



Quakers and the ecumenical agenda



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1. Introduction

When Quakers are holding discussions with other churches, it helps to consider the issues together in meetings or study groups before raising them in ecumenical groups. This booklet is intended for Quakers to use in those preparatory sessions.

It has been prepared for and issued by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) as part of the committee's remit to support and encourage Friends in ecumenical work. It reflects some of the thinking of the committee in trying to introduce and pursue a new ecumenical agenda.

Why a new agenda?

The Committee considers that the time is right to be more proactive and to put forward our own questions which might help in developing understanding and growing unity between the churches.

As churches try to find unity together, many of the issues raised are ones which are not of first importance to Quakers. We are not ourselves concerned about the details of water baptism, about sharing in the ritual of the eucharist or about the validity of orders of ordained ministry. Meanwhile of course we must continue to explain our position on these matters.

Why are we involved?

Some Friends may wonder why Quakers should be involved in these discussions with other churches if so many of the topics are not relevant to us. There are several reasons:

- We are a Society that looks for the guidance of the Holy Spirit; when we can see the Spirit at work in other churches and in the movements which bring churches together we cannot ignore its work.
- When we are involved in building relationships with other churches we open ourselves to possibilities for growth in our religious understanding and our spiritual lives; in particular we have the opportunity to be reminded of aspects of our Christian heritage which we may have neglected or forgotten. At the very least, in explaining ourselves to others we come to understand ourselves better.
- When we draw on our heritage in the Bible we may look at the image of the body which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12; all the parts of the body belong together though they are all different and have different functions. We can also remind ourselves of the command of Jesus to his followers that they should love one another (John 15.12).
- An important reason is that we are a peace church; we teach and try to practise and bring about peace. This movement towards reconciliation between churches is a peace movement, albeit slow and undramatic. If we believe in peace, how can we not be involved?

What about other faiths?

We recognise that God is present for all people. Friends are also working with other faiths: this is important work which contributes to racial justice and social cohesion, and raises questions about truth. QCCIR is able to give guidance on relations with other faiths.

However, for the time being, interchurch work is both more structured than interfaith and has different goals. Churches have a shared history and are able to work together on difficult theological issues. One of those issues is how Christians together relate to other faiths.

What is the Quaker agenda?

Our questions arise from our own experience and practice, from which our theology springs.

- What is special to the experience and practice of our Society? What would we regard as the gifts we hold in trust for all the churches? And what are their gifts for us?
- Our worship waits upon the inspiration of the Spirit. How do we recognise the guidance of the Spirit, both in our meetings and in other churches?
- What language can we use to express our experience and understanding? How can we communicate to each other and to other churches?
- What is authoritative for us? In particular, how do we interpret the Bible which is part of the shared heritage of all the churches? How do we deal with differing interpretations?
- What do we mean by 'unity' amongst the churches?

This booklet

This booklet briefly introduces each of the major topics and suggests questions for discussion. You will find questions for Friends to discuss together, followed by questions to discuss with other churches in dialogues or ecumenical groups, and some further background information.

QCCIR will be glad to receive any feedback about the booklet, or any accounts of discussions which might be suitable to be shared with other Friends through the newsletter CIRcular. Please send your comments to the secretary of QCCIR, contact details on the back page of this booklet.

Background

Friends have been involved in the modern ecumenical movement since its beginning. At the World Conference on Mission held at Edinburgh in 1910, Friends were represented by the Friends Foreign Mission Association, a predecessor of QPSW. That conference gave impetus to both the World Mission and Evangelism movement and the Faith and Order movement.

Over the century since then British Quakers have, either as a Yearly Meeting or through Friends World Committee for Consultation, belonged to or worked with Faith and Order, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the British Council of Churches. We now are members of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Churches Together in England, ACTS(Scotland) and CYTUN(Wales).

In recent years our Yearly Meeting has responded to the WCC document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. The response, published as *To Lima with Love*, was approved by Yearly Meeting in 1986. Since then QCCIR has been engaged in responding to other WCC documents, most recently *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. In this response the Yearly Meeting has begun to put forward suggestions for a renewed ecumenical agenda.

2. Can we exchange gifts?

What is a gift?

Every part of the church can be seen as having special gifts which it is able to share with the other parts. Some churches have recently begun to talk about such an exchange of gifts as “receptive ecumenism”.

We have to beware of clinging too tightly to our own gifts as if they were our own possession. We also have to realise that not all gifts that are given are welcomed – they are not always received. There may be gifts which are offered to Quakers which we do not want to receive. Can we face the challenge of gifts which make us uncomfortable?

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about the gifts of the Spirit. There is, he says, a wide variety of gifts and they are all to be used for the building up of the whole church. It is important for us to notice that all the gifts come from God. In the first place they are given to us. It is our task to use them wisely.

What are our Quaker gifts?

In trying to describe the gifts which Quakers bring to the wider church we have to be aware that there are differences among Quakers around the world. We have to make it clear when we are describing only our own Yearly Meeting. For example, not all Quakers worship in silence; though we may regard our way as a precious gift to us it is not the only form of Quaker worship.

We also have to be aware that some things which are precious to us are not unique to us. For example, we are only one of three Historic Peace Churches: the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren have also taught and practised peace since their origins. Other churches too are changing and

rediscovering truths which we have tended to claim as our own.

All this means that we have to be modest in claiming gifts. It may be that if we ask other churches what they see as our gifts to them, their answers will surprise us.

If we are prepared to see these as emphases rather than as unique features we may find from within our own tradition aspects such as:

- The business method – our way of seeking the will of God in our meetings for church affairs seems to be common throughout the Quaker world.
- Personal responsibility is taken by all members for worship, business, spiritual and pastoral care.
- Religion is seen as a way of life rather than a belief system – and that way of life is guided by the testimonies such as to truth, peace, simplicity and equality.
- God is known and worshipped inwardly rather than through symbols and rituals.

What gifts do we receive from other churches?

Every Quaker will have a different background and experience. When we talk to each other about what we have received from other churches we may be surprised by the breadth and variety of the gifts. Some Friends may have negative experiences which they wish to share – even these can be a gift if they have made us seek out a religious path which is more authentic for us. On the other hand, some Friends may for good reason worship regularly with another church and may have very positive experiences to share.

Some gifts to consider might include:

- The Church of England's service to the whole of England through its parochial system, providing religious services for everyone in the parish.
- The Methodist Church's tradition of hymn-singing – theology in song.
- The honour which churches give to the Bible and the teaching which they give from and about it.
- The tradition of preaching, whether it is a short homily or a long sermon, bringing together the tradition and the contemporary world and helping people to see how to apply and live their faith.
- The pastoral care given at times of crisis.

Questions for Quakers

- What for you is special about being a Quaker?
- What do you most appreciate about your Meeting?
- Do you find anything lacking in Quaker ways?
- What gifts have you received from other churches?
- Which of the gifts of other churches present you with a challenge or make you feel uncomfortable?
- How do I as a Quaker take part in other churches' worship with integrity?

Questions to share with other churches

- What gifts do you think Quakers have to offer to you?
- How can we best offer them?
- What gifts would you wish us to receive from you?

3. How do we recognise the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

What is the Quaker experience of the Spirit?

Our experience is both individual and corporate, in meetings for worship, meetings for church affairs, in the development of concerns and in action. Quaker Faith and Practice has many examples (eg 2.57, 2.58, 29.02, 13.03, 13.04, and many others). In QFP 19.43 Isaac Penington reminds us of the “day of small things” – not to be too ambitious, but to follow the small promptings and guidance that we have.

Any movement which relies on the Spirit has to have a way of distinguishing what is of the Holy Spirit from what is of the human spirit. Over the years we have developed some criteria which we use in practice. These include:

- Practice – the promptings of the Spirit are more readily recognised by those who follow the promptings they already have.
- Prayer – the personal testing of what appears to be guidance.
- Persistence – the Spirit will not be ignored.
- Plurality – although a leading may come from a lone voice, we expect it to come from different directions.
- Patience – the Spirit will not be rushed.
- Consistency – with the tradition, but this does not mean being the same; it can be consistency of vision not of practice, or consistency of process not of outcome.
- Confirmation – testing in a gathered meeting for worship, and often being developed and revised.
- Practicality – in an old Quaker phrase “way opens”.
- Fruit – does it advance the kingdom, does this guidance lead

to or show love, joy, peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit?

Having such criteria does not necessarily make discerning the Spirit easy, but it gives a way in which we can all submit our own wishes to the judgement of the meeting and reach a confident sense of guidance. However, while these criteria “work” within the Society, how far can they be extended to others?

How might we recognise the Spirit in other churches?

There is a particular challenge for us in recognising the work of the Spirit among those with whom we disagree. Faithfulness in preaching or in developing beauty in ritual, pastoral care for the armed forces, the careful selection of candidates for an all-male hierarchy, may all cause a certain twitchiness for Quakers. It may be easier to recognise the spirituality of an individual person rather than of an institution. Their spirituality will be based on the practice of prayer and responding to promptings; when we recognise the Spirit in our own lives we may be able better to recognise it in someone else’s.

The following criteria may also be helpful.

- The fruits – is what is being done leading to or demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit?
- Are decisions reached through a process which listens for the Spirit and which values patience, love, peace, and the other signs of the Spirit?
- Consistency – is a decision consistent with
 - the teaching and example of Jesus?
 - the Christian tradition as Quakers understand it (e.g. peace)?
 - the church’s own best tradition?

Questions for Quakers

- What is your experience of recognising the work of the Spirit, in your own life or in your meeting?
- Does the list of criteria ring true to your experience?
- Can you give examples of recognising the Spirit at work in other churches or other faiths? How did you recognise the Spirit at work?

Questions to share with other churches

- How do you recognise the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your church? and in other churches?
- How do we reconcile the different directions in which the Spirit seems to lead different churches?

Further background

The Holy Spirit in the Bible

In the Bible, it is the Spirit of God which is present at creation (Genesis 1), which speaks through the prophets, and which inspires Jesus (Luke 4). In the gospel of John, Jesus teaches that it will lead into truth; in John 20, when he gives the Spirit to his followers he gives them the same mission which he had.

In the Pentecost account in Acts 2, the Spirit is a sign of the new time; it is given to a whole community; throughout Acts it builds up the community and guides decision-making. Paul writes about the gifts which the Spirit gives, and he also tackles the difficult question of how the guidance of the Holy Spirit can be distinguished from our own desires. He writes (Galatians 5:22-3) of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, gentleness, patience, kindness, faithfulness, goodness and self-control.

The Trinity

Quakers recognise in our language and practice the three aspects of God when we speak of “seeking the will of God”, the presence of Christ as “the Light” in our meetings for worship, and “the guidance or inspiration of the Spirit”.

Traditionally the church developed this experience of God into the concept of the Trinity – that God is one but has three “persons” or aspects which cannot be separated or confused – the Father (Creator), the Son (Redeemer/Light/Word) and the Holy Spirit (Sustainer/Life-giver). The Quaker tradition since the 17th century has been to avoid the word “Trinity” because the word is not in the Bible.

Christians value the concept of the Trinity because it enables them to talk of God in different ways emphasising different aspects: the person who talks of God as Spirit, the one who refers to the Creator and the one who emphasises a personal relationship with Christ, are all talking about the same God and are all equally limited in their language and ideas.

4. What are our Sources of Authority?

Authority in a changing world

For Quakers, the primary source of authority is the living Spirit, and discerning its guidance is the purpose of our worship and business meetings. This is a communal process, tested in the worshipping community, as no individual can be certain that the Spirit speaks only through her/him. We do not have a separated priesthood, as all may equally share in and witness to the Spirit, nor do we see Scriptures as God's final word; rather, as Robert Barclay wrote in 1678, "they are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself; therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge" (QFP 27.28). For Quakers, revelation is a continuing process, but in the context of our tradition and experience. We value our historic testimonies to truth, peace, simplicity and equality, interpreted in each generation in changing circumstances, but providing a continuing framework in which to express our faith, experienced in worship and practised in the world.

The minutes of our business meetings, held in the spirit of worship, have authority for us, as being an expression of what the Spirit is saying to the community now, but recognising that our discernment of the Spirit may be inadequate, and that further down the road we may discern things differently. Our own Quaker Faith and Practice bears witness to our attitude to revelation and inspiration. Some parts are "church regulations" which are laid upon us to provide the right conditions for the Spirit to work amongst us; other parts are anthologies of differing expressions of the Spirit at work in our lives. Each generation produces a new book, carrying forward some things from the old, but also allowing the Spirit to find new ways of expressing our faith.

The Spirit and the Bible

The giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Jesus at Pentecost, found in Acts 2, can be seen as a forerunner of the Quaker experience. In the Quaker meeting for worship, as well as at Pentecost, the spiritual experience exceeds the capacity of language to express it, and gives impetus to go out and change the world. In John's Gospel 20:22, the risen Jesus breathes the Spirit on his disciples so that they can continue his mission. Quakers can use these Biblical references as a starting-point for consideration of the work of the Spirit in different parts of the Christian church and beyond.

Traditionally the Bible had the greatest authority for Protestant churches, but the situation today is not uniform. In mainstream Protestant churches, generally the "preaching of the Word" will take some part of the Bible as a starting-point, and elaborate a message for today by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Individuals in Christian churches will probably have a very varied knowledge of the Bible, but they will all be familiar with its use in worship. The clergy and those used to leading worship will probably have greater familiarity than most members of their congregation. Quakers getting involved in ecumenical encounters will also have different levels of knowledge about the Bible, but also different experiences of its use in worship, ranging from none at all to considerable. Depending on the level of ecumenical involvement, Quakers may find it helpful to undertake some Bible study or at least to have thought through their attitude to the Bible; perhaps a course at Woodbrooke might help.

Modern Scholarship

Modern Biblical scholarship, taught in an imaginative way, can throw light on a number of issues which relate to relationships within and between different churches. The variety of possible interpretations may be challenging, but also reassuring, as it

leaves space for the Spirit to work. Seeing the authors of the various books of the Bible within their own contexts, and as poets, story-tellers and theologians, rather than biographers or historians, can bring to life the Biblical traditions which lie behind or pre-date much formulated Christian belief.

Some fundamentalist groups proclaim the Bible as the absolute “word of God”, and will seek to apply it inappropriately to situations today. It can be difficult for Quakers who do not have an adequate understanding of how the Bible developed to seek to engage productively in dialogue. It should also be remembered that the Spirit may be working in such groups in other ways, such as through seriousness of commitment, or through an active prayer life.

For Quakers, the Bible can not be the final word or a permanent record of the will of God, but the Spirit which inspired the words “blows where it wills” and continues to reveal its message within the hearts of those who listen.

Questions for Quakers

- What is the source of authority for you personally and for your meeting?
- How confident do we feel as Quakers with working with Biblical material?
- What would be lost if we didn't have the Bible?
- Are we able to discern the Spirit working in the Bible as well as elsewhere?

Questions for other churches

- What authority does the Bible have in your tradition?
- How do you deal with continuing interpretation?
- Which of the commands of Jesus do you think are essential?
- Which can be modified and why?
- What other sources of authority do you have?

5. Language and experience

How can we understand each other?

Direct experience has always been central for Friends. Words are used to express experience and insights: the experience and insights come first.

Fox and early Friends made extensive use of the Bible to express what they had understood in the silence - and their ability to use the Bible in this way depended on their thorough knowledge of it. Friends today have largely lost this familiarity with the Bible: as well as losing a language to express ourselves we have also lost a means to understand and discuss our faith with Christians of other denominations.

Because Friends depend on experience rather than creeds, and structure their experience and insights as they are led, we may appear “woolly” to others, and we, in turn, may feel alienated or confused by the language others use. However, such moments can also be opportunities to foster discussion if we can create opportunities to ask what words or phrases, or sacramental or other aspects of church life, mean to those who have referred to them, and we are ready to “unpack” in the same way. All present are likely to gain from such exchanges: surprising points of contact often emerge, and words and phrases which hitherto had represented a barrier to understanding can be seen and understood in new ways. Discussions might otherwise proceed “along tramlines”, with everyone using – or believing they use – words and phrases in the same way, and nobody exploring further. Quakers can also be guilty of thinking and expressing themselves “along tramlines”. Ecumenical encounter challenges us too.

Variety of language

All words about religious experience are a “finger pointing at the moon”. If we look for the experience that underlies the words this can unlock texts and practices in ways that are helpful for all involved. Religion, after all, is a universal human impulse: the sense of the sacred, feelings of awe and wonder, of falling short and repentance, of oneness with God and with everything, of being loved and accepted, and of gratitude, are recorded in cultures around the world. Another universal human impulse is to try to express and structure religious experience. However, differences of culture, language, and tradition, mean that people express and structure their insights and feelings in many different ways: a veritable “Tower of Babel”, despite the universality of religious experience.

We sometimes assume that other churches are “monolithic” in their theology. In fact, there is as wide a variety of views in other churches as there is among Friends. Yet we will only discover this if we build relationships that are strong and open enough to allow this sort of exchange of beliefs and experience.

Going Beyond the Words

If we enter discussion with the intention of winning the argument with our words and arguments, others are likely to respond in the same spirit, and regardless of whoever “wins” or is cowed into silence, little real understanding will result. If instead we seek genuinely to understand what others are saying and everything that lies behind their words, this will move the discussions to a different level, and trust and a sense of fellowship may well develop where none seemed possible before.

Working on a project with members of other denominations – whether it be helping in a soup kitchen, working with refugees, campaigning for Fair Trade, or simply putting leaflets in envelopes together – will build strong relationships and an

environment where other issues, such as faith journeys, or faith and practice more generally, can be discussed openly and without “fear of the other”.

Early Friends realised the limitations of words to express the deep truths they knew “experimentally”, and the risk that words can be a barrier, rather than a gateway, to understanding. In the shared stillness of Meeting for Worship we meet in the place where the words come from – the place where Babel is reversed as all wait together in equality and mutual acceptance. And we find this place wherever and whenever true fellowship has been achieved.

Questions for Quakers:

- How far can I express my faith in “traditional” language?
- How has discussion with other churches challenged me?
- What religious terms am I uncomfortable with?
- How can I get beyond these difficulties? How could they become an opportunity?
- Could someone who is not a Quaker work out from my actions what I believe and trust in?

Questions to share with other churches:

- How has discussion with Quakers challenged me?
- Can I work out from the actions of Quakers what they believe and trust in?
- How far can I express my faith in “non-traditional” language?

6. What is “Visible Unity”?

Visible Unity – a Quaker perspective

In the 17th century Thomas Story wrote, “The unity of Christians never did nor ever will stand in uniformity of thought or opinion, but in Christian love only” (QFP 27.12). For the Quaker tradition this love is both the aim and the means of visible unity. It is a major reason for participation in ecumenical endeavours, and our hope for the life and relationships of the churches. We see this love as compatible with the variety of Christian life, structure and practice.

In 1 Corinthians 12 the description of the body of Christ celebrates this diversity. No part of the body can say that it does not belong; nor can one part say of another that it does not belong. But the parts of the body are not the same as each other. They have different tasks.

We can argue that unity is a gift of God. We are already united in so far as we are faithful to our relationship to God.

The ecumenical movement

The stated aim of the ecumenical movement is “visible unity”. For some people this is an organisational or structural aim, bringing churches together. A British example is the United Reformed Church which brought together three separate (though very similar) churches. However, such an endeavour on a larger scale is coming to be seen as unlikely to be achieved. Quakers, with our emphasis on freedom of religion, tend to work for “unity without uniformity”.

Another model is that of creating “ecumenical instruments”, organisations which help churches to work together and to build relationships without dictating what the outcomes might be. In Britain this has had some success with the mainstream

churches, but there are new and independent churches springing up which do not fit easily into these organisations, and indeed may not want to. Some people prefer to talk locally of Christians Together rather than Churches Together. The picture is messy and it is hard to see the way forward.

None of this should stop us from the positive moves of building up relationships with other churches. In many places churches are working together and praying together. Unity is shown in examples such as prison chaplaincy, campaigns for fair trade or racial justice, and joint discussion groups.

What is the church for?

There are other elements of our tradition which contribute to our more detailed thinking. From our origins in the 17th century we have placed an emphasis on the invisible church. This consists of all those who have responded to God, who have let the Inward Light (by whatever name they have called it) become active in their lives. These members of the invisible church may be found in any religion, or none, and even, as Fox put it, “within the several churches”.

Our task however is to be the visible church. We can describe this as consisting of those who are called together to show in and through their community the nature of the life lived in the Light. We can see this task in three ways.

- The church is to be a sign of the kingdom – the reign of God. The ways of life which Quakers call the Testimonies, summed up as peace, equality, justice, simplicity, and truth, are expressions of this eschatological character.
- The church is to live in such a way that it makes real the fruit of the Spirit for everyone.
- The church is to recognise and value the members of the “invisible church”.

For us, therefore, unity between churches must be relational. The more love flourishes between churches, the more we show

the unity God gives us. But there are some hard questions to be explored about how we show this love for each other. Love can be “tough love”, prepared to challenge for the sake of truth, but also prepared to be challenged.

Questions for Quakers

- How do churches work together in your area?
- What would we be prepared to give up from our own tradition for the sake of showing unity in love?

A question to share with other churches

- What might a unity based on love look like?

7. Moving Forward

We know that just polite sharing in worship services is not enough; even when we work together for justice and equality, locally and nationally, we can keep our relationships superficial. When people from all the churches meet in depth, in love and in truth, we can engage with each other in a truly relational ecumenism.

When we understand our own faith, we develop both a confident voice and a confident Quaker heart; we move beyond being simply representatives of our churches each with our denominational labels, and we meet as people, changing, developing, growing and learning together.

Can the Spirit of Love help us all to move forward?

To give your feedback and obtain further information, please contact:

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