Chapter 5

General meetings and other gatherings

GENERAL MEETINGS: DESCRIPTIONS AND FUNCTIONS

5.01 The origin of regional gatherings, each embracing several monthly meetings, goes back to 1660 when George Fox was 'moved to set up the men's quarterly meetings throughout the nations'. These were followed by women's quarterly meetings. From the middle of the eighteenth century these progressively became mixed. They gradually took on considerable responsibilities for discipline, inspiration, pastoral care and records of membership. They also nominated members for service on Meeting for Sufferings. Overall they functioned as a link in the chain of responsibilities joining local meetings to the yearly meeting. With reorganisation in 1967 the title and function of quarterly meetings disappeared and they were renamed 'general meetings.' In the years following some became inactive and were held in suspense pending any further changes in the structure of Britain Yearly Meeting. All continuing meetings concentrated mainly on their functions of being places of wider fellowship, holding meetings for conference, inspiration and extension work, and offering a broad support of Quaker life and witness within their region. Some retained administrative responsibilities, particularly in relation to Quaker schools and the care and nurture of children and young people.

5.02 The name general meeting is now used for several different kinds of organisation, usually based on a geographical grouping of several area meetings. The General Meeting for Scotland (see 5.03) and Meeting of Friends in Wales (see 5.04 and 5.05) have certain delegated powers from Yearly Meeting. Yearly Meeting in 2005 recognised that some geographic general meetings wished to be laid down and with effect from Yearly Meeting in 2007 the eighteen regional general meetings in England and Wales were removed from the administrative structure. There are two other distinct types of general meeting, one

being any Quaker school general meeting that functions solely as that school's responsible body, the other being Young Friends General Meeting (see 5.09).

General Meeting for Scotland

5.03 General Meeting for Scotland has national responsibilities on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting, to represent and advance the life and witness of Quakers in Scotland. It consists of all Friends in membership of the Scottish area meetings, and meets at least quarterly. Provision is made for members of other meetings and attenders to be present at meetings as in 4.08. The responsibilities of General Meeting for Scotland include:

a. promoting spiritual life and witness, facilitating contact between Friends of all ages, and providing opportunities for training and mutual support for those with special responsibilities, in conjunction with the associated area meetings and Quaker bodies;
b. representing Britain Yearly Meeting in Scotland, including: acting on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting in relation to ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland) (see 9.09-9.12) and other church and faith groups; acting on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting and of Friends in Scotland in dealings with the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and the Scotland Office, and on such procedures as may be required by the Scottish legal system;
c. encouraging communication from Scottish area meetings on matters which in their judgement merit interchange of views (see 4.18) including testimonies to the life and service of deceased Friends, discerning whether the latter be forwarded to Yearly Meeting for the benefit of the Society as a whole (see 4.27-4.30);
d. representing Scotland to Britain Yearly Meeting, liaising with yearly meeting committees and departments where appropriate.

General Meeting for Scotland will provide information and nominations or appointed representatives to Quaker and other

bodies when required. The meeting may communicate by minute with Yearly Meeting through its agenda committee (6.18) and Meeting for Sufferings (7.04), as well as with area meetings in Scotland. It also has the obligation to receive minutes from these bodies.

Meeting of Friends in Wales

5.04 Meeting of Friends in Wales has national responsibilities on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting, to represent and advance the life and witness of Quakers within Wales. The meeting consists of all Friends who live in Wales or who are members in local meetings within Wales. Provision is made for members of other meetings and attenders to be present at meetings as in 4.08. The responsibilities of Meeting of Friends in Wales include:

a. promoting spiritual life and witness, facilitating contact between Friends of all ages, and providing opportunities for training and mutual support for those with special responsibilities, in conjunction with associated area meetings and Quaker bodies;
b. representing Britain Yearly Meeting in Wales, including: the appointment of Friends to serve on Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) and its committees (see 9.09-9.12), communication with the National Assembly for Wales, and with other public and voluntary organisations in Wales, especially those concerned with social witness, peace and interfaith;
c. encouraging communication from associated area meetings on matters which in their judgement merit interchange of views (see 4.18) including testimonies to the life and service of deceased Friends, discerning whether the latter be forwarded to Yearly Meeting for the benefit of the Society as a whole (see 4.27-4.30);
d. responding to issues which relate to living in a bilingual society, including outreach in Wales and commissioning, translating and publishing Quaker material in the Welsh language;

e. representing Wales to Britain Yearly Meeting, liaising with yearly meeting committees and departments where appropriate.

The Meeting of Friends in Wales will provide information and nominations or appointed representatives to Quaker and other bodies when required. The meeting may communicate by minute with Yearly Meeting through its agenda committee (6.18) and Meeting for Sufferings (7.04), as well as with area meetings which include parts of Wales. It also has the obligation to receive minutes from these bodies.

The following is a translation into Welsh of 5.04

Cyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru

5.05 Mae gan Gyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru gyfrifoldebau ar ran Cyfarfod Blynyddol Prydain, i gynrychioli ac hyrwyddo bywyd a thystiolaeth y Crynwyr yng Nghymru. Mae'r cyfarfod yn cynnwys pawb o'r Crynwyr sydd yn byw yng Nghymru neu yn aelodau o gyfarfodydd lleol yng Nghymru. Gwneir darpariaeth i aelodau o gyfarfodydd eraill fynychu cyfarfodydd yn unol â 4.08. Mae cyfrifoldebau Cyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru yn cynnwys:

a. ar y cyd â chyfarfodydd rhanbarth perthnasol a chyrff Crynwrol eraill hybu bywyd a thystiolaeth ysbrydol, hwyluso cyswllt rhwng Cyfeillion o bob oed a chynnig cyfleoedd am hyfforddiant a chyd gefnogaeth i'r rhai sydd â chyfrifoldebau arbennig;
b. cynrychioli Cyfarfod Blynyddol Prydain o fewn Cymru, gan gynnwys: penodi Cyfeillion i weithredu ar Cytûn (Eglwysi Ynghyd yng Nghymru) a'i bwyllgorau (gweler 9.09-9.12), cyfathrebu gyda Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru a gyda chyrff cyhoeddus a gwirfoddol eraill yng Nghymru, yn enwedig y rhai sydd yn ymwneud â thystiolaeth gymdeithasol, heddwch ac amlffydd;
c. annog cyfathrebu oddiwrth y cyfarfodydd rhanbarth perthnasol ar faterion sydd, yn eu tyb hwy, yn haeddu cael eu cyd drafod, gan gynnwys tystiolaethau i fywyd a gwasanaeth

Cyfeillion ymadawedig, gan ddirnad os dylid anfon rhain at y Cyfarfod Blynyddol er lles y Gymdeithas gyfan (gweler 4.27-4.30);

ch. ymateb i faterion sydd yn ymwneud â byw mewn cymdeithas ddwyieithog gan gynnwys ymestyn i'r gymuned yng Nghymru a chomisiynu, cyfieithu a chyhoeddi deunydd Crynwrol yn y Gymraeg;

d. cynrychioli Cymru i Gyfarfod Blynyddol Prydain, gan gysylltu â phwyllgorau ac adrannau y cyfarfod blynyddol fel bo'n addas.

Fe fydd Cyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru yn darparu gwybodaeth ac enwebiadau neu benodiadau i gyrff Crynwrol a chyrff eraill yn ôl y galw. Gall y Cyfarfod gysylltu trwy gofnod â Chyfarfod Blynyddol Prydain trwy ei bwyllgor agenda (6.18) a'r Cyfarfod Dioddefiannau (7.04), ac hefyd â'r cyfarfodydd rhanbarth sy'n cynnwys rhannau o Gymru. Mae hefyd yn ofynnol i'r cyfarfod dderbyn cofnodion gan y cyrff hyn.

Other gatherings

5.06 Other Quaker gatherings, assemblies or associations provide a place of fellowship and a means for Friends to have a vital sense of being part of a larger Quaker body beyond their local meetings.

A number of Quaker gatherings are former geographic general meetings which wish to continue as gatherings, having been removed from the administrative and constitutional structure by Yearly Meeting (see 5.02). Yearly Meeting asked them at that time to consider renaming themselves. Other Quaker gatherings may be set up subsequently.

General meetings and gatherings provide for conference and inspiration, and for broad support of the life and witness of Quakers within their compass, considering regularly what is being done and what might be done to extend the service of their members and to reach out to those who are in need of spiritual guidance and friendship (see 12.06). They also find opportunities to consider the

work of the yearly meeting and may link with ecumenical and interfaith activities in their area.

5.07 Quaker gatherings or conferences may be set up by two or more area meetings, by a mix of area and local meetings, or by two or more general meetings. The constituent meetings are those that choose to take the responsibility for organising and funding such gatherings or conferences. The members are the members of the sponsoring meetings.

If a newly formed gathering is intended to have an ongoing structure and regular meetings, it must inform Meeting for Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting of its existence and proposed mode of operation. All gatherings (including those that continue from pre-existing general meetings) must inform Meeting for Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting of any substantial changes in their mode of operation or constituent meetings.

General meetings or gatherings that wish to discontinue activity must ensure the appropriate winding up of their responsibilities and funds. They must notify Meeting for Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting of their intention to lay themselves down, then of the steps that they take to discharge or transfer their responsibilities and to deposit their records. Lastly they should forward to the Recording Clerk the minute by which they are finally laid down.

SIX WEEKS MEETING

5.08 Six Weeks Meeting, dating back to 1671, does not fit neatly into the modern pattern of area meetings, general meetings and gatherings. It is made up of representatives from the area meetings within the London region. Its main objective is to maintain, preserve and insure the places of worship of the constituent area meetings, and their contents. It is accountable to the constituent meetings for the stewardship of the funds and assets it holds on their behalf. It may communicate formally by minute with the constituent area meetings, Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting.

The names of constituent area meetings in 2008 were Kingston & Wandsworth; London West; North East Thames; North London; North West London; Purley & Sutton and South East London. Each appoints an agreed number of representatives to Six Weeks Meeting (currently three). The normal period of appointment or re-appointment is five years. The Friends appointed are individually managing trustees of the properties and financial assets in the care of Six Weeks Meeting (15.03).

YOUNG FRIENDS GENERAL MEETING

5.09 Young Friends General Meeting is open to Quakers between the ages of 18 and about 30 who need not be formally in membership of the Religious Society of Friends. Area meetings may appoint representatives to Young Friends General Meeting. At its meetings for business three times a year it organises a range of other events for young people. It may communicate formally by minute with area meetings, Britain Yearly Meeting and its Agenda Committee, Meeting for Sufferings and the standing committees of Yearly Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings.

Young Friends General Meeting nominates two representatives to Meeting for Sufferings, being officers or others able to speak in its name (see 7.05.c).