

## **A theological basis for children and young people's participation in Quaker decision-making**

This paper draws on *Quaker Faith and Practice, Advices and Queries* and other writings to give a theological and spiritual basis for the inclusion of children and young people in Quaker decision making process at all levels within the Religious Society of Friends, including their participation in Quaker meetings for worship for church affairs. There are five interrelated elements to this issue: faith, equality, nurturing, experience and community.

*Advices & Queries 7* asks us whether we are open to new light, from whatever source it may come. Amongst early Friends, the light was seen in children: 'and whilst I was in the dungeon a little boy, one James Parnell, about fifteen years old, came to me, and he was convinced and came to be a very fine minister of the word of life' (George Fox, *Qf&p* 19.26). How will we recognise the James Parnells of today if we don't include them and aren't open to seeking, and recognising their ministry?

### **Faith**

In 1986 Yearly Meeting stated that 'the priesthood of all believers is a foundation of our understanding of the church. Our own experience leads us to affirm that the church can be so ordered that the guidance of the Holy Spirit can be known and followed without the need for a separated clergy' (*Qf&p* 27.35). The priesthood of all believers necessarily includes children and young people, 'The Spirit in which the apostles lived... which was poured out at Pentecost on all the church, young and old, women and men, continues in our experience to empower all members of the church in a variety of ministries' (*Qf&p* 27.35).

As an all-age religious community we should only do those things separately which we cannot in all conscience do together, including worshipping, learning and following the guidance of the spirit. This should be in addition to the participation of children and young people in separate events which enable them to worship and learn in age-appropriate ways which speak to their experience.

### **Equality**

Underlying the concept of the priesthood of all believers is a belief in the equality of all human beings of whatever sex, race, class or age which is firmly grounded in God's love for each individual, rather than in social fashion. (*Qf&p* 23.73). An awareness of, and commitment to, the religious equality of each and every one is central to the Quaker testimony to equality.

We help [our children]... by recognising their own full stature as God's children. If we, the important adults in their lives, respect their integrity, their capacity to worship and experience God, then they will respect it too. If we share the skills that we are learning, then they will practise them too. If we are truly touched by God in worship, and realise that we can all, both young and old, open up to God, then we have made a good foundation. (*Qf&p* 22.71)

Children and young people are able to experience God in worship and contribute through spoken ministry. Quaker meetings for church affairs are also meetings for worship based on silence carrying the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned (*Qf&p* 3.02) children and young people can, and do, experience God in this context too.

We can, and should, help children and young people to have an understanding of the Quaker business method and an awareness of what will happen, to ensure that they, like all of us, come with hearts and minds prepared

### **Nurturing**

Preparing hearts and minds is about nurture, it is education in its broadest sense:

We need to instruct our children in the widest sense, so that they can use the knowledge we pass on, both in relation to the Bible and to our Quaker heritage... We do our children a disservice if we do not pass on to them our concerns, beliefs and ideas. (*Qf&p* 2.75).

In nurturing young Friends as co-religionists we should enable them to understand how we as Quakers make decisions and our unique method of discerning the will of God. This is something that cannot be taught purely in a traditional way but is something that we as Friends come to know 'experimentally'. As adults we learn about how the Quaker business method works through attending meetings, through participating in the worship, this is how young people should learn about it as well. *Advices and Queries* 19 asks us to be ready both to learn from young people and to accept our responsibilities towards them. It encourages us to allow and enable them to develop as the spirit of God may lead them and to seek for them a full development of God's gifts, which includes the gift of discernment.

## Experience

Friends may argue that children and young people's limited experience of life or of Quakerism limits the extent to which they can actively and appropriately participate in Meetings for Worship for Church Affairs or that they would be unable to grasp the intricacies of matters or complexity of issues being considered by the meeting. However, the same may be true of some adult Friends and, importantly, seeking the will of God, whether in Meeting for Worship, or Meeting for Worship for Business is a spiritual exercise not an intellectual one. What we require is religious awareness and 'the whole of our everyday experience is the stuff of our religious awareness: it is here that God is best known to us' (*Qf&p* 27.38). Children and young people also have everyday experience, and through that, an awareness of God, it may be different to that of older Friends but that does not allow us to dismiss it by excluding them from participation in the life of our meetings:

It is always to be recognised that, coming together with a variety of temperaments, of background, education and experience, we shall have differing contributions to make to any deliberation... we are called to honour our testimony that to every one is given a measure of the light, and that it is in the sharing of knowledge, experience and concern that the way towards unity will be found' (*Qf&p* 3.05).

This variety of experience includes children and young people. They too are given a measure of the light and through sharing their knowledge, experience and concerns they can help the meeting to find real unity.

There are concerns that children and young people couldn't fit into the way the Quaker business method works, particularly at Yearly Meeting and in the way committees work, and including children and young people may mean we have to think about how we conduct our business, although not the basis of our method. However, all our meetings for church affairs should be used imaginatively (*Qf&p* 3.29). How can we know though, that children and young people will be able to cope with the rigours of a meeting for worship for church affairs when we have no evidence to base this on, no proof that this is possible? We don't. What we do know is that as Quakers, 'our experience [is] that God speaks to and works through children as well as adults' (*Qf&p* 23.73) and our approach to children and young people should not be based on what they are yet to achieve or prove but on what they can do now. In society children are constantly required to prove themselves capable before they are entrusted with tasks, in a way that is not always the same for adults. Friends can provide a witness that affirms that children and young people are people and Quakers now, not in the making.

Some Friends may feel that because many young Friends are not in membership and are not 'convinced' Friends there are some parts of our life as a church that they cannot contribute to. However some children and young people are convinced Friends and are deeply committed to Quakerism, without being in formal membership. Meetings may not encourage young people to apply for membership and young Friends often understand their sense of belonging and commitment to the Religious Society of Friends in ways other than through formal membership.

## Community

As Quakers we should strive to make our meetings communities in which each person is accepted and nurtured (*Advices & Queries* 18). The meeting includes all aspects of its life together: worship, social activities, service, committee work and our decision making. Our idea of a meeting as a community shouldn't be limited to local meetings but extends to monthly meetings and to Yearly Meeting. Living in a community is an exercise in selflessness. Part of the cost of discipleship is living with the other disciples (*Qf&p*.28), part of the cost of being a Friend and living in an all-age religious community is that we may have to do things in ways unfamiliar to us, and may be limited in what we can do. There is a cost for young Friends in this as well as for adults, however:

Our sense of community does not depend on all professing identical beliefs, for it grows from worshipping together, knowing one another, loving one another, accepting responsibilities, sharing and working together. We will be helped by tried and tested Quaker methods and procedures, but the meeting will only live if we develop a sense of community, which includes children and adults alike. (*Qf&p* 10.03).