

Membership: principles and processes

Membership involves 'the individual on their spiritual journey and a whole community of faith'. (*Quaker faith & practice* 11.05)



Principles

To the individual membership may give a sense of belonging, acceptance, an identity and recognition of having found a spiritual home. Through being a member of a religious community we may be able to come into our truest selves and ‘render to the world the services it sorely needs’ (Pierre Ceresole, *Quaker faith & practice* 10.29). Membership may inspire us to persevere in times when we are spiritually cold. Through the membership of individuals the community is affirmed and strengthened spiritually. Our commitment to loving one another that comes from membership strengthens our worship and enables spiritual leadership.

There are almost 14,000 members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.¹ As our title shows, we are both a religious community of Friends and a ‘society’, an organisation. As a community we come together in worship and support one another. As an organisation we have a shared identity and can speak and act together. Membership links the individual to the community and the organisation; it can be seen as an administrative recognition of a spiritual connection or commitment. Together we grow as individuals and as a community, rooted in and learning from our Quaker tradition and open to new light.

‘Membership is still seen as a discipleship, a discipline within a broadly Christian perspective and our Quaker tradition, where the way we live is as important as the beliefs we affirm.’ (*Quaker faith & practice* 11.01)

Membership provides the community with a framework in which to explore and practise our corporate worship and processes and live out our shared witness. The boundaries provided by membership hold us accountable as individuals to our faith community and our Quaker tradition.

‘Religion implies a sense of being bound to the community in which you live and to its members.’ (Gerald Hewitson, *Journey into life*, Swarthmore Lecture, 2013)

As an organisation membership is essential to our existence. It enables us to have a public voice, relate to other organisations, support members and meetings financially and gives certain privileges, such as charitable status.

Membership brings responsibilities for the individual and for the group both as a community and an organisation. All members are part of the priesthood of all believers and have responsibility for the maintenance of the meeting as a spiritual community. This means contributing to the meeting, in whatever ways are right for them, by giving time and energy to necessary tasks, participating in making

¹ There were 13,906 members as at 31 December 2012.

(Tabular statement: www.quaker.org.uk/files/Tabular-statement-2013-web.pdf)

decisions and working together under Quaker discipline. Membership also entails a financial commitment appropriate to a member's means.

Processes

Becoming a member involves a process of discernment by the individual and the meeting, following a simple procedure agreed by the area meeting, which is open to all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

Procedures have to be simple and flexible enough to reflect individual and local circumstances. Experience shows that there is no 'one size' that comfortably fits all, and many area meetings have developed a variety of routes into membership in order to meet different needs (*Quaker faith & practice* 11.04).

The process may be initiated by the individual, overseers, a local meeting or, where a nurturing process is in place, supporting/nurturing Friends, or a parent/guardian or advocate (*Quaker faith & practice* 11.10). The process should be open and inclusive and involve the potential member, whatever their age, throughout.

Whatever the route, the area meeting makes the final decision after a process of discernment and must be well enough informed to discern whether membership is right from the point of view of the community and the individual. The process will involve trust as well as information, which may be presented in various ways and come from different sources:

- Nurturing/supporting Friends may write a report or letter of application with the individual after a period during which they have met and explored together.
- A meeting for clearness may take place, followed by the writing of a report or minute.
- A local meeting may send a minute and report to the area meeting. This is likely to be particularly appropriate for someone who has been very well known to the meeting over a long time.
- Visitors appointed by an area meeting may offer a report after meeting with the person applying for membership.
- A visit and report may be adapted to involve both the individual and a parent or guardian, in the case of a child, or an advocate for a person with limited capacity.
- The applicant and any representative or supporter should be party to any written report prepared as part of the process, which must be compliant with legal requirements such as the Data Protection Act.

- Information might also be provided by other Quaker groups that the individual has contact with, e.g. listed informal groups, university chaplain, young people's link group.

'The Quaker community should be sure that the potential member has an understanding of the meaning and responsibilities of membership appropriate to their age and abilities. Potential members should be supported and nurtured before, during and after the process.'

(Quaker faith & practice 11.06)

What to check in relation to any procedures:

- Can they include children, people with limited capacity, limited literacy or education, those who are diffident, those with very long experience of Friends?
- Are the procedures clear and explained so that the applicant knows what to expect? Are they supported throughout the process? Might the process be seen as daunting or threatening? Traditional 'visits' have often been seen by some as intimidating.
- Does the process include the potential member throughout? Are they included in the writing of any report?
- Are all appropriate sources of information used to guide the process, e.g. other Quaker groups the potential member currently has or has had close contact with?

The acceptance of a new member should be a joyful occasion for the individual and the meeting.

'...Friends are together on a pilgrimage of hope. We continue to follow our inward Teacher, sometimes falteringly, sometimes confidently, but always in the company of those who have travelled this way before us and those who are journeying with us now.' (Britain Yearly Meeting Epistle, 2013)

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