

# A spirit-led church a study guide for Friends



This study guide has been prepared by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) in order to help Friends engage with the paper *A Spirit-led Church* (available at [www.quaker.org.uk/qccir](http://www.quaker.org.uk/qccir)). This paper is a response by QCCIR on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting to the World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith and Order paper no 214, *The Church, Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva 2013).

See: [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision)

Photo: The view across Morecambe Bay. Credit: Rowena Loverance

# 1. Why study this material?

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**1.1** The most important purpose of the World Council of Churches (WCC) text, as it states in its opening pages, is not about trying to find theological agreement, but about renewal. The writers hope that by reflecting on why we are in the church, and what the purpose of the church is, we can all deepen our common life and make the church stronger to carry out its work in the world.

Britain Yearly Meeting's (BYM) 2014 Swarthmore Lecture, *Open for Transformation*, expressed precisely the same hope. If the Spirit is at work in other churches, we cannot ignore its work.

**1.2** But of course the text is also hoping to identify areas of theological agreement. The WCC does this by trying to identify things that all the different parts of the church hold in common, and then reflecting them back to the church to see if they have discerned correctly. This process is known as 'convergence'.

The first WCC 'convergence' text was *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva 1982); BYM's reply was published as *To Lima with Love*. Thirty years ago, the process of reflecting on what Quakers understand by sacrament, communion and ministry was of great help to the yearly meeting as it prepared for the previous revision of *Quaker faith & practice*. QCCIR hopes that reflecting on this second 'convergence' text may help Friends clarify their thoughts in a similar way.

**1.3** Quakers have one big thing to say to other churches and faith communities: that the only criterion of being the church is that each one of us can know the living God (*the Spirit / the divine / love, whatever we want to call it*) in our meetings and in our lives, and that this knowledge enables us to live out God's purposes in the world.

We are not the only people who believe this, but we are probably the people who say it most consistently. We need to convince other churches – by how we explain it as well as how we practice it – that this way of being the church does work.

**1.4** Quakers tend to pretend we don't have an 'ecclesiology' – a theology of the church – but of course we do. Every time we argue about the

meaning of membership, what authority we give to our book of discipline, how to make our meetings more vibrant, how to prioritise our central work in a long-term framework, how we relate to other yearly meetings. Our attitude to all these issues depends on our understanding of what kind of community we are.

Considering these matters through the 'lens' of how other churches think and operate may help us clarify our own thinking.

## 2. Other resources you might find helpful

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### ***Quakers and the ecumenical agenda***

In 2009, QCCIR prepared a study guide for Friends to help them consider ecumenical issues before raising them in ecumenical groups. Each section includes questions for Friends, and questions to share with other churches. This material is still valid, and we warmly recommend it to meetings. See [www.quaker.org.uk/quakers-and-ecumenical-agenda](http://www.quaker.org.uk/quakers-and-ecumenical-agenda) or contact the Quaker Centre (details on back page) for paper copies.

Issues covered include:

- Why are we involved in ecumenical discussions at all?
- What are the Quaker 'treasures' we bring, and what can we receive?
- How we recognise the movement of the Spirit, and how we can recognise it at work in other churches?
- What are our sources of authority?
- Language and going beyond words
- What is the church for?

### ***Open for transformation: Being Quaker***

Ben Pink Dandelion's 2014 Swarthmore Lecture contains lots of useful study material and although couched in language rather more familiar to Friends, covers a lot of the same ground as the WCC text. It also has helpful guidelines about how to work in small groups.

Topics include:

- Celebrating the Quaker way
- Our spiritual experience
- Identifying our gifts and needs as a meeting
- How our meeting works
- Living the Quaker Way.

### **3. Thinking about being 'A Spirit-led Church'**

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#### **3.1** Sharing stories: What is your experience of the church?

- Did you come to Friends from another religious affiliation?
- Have you been a member of another Quaker meeting before your current one?
- Do you notice any differences?
- Since you've been a Friend, what has been your personal experience of encounter with other Christian churches?
- Has your Meeting any corporate experience of encounter with other Christian churches?
- How have these encounters surprised you? Have they confirmed or called into question any assumptions you might have made?
- How has your experience of other churches shaped your understanding of Quakerism?

#### **3.2** Our understanding of ourselves and of others: What do you understand by the words 'Religious Society' and 'church'?

- Do Quakers in Britain regard themselves as members of a church?
- Do Quakers in Britain regard themselves as members of *the* church?
- What are the implications of this self-understanding for how we regard other Christian churches?
- How do we see the Spirit at work among us and among other churches?

### 3.3 Sharing and receiving treasures

- Do you agree that at the core of being a Quaker is our experience of the transforming presence of God (the Spirit / love / the divine) in our worshipping communities?
- What insights have you received from your experiences of other churches?
- Are there any areas of corporate Quaker life where you think we might learn from other churches?

## 4. Questions about 'A Spirit-led Church'

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**This response is being considered by Meeting for Sufferings in September 2015, so please discuss these issues with your Meeting for Sufferings representative.**

- Has QCCIR got the balance right between affirming the inclusive spirit of the WCC text and reasserting Quaker insights?
- Are there additional points that you think we could usefully make?
- Do you consider this response reflects the current views of Britain Yearly Meeting?

## 5. Thinking about the WCC text

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*The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is a theologically complicated text. If your study group would like to engage with it directly, here are two ways we suggest you might want to tackle it:

- You could use the five questions at the start of the text, which the WCC has specifically asked the churches to answer (p.3). We've re-framed them to make them more specific for Friends (section 6).
- You could choose one of the passages printed at intervals in the text in italics: these refer to areas where the WCC thinks the churches are still quite far apart and where there is more work to be done. For convenience, we've made a list of them (section 7).

## 6. Thinking about the WCC text: the five questions

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1. How far do you find your own understanding of the church reflected in the text?
2. What contribution do you think this text can make to the search for Christian unity?
3. Does the text suggest any areas in which you think the Religious Society of Friends in Britain needs to change or be renewed?
4. What difference would it make to Quakers in Britain if we, and the rest of the churches in Britain, agreed on the picture of the church given in this text?
5. What issues does the text *not* discuss that you think it should?

## 7. Thinking about the WCC text: some specific issues

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The WCC has identified 13 passages, printed in italics, where they think particular work needs to be done.

*Fundamental issues on the way to unity* (Chapter 1, p.8)

*How continuity and change in the Church relate to God's will* (Chapter II, p.14)

*The expression "the Church as sacrament"* (Chapter II, p. 16)

*Legitimate and divisive diversity* (Chapter II, p.17)

*The relationship between local and universal Church* (Chapter II, p.18,19)

*Sacraments and ordinances* (Chapter III, p.25)

*Ordained ministry* (Chapter III, p.26)

*The threefold ministry* (Chapter III, p.27)

*Authority in the Church and its exercise* (Chapter III, p.29)

*The authority of Ecumenical Councils* (Chapter III, p.30)

*A universal ministry of unity* (Chapter III, p.32)

*Ecumenical response to religious pluralism* (Chapter IV p.34)

*Moral questions and the unity of the Church* (Chapter IV p.35, 36)

Some of these aren't particularly relevant to Friends, but some are. These are three which you might like to discuss in more detail.

## Legitimate and divisive diversity (chapter II, p.17)

*'Ecumenical dialogue in search of the unity for which Christ prayed has, in large part, been an effort by representatives from various Christian churches to discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what is necessary for unity, according to the will of God, and what is properly understood as legitimate diversity. Though all churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity, it is clear that two things are lacking: (a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively. All churches seek to follow the will of the Lord yet they continue to disagree on some aspects of faith and order and, moreover, on whether such disagreements are church-divisive or, instead, part of legitimate diversity. We invite the churches to consider: what positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible?'*

This one is very relevant for Friends, because many of the issues on which we differ from other churches (sacraments, clergy, creeds etc) might be considered to fall outside the bounds of 'legitimate' diversity. On the other hand, it could be argued, as Ben does in his Swarthmore Lecture, that by trying to incorporate all points of view, we are in danger of losing touch with our core insights.

- Do you agree with the concepts of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' diversity?
- Do you think Quakers have our 'own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity'? If not, why not?
- Have Quakers anything to offer the WCC about our experience of living with diversity?
- Could Quakers offer the WCC any advice about what a process of common discernment might look like?

## Ecumenical response to religious pluralism (chapter IV, p.34)

*'There remain serious disagreements within and between some churches concerning these issues. The New Testament teaches that God wills the salvation of all people (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4) and at the same time, that Jesus is the one and only saviour of the world (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5 and Acts 4:12). What conclusions may be drawn from these biblical teachings regarding the possibility of salvation for those who do not believe in Christ? Some hold that, in ways known to God, salvation in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is possible for those who do not explicitly share Christian faith. Others do not see how such a view sufficiently corresponds to biblical passages about the necessity of faith and baptism for salvation. Differences on this question will have an impact upon how one understands and puts into practice the mission of the church. Within today's context of increased awareness of the vitality of various religions throughout the world, how may the churches arrive at greater convergence about these issues and cooperate more effectively in witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed?'*

From their earliest days Quakers have always believed strongly in religious pluralism. So it is good that the WCC is flagging it up here.

- How do you think the churches might together come to a greater convergence about this issue?
- Inter-religious dialogue is under considerable strain in today's world. How do you think contemporary political issues are impacting on relations between peoples of different faith? What witness do Friends have to offer?

## Moral questions and the unity of the church (chapter IV, p.35, 36)

*'Ecumenical dialogue at the multilateral and bilateral levels has begun to sketch out some of the parameters of the significance of moral doctrine and practice for Christian unity. If present and future ecumenical dialogue is to serve both the mission and the unity of the church, it is important that this dialogue explicitly address the challenges to convergence represented by contemporary moral issues. We invite the churches to explore these issues in a spirit of mutual attentiveness and support. How might the churches, guided by the Spirit, discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching and attitude of Jesus? How can the churches, as they engage together in this task of discernment, offer appropriate models of discourse and wise counsel to the societies in which they are called to serve?'*

The WCC text distinguishes between 'individual moral values' and 'the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment' (62). Historically, Friends have probably had a lot more to say about the latter than the former.

- Do you think Friends today place enough emphasis on individual moral values?
- Most Friends would probably not look to the inspiration and insights of the Gospels in evaluating new developments in moral thinking (63). So how do we avoid simply falling in with secular moral values?

**Thank you for helping the Quaker Committee for Christian Relationships in its work for the Yearly Meeting by considering these issues.**

**If you would like to communicate with the committee, please write to us via our Secretary, Marigold Bentley, at Friends House.**

**QCCIR is in process of setting up an e-group for those who would like to continue to be involved in its work. If you would like to join this, please go to:**

**<http://lists.quaker.eu.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/qccir>.**

Published in August 2015 by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR). For further copies of this booklet, or for paper copies of the resources listed inside, please contact the Quaker Centre, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ; email [quakercentre@quaker.org.uk](mailto:quakercentre@quaker.org.uk) or call 020 7663 1030.

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