I see no inherent reason why, if there are genuine digital communities, there couldn't be genuine digital institutions for memberships. However, what this whole line of thinking misses is that these communities are not primarily digital. The technology is simply background. These communities are defined by their shared experiences, missions and identities. A group of Friends who met at a Glenthorne weekend 10 years ago and continue to chat, meet regularly online and meet up occasionally in person, who share silence together and uphold each other, is as much a living community as many Local Meetings. To

¹ J. Martin, 2022, *Reshaping our Understanding of Quaker Community*, Woodbrooke, accessed 20 February 2024 <<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/reshaping-our-understanding-of-quaker-community>>

² S. Best, 2010, *The Community of Intimacy: The Spiritual Beliefs and Religious Practices of Adolescent Quakers*, accessed on 20 February 2024 <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1250/1/best_10_PhD.pdf>

consider these communities as simply digital would be a disservice to their vitality and strength.

At the same time, many of these communities are so successful because they lack the ponderous weight of institutions like membership (and excessive committee-making!). Many are very happy to remain nimble and human, just the way they are without being co-opted into a system of digital or thematic Local and Area Meetings. Many of these groups are very happily and successfully Being Quakers without these structures.

So, how could we share the blessings of membership with all Friends who seek it without imposing excessive structure on these groups? Perhaps a centralised route to membership could exist whereby any Friend from any meeting could nominate someone for national membership. This model seems straightforward, but at the same time is a little antithetical to the non-hierarchical nature of our community. Another approach could look a bit like adoption. Any Meeting could have the power to recognise an individual Friend without specific local links if nominated by existing members of that meeting. This individual might be called something like a General Member. None of these ideas are perfect and any solution requires the perspectives of those Friends who genuinely feel excluded by our current institutions of membership. However, my experience is that membership is a deeply valuable source of belonging and commitment in our community and we should seek ways to share these blessings with all Friends.

I am deeply grateful for the institution of membership as an opportunity to meaningfully consider my place in this Quaker community. More fundamentally, I am grateful to my Local Meeting for giving me a sense of belonging. In a largely mundane way, often involving tea and biscuits, this Meeting has profoundly affected me. It has given me a spiritual home.

As a radically inclusive church, we should seek to ensure that no Friend is excluded from these blessings by our processes or institutions. Reform might mean a Digital Area Meeting, or national level membership, or a general membership managed by Local Meetings, or something else entirely. However it is structured, there must be a route for all Friends to share in our community.

Even still, we must remember that all of these institutions are just scaffolding. Fundamentally, we are a community seeking to see the light in others, to live adventurously, to let our lives speak, to Be Quaker. We can at the same time treasure our community and our membership and hold our membership lightly. What really matters is that this community is a home for all of us.