



Revitalising Area Meetings

17 November 2013; updated 9 January 2014

This paper has been produced in response to an enquiry from an area meeting. It describes a model for invigorating area meetings.

Introduction

AM X is a small area meeting with numbers steadily declining, and active members growing older and less active. Finding Friends able or willing to take on positions of responsibility at both local and area meeting level has become increasingly difficult. There have been adventurous appointments:

- a 4-person area meeting clerking team
- a finance committee instead of a treasurer
- attenders in roles normally prescribed for members
- single-year appointments

In spite of this, elderly trustees face 'an almost intolerable burden', particularly as the area meeting embarks on a major programme to restore and repair four listed buildings. The clerk of trustees wrote to Quaker Stewardship Committee: 'We do not know where we can go or how we can progress or change. We feel that we are not alone in this position and we [wonder] how other meetings are coping'.

Quaker Stewardship Committee is aware of a number of area meetings that face similar issues, and some have embarked on a process of renewal. One area meeting, in particular, shares much in common. Pickering and Hull is a smallish, ageing area meeting (250 members) with numbers declining, experiencing difficulty in finding Friends to serve, and with a programme of restoring listed buildings. They are just over a year into a process of renewal, with a small working group of four engaging with all within the area meeting to take the process forward. In October 2013 Pickering and Hull agreed a set of protocols, based on a model devised by Northumbria Area Meeting, to bring about renewal.

The changes at Northumbria have been radical and profound, bringing new energy to the area meeting.^{a1} Attendance has doubled. Families and children attend (on one occasion over 20 children). More attenders have come into membership. Filling roles has become easier. The Northumbria model is one that lends itself to replication by other area meetings.

Background to the process of change at Northumbria Area Meeting

The restructuring process at Northumbria AM began with two prompts: a minute from Alnwick Local Meeting, which 'felt geographically isolated and wanted to be a bigger part of the Area Meeting. [They] sensed that Area Meeting was focussed too much on its business and not enough on raising the spirits of Friends'.^{a1} The second prompt was a message from Meeting for Sufferings who wanted to give greater support to area meetings that were experiencing difficulties in attracting Friends, and that were concerned that the spirit was drowning in the business.

Northumbria Area Meeting felt that their spiritual lives could be enriched and their business made more effective if they could find a more sympathetic way of managing their area meeting responsibilities. A visit by Paul Parker reminded Northumbrian Friends that *Quaker faith & practice* is not prescriptive about the shape or format of an area meeting. Northumbria AM began radically restructuring the way they conduct area meeting.

Six key features of the Northumbria Area Meeting model

1. Area meetings are held on Sundays ‘...Sunday Area Meeting releases Saturdays for family stuff and the parking battles with Saturday shoppers.... It also enables Friends to join the host Local Meeting in its Sunday Meeting for Worship. This can re-energise Friends in small meetings.’^{a1}

2. Area meeting meets four times a year (not 8)

3. Local meeting partnerships Eight local meetings are paired with a neighbouring local meeting to form four partnerships. ‘This spreads the challenge of arranging the Area Meeting. Local Meetings have the opportunity to host an Area Meeting every two years – a welcome lessening of the not insignificant burden on small Meetings of being hospitable to Area Meeting once a year as previously.’^{a1}

4. A new model for area meeting has been introduced

- Overnight accommodation is offered
- A big and inclusive welcome for children and children's events
- The day begins with an hour-long meeting for worship, followed by a short refreshment break
- A presentation, exhibition or speaker
- Shared lunch
- A spiritual exercise to put the Friends in a frame of mind to approach important matters
- A smaller and shorter area business meeting from 3.15pm
- Tea and cake

5. Area Meeting Working Group

Perhaps the most significant change has been the creation of an Area Meeting Working Group which meets, significantly, four times a year. Its key task is to absorb as much of the routine business as possible, so that the day can focus on getting to know one another as Friends, friends and as spiritual adventurers. The group assesses which business needs to be taken at the AM business meeting; and commissions a Learning Development Group to create and manage learning and development events and learning materials.

The group comprises at least a named representative and alternate from each local meeting as well as a trustee, a standing nominations committee representative, an elder, an overseer, the area meeting clerking team, a Meeting for Sufferings representative and a member of the Learning Development Committee. This working group is *not* exclusive. It is open to any interested Friend to attend. The group meets in the month preceding full area meeting. This enables area meeting business to progress more easily over the calendar year with no big gaps between business gatherings.

The main focus of the pruned down business meeting is membership: the sending of loving greetings, application visitor reports, testimonies to the Grace of God, ministry about Friends who have recently passed away. Finding visitors to applicants for membership is no longer taken at area meeting¹. The business meeting receives annual reports from local meetings about ‘How truth is prospering’. These are often

¹ The area meeting clerk is the first point of contact for an application for membership. The area meeting clerk approaches the applicant's local meeting elders to find a Friend from that meeting as the first visitor. Elders of the local meeting, knowing the applicant, then approach the elders of another local meeting to find the name of the second visitor. Once the two visitors are found their names are brought by the applicant's local meeting elders to Area Meeting Working Group for appointment.

rich in content, with inspiring stories of the work of Friends, reaching in and reaching out.

The programmes are devised and presented by the paired local meetings, with children fully involved in all aspects. The children have brought 'a refreshing and enthusiastic dynamic to our gatherings'. There are no set criteria for what their occasion may be about, what it might or contain, or the format of the presentation. Northumbria has had puppet shows challenging our attitudes to Trident. They have created playlets challenging our attitudes to and experience of economic injustices. They have held discussion groups, worship sharing and workshops – including community singing, creative writing – and free taster sessions of complementary medicine. They have had visiting speakers – Alex Davison and 'Blooming Quakers', Sue Holden on Economic Justice. They have heard from Andrew Greaves on the Pilgrimage for Peace and Economic Justice from Iona to London in the summer of 2013. 'It really has been creative, novel and indeed spiritually uplifting.'^{a1}

6. A Learning Development Committee has been established.

Its purpose is to evaluate progress, to consider how the area meeting programme fits within the wider context of the Society of Friends and the three aims of Britain Yearly Meeting: strengthening our spiritual roots, witnessing to our faith in action, and promoting the way of life and influence of Quakers, and to produce events and publications that 'move our spirits'.

Reflections on how the Northumbria model is working

- 'Getting to know our Friends in the spirit, not just in the business, has been really beautiful and enriching. Seeing so many children and watching them work together is exciting and hopeful for our Area Meeting and for the Society of Friends. The collaboration between meetings takes away some of that isolation that smaller meetings experience. ... we are doing surprisingly well. It's all a matter of perspective. Friends Meetings everywhere do an awful lot. It's just a matter of shining our light through the prism of Framework for the Future.'^{a1}
- '... these inspirational days.... have measured up to our hopes that they would be busy, varied, engaging, inclusive, inspiring and FUN.'^{a1}
- 'What we have done in Northumbria Area Meeting isn't radical or revolutionary – or disrespectful to tradition. We have responded to an expressed need for better opportunities for spiritual development and to get to know each other as Friends...'^{a1}
- 'The mechanism or device which released our energies for our Area Meetings is our Area Meeting Working Group... In them we place great trust! ... Working Group is effectively absorbing routine business. And our spirit-led gatherings are providing for our spiritual hunger.'^{a1}
- 'Working Group is NOT taking power over our affairs, that remains firmly with Area Meeting.... Our Table of Responsibilities sets out those matters best dealt with by Area Meeting or the Working Group'. These matters 'have been agreed within the wider Area Meeting though a careful, step by step process of consultation with Local Meetings.'^{a1}
- 'The challenges lie in the simple logistics of Local Meetings of varying sizes in being able to cope with large numbers of Friends arriving at their Meeting for Worship, hoping for lunch and ready for a spiritual adventure. This is partly solved by our partnering several Local Meetings together to facilitate these days... If we, as an Area Meeting, have work to do it is in this matter of logistics – and indeed, catering.'^{a1}
- There has been a concern about too much busy-ness and the day being too structured: 'I used to truly appreciate the calm unfolding of a Quaker business meeting, taking the time it needed, promoting that vital quality of self-discipline

among Friends; sometimes irritating or frustrating, but overall an immensely valuable spiritual experience.’^{a2} Friends have suggested (1) that a quiet room could be made available, and (2) as well as other arranged activities, a group could meet to discuss, in an informal way, the main items coming up in the business meeting. ‘This could potentially deepen and inform participation in the business meeting.’^{a2}

- ‘Responses from Friends about the new pattern of Area Meeting have been entirely positive about holding the meetings on Sundays...Friends have been positive about the richness of the new format...The proof of the pudding, for most people, is that more Friends have been attending Area Meeting since the new format...Other area meetings are taking notice of what we are doing and seeking to learn from us in order to revive flagging area meetings.’^{a2}

Additional notes

This report has been based on reports by and conversations with Friends at Northumbria, Pickering & Hull, and Hertford & Hitchin AMs, as well as references cited below. Area Meetings seeking renewal may find further inspiration and/or helpful guidance in the following quotes and pointers:

1. The process of change

- The starting process for area meetings embracing renewal is to achieve ‘buy in’ from Friends and attenders across the area meeting. Bringing Friends and attenders within the area meeting ‘on board’ is an essential first step before adopting, for example, the Northumbria model. Area meetings have achieved high attendance at well-publicised events, such as visits by Paul Parker and by representatives from Northumbria Area Meeting, and/or by holding a workshop facilitated by Quaker Life Network.
- It is important that renewal of area meeting is an open process where everyone is engaged.^e
- ‘Change is always a challenge – but taken in time and at a pace comfortable with your members it can happen. Change does prompt you to look more closely at what you do, why you do it and what spiritual direction you might wish to travel.’^{a1}
- ‘Effective change can only come about if a meeting really believes that it wants to go forward – imposing a new structure from above will not work ...It is never a good idea to simply download a scheme wholesale from outside; each AM needs to look at its own idiosyncratic situation. Behind all of this discussion is the key point that meetings need to focus on: getting to know each other better as a means of building up strengths. There is a need to robustly prioritise AM agendas, use social media, share jobs more widely, improve communications....’^b
- ‘We were stuck in the past. We weren’t flexible enough...It’s about being prepared to work with the issues, not be daunted by them.’^e
- ‘People need to be open to change.... Don’t expect perfection. Things will go wrong.’ (David Hindle, Hertford & Hitchin AM)
- ‘The Friend who was convener of elders at Northumbria had been sceptical but has been completely won over...At Newcastle Meeting they are wondering whether they have enough plates and cutlery [to meet the increase in attendance].’^e

2. Area meetings have the freedom to run their affairs

- ‘Area meetings have the freedom to run their affairs to suit their purposes. Clearly there are some agenda items that area meetings are requested to consider but the routine and format is entirely the choice of area meetings. Friends need to develop confidence in taking this point on board.’^b

- ‘When early Friends got on their horses to go to Area Meetings, they went to talk about their faith, not the things we talk about today.’^c [Paul Parker]

3. Older Friends

- ‘People have the wrong idea about being old. We are taking the wrong attitude to age. It’s a myth. It’s about not feeling bogged down and being released to be spiritually creative. It’s about being vibrant and vital and spiritually engaged.... Older people use their wisdom and understanding. They can cover the same ground by being more careful about how they run the admin side. Age is not a barrier unless we see it like that.... the big thing is that older people can have vitality if they are enthused.’^e

4. Treasurer/finance

- Implementing Paxton software reduces the workload of treasurers and there’s a smaller bill for accountants.^e

5. Administration

- Pickering and Hull AM are thinking of appointing an administrator. They are taking this slowly as they are not yet clear what they need to do.
- Some local meetings outsource administration, such as lettings management. For example, Mindful Business Services⁶ provides remote admin services for meetings.
- One local meeting is amalgamating committees.
- Treasuring – see 4 above.

6. Listed buildings

- Pickering and Hull AM have been involved in refurbishing three listed buildings and another cottage as part of their commitment to sustainability. They have been supported by Finance and Property Committee. In each case the local meeting concerned has taken the lead, and has been supported and sometimes challenged by area meeting e.g. there was an advice about holding costs back. Appeals have been made for two listed buildings. ‘We are up to speed.’^e

7. AM clerking

- At Hertford and Hitchin AM no one was willing to serve as clerk. Shared clerking was introduced, with the host meeting responsible for the clerking. A former clerk of trustees serves as correspondence and continuity clerk. ‘People have become involved in clerking who would never have considered doing so. This has brought new energy and those involved have not felt weighed down by the drudgery of three years of clerking. The area meeting has gained experience and energy.’ [David Hindle]

8. Communication

- Good communication is key. At Northumbria Area Meeting the clerking team of the Working Group (which meets ahead of area meeting) circulates minutes, reports and papers to local meetings and 120 Friends within two days of meeting; the clerks send out early agendas.^{a1}

9. More hints and tips

- To ease catering arrangements: ‘We have discovered plain brown paper Picnic Bags – a sandwich, a piece of fruit, a juice drink, and a packet of crisps.’^{a1}
- One host meeting hired a village hall and offered transport between the meeting house and the village Hall – this was very successful.^{a2}

References & contacts

- a. Northumbria Area Meeting Reports:
 - a₁ 'Changing Our Ways – Revitalising Area Meeting' (Michael Long, 8 September 2013; revised December 2013).
Note: This report includes a useful appendix entitled 'Table of responsibilities', which lays out clearly how responsibilities can be divided between (1) the Area Meeting Working Group and (2) the Area Meeting Business Meeting.
 - a₂ 'Area Meeting: How are we doing? Final Report' (Peter Bennet, December 2013)
- b. Feedback from workshop held at Malton Meeting House for Hull & Pickering AM (Nick Tyldesley, 10 August 2013)
- c. 'Putting the sparkle back in Area Meeting' (Judy Kirby, *The Friend*, 1 November 2012)
- d. Michael Long, Clerk, Northumbria Area Meeting
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