



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

## **New ways into membership: A proposal from a working group of Quaker Life Central Committee**

### **Summary**

These proposals offer Friends who are not attached to an Area Meeting the option of becoming members of Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM). In removing the need for a live connection with a geographic Area Meeting, this innovation represents a significant change to existing practice. It anticipates a broader, more inclusive Yearly Meeting where different kinds of Quaker community co-exist on a par with each other, and where any Friend can decide on their primary Quaker community of belonging.

The proposals address the following:

1. The history of concern for 'Unattached' Friends
2. Developments towards inclusion of such Friends
3. The need for appropriate new terms which are not divisive
4. The creation of a new body having the functions of an Area Meeting, excepting those associated with geographic location
5. The role of the new body in membership processes
6. The part played by non-geographic Quaker communities
7. Non-geographic communities in relationship with the new body
8. Implications for existing BYM structures

### **Notes**

**Unattached Friends:** See Appendix 2 for some context to recent usage.

**Friends and members:** 'Friend' refers here to both members and attenders of Quaker meetings or groups; 'member' refers either to a member of a Quaker group or community, or to a Friend in membership of the Society of Friends.

**Lower case/capitals:** We are aware of the conventions used by Quakers in Britain. To keep things simple and to avoid implying degrees of formality or importance, the terms used here for all groups, meetings and communities are capitalised, other than to distinguish a yearly meeting from the Yearly Meeting.

**Wayfinding:** The necessary detail in these proposals makes them quite a long read; sections and paragraphs are numbered to help with this.

## 1. Background to this work

a. A longstanding call to respond to the needs of Friends excluded from membership of BYM has not so far been addressed at Yearly Meeting (YM). Part of YM 2014 Minute 40 reads:

“We have heard of a need for a yet more flexible approach to membership for some people, including particularly young adult Friends, whose journeys may preclude them committing to a local or area meeting. We ask Meeting for Sufferings, working with Quaker Life Central Committee, and having sought the views of those concerned on this matter, to consider how to respond to this call.”

Rapid advances in communications technology combined with the changing nature of how we experience community indicate that the question would keep resurfacing, and the need for a response would only increase.

b. In January 2021 Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC) considered a paper by Oliver Robertson, Committee Secretary, on *Unattached Friends* (see Appendix 2). The paper included the keynote for most of our thinking here:

“The current situation has meant that staff have become much more fluid and imaginative in understanding what Quaker community means, that it is often less shaped by geography than we have previously understood and that people often have a range of ways of connecting to multiple communities.”

c. In November 2021 QLCC discussed a paper brought by Rachel Matthews, BYM staff, on *Unattached Friends and Membership*, which explored many related issues including the discriminating effects of membership processes, emerging and online Quaker communities, and how our testimony to equality impels a need to go beyond “all are welcome” to “we will travel with you”. A steering group was set up to take the issues raised forward and a working group was appointed in July 2022 (QLCC 22.26) to consider:

1. Ways to fully include people whose belonging and connection is not chiefly within a geographic location, such as a local or area meeting
2. Inclusion in BYM of Quaker worship communities which are not defined by geographic location

3. Encouragement and support of models of community and worship which are identifiably Quaker, but may not 'look' like most existing Quaker worshipping communities in 2022

d. Also in 2022, Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) reported on the question of membership and appointment to central service (MfS/22/10/12), followed by a call to Area Meetings to consider these questions: Why do we have membership? What is it for? Is it still necessary? If yes, what form(s) could it take? (MfS/22/12/10). Other recent minutes on membership include: MfS/23/10/06, MfS/23/12/09, MfS/24/12/14.

e. Between 2022 and 2024 the central committee working group reported at intervals to both QLCC and MfS and was laid down following its report to MfS in October 2024.

f. In March 2025 QLCC appointed a committee member and a member of Quaker Rainbow to the current working group; a Woodbrooke staff member joined us before we convened our first meeting in May 2025. Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) was also invited to be represented. No name came forward but we consulted YFGM regularly and kept them informed throughout.

g. As a new group, we reviewed the history of this work and the current situation of non-geographic Quaker communities of all kinds having mushroomed in recent years. Friends increasingly make fruitful in-person and online connections and via social media, they meet with existing groups for a range of Quaker activities and purposes, they establish new communities, and not all these Friends have a connection with a Local or Area Meeting or wish to maintain one. We therefore focused our task on QLCC Minute 24.06, which asked the previous working group to expand its remit "To consider the potential for an individual's membership of specific groups associated with Friends to be sufficient basis for membership of BYM as a whole".

h. We detail the timeline above to clarify that recent considerations of membership by MfS and by QLCC have run in parallel, each body connecting with the other by reports and minutes but not duplicating their remit or focus. Yearly Meeting may need to bear in mind the work undertaken elsewhere when considering these proposals from QLCC. For example, the working group has not considered more basic questions around BYM retaining a system of membership, questions which nevertheless do have relevance for these proposals.

i. Nor have we explored recent developments affecting Area Meetings. In January 2025 Wales became the first region in BYM to amalgamate AM charities into one charitable entity with new forms of trustee arrangements; other regions are in the process of doing so and each is approaching it differently. These proposals assume a relationship between a Local and Area Meeting in which the AM is a formally constituted charity. Current and impending changes could have implications for any new structure for non-geographic Quaker bodies, which cannot as yet be anticipated.

## 2. Towards inclusion of non-geographic Quaker communities and Friends not attached to an Area Meeting

a. In July 2025 we reported to Meeting for Sufferings with an outline of QLCC's work from 2022 and on progress towards proposals to Yearly Meeting. Many Friends have their main experience of Quaker fellowship, worship and practice, and their strongest Quaker connections, with non-geographic groups, especially online worshipping communities where there is a clear call for some kind of membership process. Our report in July offered initial thinking on two questions from MfS related to this call:

- What might be the specific characteristics of a Quaker group or community which would enable them to be a body that could confer membership, as Area Meetings do now?
- What would need to be present in terms of a meaningful membership process?

Meeting for Sufferings united with the draft proposals we offered in response and asked for formal proposals to return "in timely fashion, looking to send them to a future session of Yearly Meeting for consideration." (MfS/25/07/11 New ways of belonging).

b. More recently, we tested out a previous assumption that Quaker Recognised Bodies (QRBs) would be target groups for this development. Of 70+ such bodies, we discounted all but a dozen whose online profile indicated the kind of Quaker group which might be eligible, i.e. with some community and/or worship focus in their connections as an affinity group. Of those, three expressed interest, two of them strongly, which was enough to affirm the point of seeking out communities and Friends disadvantaged by the geographic-only route into membership. Friends are unlikely to ask for this if they believe it is out of the question, they will just carry on being Quakers not in membership. But we trust that once the option exists and is known about, other groups will wish to explore this new route to membership.

c. Of all non-geographic groups this option might affect, by far the greater number are online worship communities, including Friends participating in the many meetings for worship offered by Woodbrooke. Online meetings for worship are now common, and many are not attached to Local or Area Meetings; newcomers to Quaker worship are among their regular attenders. A recent survey of Woodbrooke's online worship participants found 67 people who would like either to apply for membership through Woodbrooke's worshipping community or to transfer their membership there. Friends attending meeting for worship online have needs to worship as part of a community, just as they do in their worship elsewhere.

d. We also reviewed our earlier response to the first question in 2a above, i.e. that eligible non-geographic communities could be approved to confer membership and to develop procedures reflecting the needs of their particular community. We rejected that idea as potentially too demanding of BYM staff or committee oversight, and because of the risk that the membership of some Friends might be informed by idiosyncratic understandings and practice of Quakerism (congregationalism).

e. The possibility of the Yearly Meeting becoming the membership-conferring body, as in some other yearly meetings, was another idea we rejected. In BYM's case, it would create a one-sided relationship, i.e. the member would belong to an organisation that is not set up to reciprocate. Quaker Life's work is to help nurture and support Quaker Communities, not in supporting Friends directly. AMs provide this through their pastoral care arrangements and their constituted purpose in fostering community (*Qf&p* 4.02), and much of it happens in Local Meetings.

f. In response to needs identified above for wider testing of membership applications and for support with eldership and pastoral care, our proposal replicates the relationship between Area and Local Meetings. This would involve the creation of a virtual AM-like body to sit between the Yearly Meeting and eligible non-geographic communities. While its purpose would be to enable a path to membership for Friends who are not attached to an Area Meeting, we see potential benefit in the relationship evolving in response to other emerging needs of non-geographic communities.

g. Rather than replicating all features of Area Meetings described in *Qf&p* Ch.4, we see the formation of this new body, and its ongoing development, proceeding from *core principles* in the constitution and functions of an Area Meeting. The basic requirements of an AM-like body would need to be established, possibly including constitution as a charity with trustees, while allowing for others to arise organically. The intention would be to link the best of the past with the opportunities of the future, only some of which can be anticipated in the present.

h. The new body would process membership applications with authority to confer membership. Friends connected with a non-geographic group as their primary Quaker community of belonging would have a relationship with the AM-like body much as LM Friends have with their Area Meeting – they might or might not attend its meetings for business or give service, but if they wish to apply for membership they discuss this first with local Friends and their application is taken forward by the AM.

### **3. New terminology**

a. Existing groups and the AM-like body will all need new terms without geographic connotations to be used wherever they are referenced. The Church Government Advisory Group (CGAG) suggested replacing Local Meeting with Constituent Meeting in *Qf&p* Chapter 4, which might do for that purpose. CGAG did not suggest an alternative to Area Meeting, other than 'non-geographic', which, while accurate, feels clumsy and can imply that the meeting is not quite the real thing.

b. We acknowledge that significant changes to wording in *Quaker faith & practice* will not be helpful at this time, and that Chapter 4 explains relationships and functions as usefully for the proposed innovation as it does for existing practice. But it will be important to establish at the outset that new arrangements are intended to grow and develop over time, including the likely emergence of hybrid geographic and non-geographic communities. It will not help the natural evolution of Quaker communities

to draw boundaries distinguishing one kind from another based on where and how Friends meet.

c. With that in mind, we suggest replacing 'Local Meeting' and 'Area Meeting', both presupposing location as the norm, with other terms that recognise the evolution of what we see as normal. Just as Preparative and Monthly became Local and Area with changes in practice, these developments would call for a further review. Changes in terminology affecting BYM as a whole are beyond the scope of these proposals, but we commend this premise to Yearly Meeting for consideration.

d. In these proposals we use Home Meeting and Anchor Meeting for the LM-like and AM-like bodies respectively. 'Home' indicates the significance of their community for otherwise 'unattached' Friends (i.e. they are in fact attached); 'Anchor' offers a metaphor for grounding this virtual structure of diverse communities. In anticipation of ongoing change, each term offered avoids describing what a meeting does or where/how it does it. And in the way LMs are named by location, e.g. Milford Haven Local Meeting, Home Meetings would retain their community name as a prefix, e.g. Quaker Rainbow Home Meeting. The Anchor Meeting will also need some identifying prefix; we suggest that Friends Anchor Meeting might serve for now.

#### **4. Creating the Anchor Meeting**

a. In January 2025 QLCC received this guidance from CGAG:

"The existing wording of *Quaker faith & practice* provides no insuperable obstacle to the creation of a non-geographic Area Meeting. We recognise that the emergence of online meetings which are not part of an existing Area Meeting does need to be recognised within *Quaker faith & practice*. We see the key issues as the provision of pastoral care, the question of membership and provision for the forwarding of concerns to Yearly Meeting. There would also need to be a recognition of the responsibilities that arise from being part of the formal structure of Britain Yearly Meeting."

b. The new Anchor Meeting would be a clearly defined Quaker organisation, based in Britain, with the characteristics, functions and responsibilities of an Area Meeting, excepting any relating to geographic location and others that are irrelevant or not applicable in a virtual setting. The task of setting-up the Anchor Meeting would require a holding group of a few experienced Friends, drawn from its linked communities, to initiate communications with potential Home Meetings and call a first meeting. The Anchor Meeting might begin as a blank sheet, not to be filled in with decisions and detail but a space where many ideas can be sketched in lightly to see what emerges. We envisage things starting simply with only a few essential roles.

c. The remit of the holding group would include handing over as soon as there are processes for the nomination and appointment of Friends to run the Anchor Meeting. Which of the functions and responsibilities of an AM, as detailed in *Qf&p* Ch.4, would be relevant to the Anchor Meeting will become clearer once it is established and its relationships with Home Meetings emerge. Certain essentials would apply to this AM-

like body, such as appointment of a treasurer, possibly trustees and a safeguarding coordinator, two-way communications with BYM, and provision for the forwarding of concerns. But there need be no rush: the important work of this new body will need time for thoughtful consideration of how it wants to work and what it wants to be.

d. These proposals note broader implications for governance of establishing the Anchor Meeting but do not explore the detail. Should the proposals on membership be adopted, other work will be required in consultation with Quaker Church Affairs (QCA) to ensure new arrangements are fit for purpose and sit appropriately within BYM structures. Part of those considerations might include Quaker Life support for the communities involved, especially in the setting up of new arrangements and while they bed in.

e. The Anchor Meeting would be a community of non-geographic groups with a shared purpose in membership matters, but it would hopefully develop beyond that. Early on it might convene a meeting for Friends in potential Home Meetings to explore their vision of the Anchor Meeting's purpose as a Quaker community, i.e. more like a threshing meeting than a place to make decisions. There is no blueprint of what the Anchor Meeting's fuller purpose might turn out to be.

## **5. How the new membership-conferring body would work**

a. Among other functions, the Anchor Meeting would receive and process membership applications and confer membership. Characteristics of the new body required for this purpose would be little different from those of an Area Meeting: Appendix 1 outlines features that should be in place and notes essential elements of any procedures. Membership-conferring status will likely require Yearly Meeting approval; support and guidance on preparing and applying for this should be accessible from within BYM.

b. Membership applications:

- i. The Anchor Meeting would receive applications from Friends in Home Meetings; it might also receive them from Friends who for different reasons are not linked with any such group, and for whom the Anchor Meeting could be a place of direct connection and support. Examples might include Friends whose strongest Quaker connections are directly with BYM through service or employment, and people in prison who have no relationship with a Local or Area Meeting.
- ii. Applications received from Friends living abroad would be considered if they belong to a UK group accepted as a Home Meeting, but the process would explore why the Friend wants to apply for membership of this yearly meeting rather than another, or for International Membership, which is a well-established system for Quakers in places where there are no yearly meetings. Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) is part of current considerations on

whether to open this up to Friends who do not feel comfortable in the yearly meeting where they live.

iii. The same scrutiny should apply to applications from Friends who choose this route because they have fallen out with their LM or AM. A Home Meeting could provide a Friend with a welcoming fresh start, but it would not be helpful for non-geographic communities to become places that attract disgruntled Friends. Particular care would be taken where a Friend's membership has been terminated, and they hope to (re)acquire membership this way. Working with the Home Meeting, the Anchor Meeting's response would need to include guidance on conflict resolution or other approaches to the Friend's difficulty. In this and other respects, Home meetings will have the same responsibilities as Local Meetings and will be able to access the same staff support.

c. Although these proposals focus on the responsibility of the Anchor Meeting for membership applications and processes, all other membership matters (*Qf&p* 11.19-40) would be included, such as terminations, resignations, records of deaths and marriages. Transfers of membership might work a bit differently. A transfer out to an Area Meeting could depend on where the Friend lives or where they offer service. In any event, it will involve the Area Meeting accepting the certificate of transfer, which it might not if the Friend has no connection. Transfers-in to the Anchor Meeting might need a level of discernment similar to that of an application for membership for the possibility of issues noted in 5b.iii above.

## **6. The role of Home Meetings in membership processes**

a. Non-geographic Quaker communities vary considerably, more so than Local Meetings in their differences, but they have some things in common, including their Quaker faith and their understanding of what it means to be part of a larger community of British Friends. Not all these communities will want to participate in the new arrangements, but those that do should meet certain criteria to ensure their Quaker focus is sufficient to provide some Friends with their only Quaker experience. Communities might need support in moving towards eligibility as a Home Meeting; the Anchor Meeting would have a role here, possibly aided by BYM staff structures. Some Home Meetings might be encouraged to develop further as distinctly Quaker communities by strengthening their Quaker practice, such as in their worship and how they make decisions. Support of this kind can be offered by BYM staff to Quaker communities thinking about becoming Home Meetings.

b. Home Meetings will play an important part in how membership processes have an essential focus on "the wellbeing of the applicant at their heart" (Appendix 1) A community with a fairly loose concept of the relevance of eldership and pastoral care to its primary function (as a group sharing a common interest, purpose or cause) may need some means of supporting potential applicants sufficiently. This would not necessarily mean appointing elders or pastoral Friends. Where a group agrees that spiritual nurture and pastoral care are everyone's responsibility, experience and capacity in the community could be drawn on for the care of all Friends, enabling

support of membership applications when these arise. The community might appoint a coordinator of eldership and pastoral care to keep an eye on need, and possibly to promote activities that contribute to the care and support of individuals as well as of the community as a whole.

c. Anyone considering membership will hopefully talk first with people in their Home Meeting, which should encourage this with explicit opportunities. Whatever the arrangements for pastoral care, there should be a focus on the Friend's need for support in this important step in their Quaker journey. Experienced Friends in the Home Meeting or the Anchor Meeting might advise on a meeting for clearness or other opportunity for the Friend to share their intention and talk it through.

d. Throughout this work we bore in mind a two-sided principle underpinning new arrangements:

- They should be sufficient for their purpose
- They should not place an undue burden on a community

In other words, new work and responsibilities must not be at the expense of a Home Meeting's primary purpose as a community of affinity and belonging. Most of these communities will have plenty to do already; it should be possible to incorporate new requirements with a light touch, and for the community to decide on priorities, aware of its own resources and its capacity to embrace change.

## **7. Relationships between Home Meetings and their Anchor Meeting**

a. These would no doubt feel contrived at first and not of the same order as the relationship between Local Meetings and their Area Meeting with its history of evolving practice, and of habit, memory and shared story, none of which can be replicated. But just as an Area Meeting draws on Friends in Local Meetings for its officers and other roles, so would the Anchor Meeting draw on Home Meetings for Friends to administer its functions – and to build community, which will influence how the Anchor Meeting develops membership processes and carries them out.

b. While a Friend's strongest sense of belonging would invariably remain with their Home Meeting community, they will also be aware that membership is a reciprocal relationship of commitment with the community that conferred their membership. Alongside its purpose as a membership-conferring body, the Anchor Meeting will provide various kinds of support to Home Meetings, including as a wider spiritual community that sustains Friends on their Quaker journey. In turn, its members should commit to the Anchor Meeting, including attending its meetings, serving in roles needed to run itself and sharing in the care of its members.

c. This is where support, possibly through development work, could be most needed. The connections and participation required for these purposes may not feel accessible to Friends accustomed to seeing their group as independent and unique,

while Friends already in membership of an Area Meeting may not see the point of engaging with a broader community of non-geographic groups.

d. Development work could support a Home Meeting in how it encourages Friends to offer service to the Anchor Meeting and to attend its meetings; it might help the Anchor Meeting promote links between otherwise disparate Home Meetings. As an integral part of BYM structures, the new arrangements would have the potential to offer examples of ways to develop relationships within and between Local and Area Meetings as they adapt to the increasing importance in Friends' lives of other Quaker communities, especially those they access online.

## 8. Implications for our existing structures

a. The proposed arrangements will have implications for BYM beyond enabling Friends not attached to an Area Meeting to become members; they represent a new choice for all Friends wherever they live. Any Friend connected to a non-geographic group might identify more strongly with that community than the one they sometimes worship with locally. Friends can already be associated with more than one Local Meeting (they name one as where they are listed and counted for the Tabular Statement) and the same would apply to Home Meetings: Friends might connect with multiple communities that meet online and/or in physical locations.

b. The new choice for such Friends could be to apply for membership of the Anchor Meeting rather than the Area Meeting where they live. Or a Friend might be a member of an AM and wish to transfer their membership via their connection with a non-geographic community. Would these possibilities undermine our structures or deplete local communities? Only if we see new arrangements as disconnected from existing structures, as either/or. These proposals envisage an *integrated structure* having some parts in physical places and some parts online, bringing non-geographic communities in from the margins to join a broader, more inclusive Yearly Meeting.

c. An integrated structure of geographic and non-geographic Quaker communities could be an opportunity for Friends who have no settled base to be members of a community that always moves with them. It could offer families an assurance that they still share their Quaker connections. It might help resolve perennial problems LMs and AMs have with maintaining their 'lists'. There are always members who do not engage locally and sometimes they are hard to track down; a 'lost' Friend's active Quakerism could be elsewhere – with Woodbrooke or BYM or internationally. An alternative body for holding membership might mean that AM lists of members reduce, but not through a decline in BYM membership.

d. These proposals offer a real possibility of supporting community in BYM as a whole. If Friends fear they spell the decline of *their* Society, they need only look to Woodbrooke for an example of the potential in this opportunity. Many of us recall responding to the permanent closure of the Birmingham site with sadness – and grief. Things would never be the same again. And they are not the same, they are different:

Woodbrooke is thriving in a new multi-faceted form, largely online, offering more courses, engaging more widely and reaching more Friends than ever before.

e. We may still be sad about our loss. With any change we leave something behind, which can be hard, but our loss should not be a reason to turn aside from an opportunity. The YM minute quoted from at the beginning of this paper – calling for a response by Meeting for Sufferings and Quaker Life Central Committee – was made in 2014. We now have an opportunity to respond. The epistle that year offers us this reminder of why opening up opportunities for membership matters:

“Coming into membership of the Religious Society of Friends is not simply arrival at a comfortable place; it is also a point of departure: a commitment to the Quaker community and to a life-long process of learning, together with others. What matters most in this community is the quality of our relationships.”

### **New Ways of Belonging Working Group of Quaker Life Central Committee:**

Zélie Gross (QLCC), Simonne Wood (Woodbrooke), John Presland (Quaker Rainbow) with Alistair Fuller (Staff)

### **Proposals accepted by Minute QLCC 25.69**

In preparation for Yearly Meeting July 2026, a number of non-substantive amendments were made later to this paper.

### **Queries for considering these proposals**

- What do you find helpful or engaging in these proposals; what feels challenging?
- Is there anything you expected or hoped to find, which is not included?
- What do you feel is the essential question here of importance to the Society as a whole?

## **Appendix 1: Membership procedures for non-geographic Quaker communities**

Essential features of a new membership-conferring body would include:

1. Clear, meaningful and safe membership procedures with the wellbeing of the applicant at their heart, which provide for:
  - Personal spiritual reflection/discernment by the applicant
  - Opportunity for the applicant to clarify their motivation and for the community to feel confident about the outcome
  - Ongoing support and care for the applicant at every stage

2. Experienced Friends with a good understanding of what membership means to the individual and to the community, who would support and offer guidance to a Friend considering membership. Supporting Friends might be appointed by the Anchor Meeting or might be found in the Friend's Home Meeting, or both.
3. Ways of ensuring procedures are followed correctly, and that decisions are properly recorded and communicated, while not losing sight of the spiritual nature of the applicant's commitment and the community's discernment.
4. A secure, well-organised, GDPR-compliant system of record-keeping. This should include a register of members to meet BYM requirements, and procedures for receiving and passing on membership information as required.

The above four points do not spell out a membership process to be used in the proposed arrangements; they indicate underlying principles that can be expressed faithfully through different processes. The Anchor Meeting would be working with a variety of Home Meetings and might need to adapt procedures to work well for particular communities.

In whatever ways processes vary, they should include the following:

- a. A focus on the applicant at every stage
- b. Established ways of supporting an applicant and upholding the process
- c. The opportunity of a visit or other private meeting of a few Friends with the applicant for conversation/discussion, such as a meeting for clearness
- d. A meeting of the Anchor Meeting based on Quaker discipline, for considering the application and discerning a decision
- e. A process of follow-up, to include welcoming the new member and support/guidance for an applicant not accepted into membership at this time
- f. A formal record of the decision, which is forwarded to BYM.

## **Appendix 2: QLCC 2021 01 08 (part)**

### **Quaker Life Central Committee Unattached Friends**

#### **Introduction**

In 2018-2019, QLCC considered the issue of Unattached Friends, hearing about the situation in Britain YM and internationally (minutes 18.67 and 19.33). An Unattached Friend is someone who had previously been involved with Quakers but is not currently connected with any Quaker community. Since then, the rapid changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have meant that the experience of being attached to a Quaker community has changed significantly. In particular, some previously very involved Quakers may now be effectively Unattached Friends, while the use of virtual platforms for holding meetings has removed some of the barriers to involvement for previously Unattached Friends. ...

*Oliver Robertson, January 2021*