

Chapter 9

Beyond Britain Yearly Meeting

INTRODUCTION

- 9.01 Our meetings for church affairs, within the compass of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, exist within a variety of contexts. Britain Yearly Meeting is part of the world family of Friends; Britain Yearly Meeting sees itself corporately, and is seen by others, as part of the Christian church both globally and locally; interfaith dialogue is increasingly part of contemporary religious life. Within the spectrum of Britain Yearly Meeting there is a wide range of individual understandings of these three contexts, but all three will impinge on the life of our meetings. We need to remain aware of the wider relationships involved, and to take them into account in the conduct of our church affairs.

This chapter describes the formal relationships into which Britain Yearly Meeting has entered, their constitutional foundations and the structures which foster those relationships. It also offers advice on some of the implications for our meetings of Friends' ecumenical involvement at different levels, and on how best to address the problems and opportunities which arise.

Friends do not share a single understanding of the nature of the church, or of our place within it; we tend to feel our way into relationships with which we are reasonably comfortable, rather than prescribe a particular arrangement of structures as correct. This places a heavy but necessary responsibility on our meetings for church affairs, at all levels, for the right conduct of their deliberations leading to decisions on their interchurch involvement.

It is hoped that the following paragraphs will help Friends, whatever our differing views of the nature of the church, towards a fuller understanding of the contexts within which our meetings exist, and

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will guide us in the conduct of our meetings for church affairs when challenged by relationships with other religious bodies.

BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING AND THE WORLD FAMILY OF FRIENDS

- 9.02 In the world family of Friends there is a rich variety of experience, some of which is unfamiliar to Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting. Some Friends make frequent and joyful use of song and Bible study, and may be led by a pastor; for others silent waiting on God is the basis of worship, from which vocal ministry develops. Many Friends have a vivid experience of personal salvation through the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; many hesitate to express their deepest spiritual experiences in words. It is important that Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting be aware that we are part of the world Quaker community, that we have a responsibility to learn about Friends in other parts, and that this can be done in local meetings as well as among yearly meetings.

Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)

- 9.03 All Quaker groups in the world are invited to affiliate themselves to the Friends World Committee for Consultation. Most have done so. FWCC acts in a consultative capacity, serving as a channel of communication between Friends, helping us to explore and nurture our identity as Quakers, so that we can discuss and be faithful to our true place in the world as a people of God. It encourages joint conferences, intervisitation and the collection and circulation of information about Quaker literature, some of which it publishes itself. FWCC is recognised as a non-governmental organisation with consultative status at the United Nations and at some of its agencies. It is therefore able to accredit Quaker representatives to attend UN conferences on issues of Quaker concern, as well as to work on such issues full-time at the Quaker United Nations Offices in New York and Geneva.

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- 9.04 Britain Yearly Meeting is committed to the support of FWCC and in particular of its Europe & Middle East Section (EMES), which has its own secretary and keeps in touch with European yearly meetings as well as Friends in the Middle East and in those European countries which have no yearly meeting. Britain Yearly Meeting contributes financially to FWCC, including EMES. Local meetings are also encouraged to consider how best they might express their support of Friends beyond the boundaries of our own yearly meeting, and enhance our contacts with such Friends.
- 9.05 Meeting for Sufferings, on the recommendation of its nominations committee, appoints up to seven representatives of Britain Yearly Meeting to serve on FWCC for three years. There will often be value in considering re-appointment for a second three-year term. The representatives are expected to attend the annual meeting of EMES and the triennial meetings of FWCC. They also serve on the Quaker World Relations Committee of Britain Yearly Meeting (see below).

Quaker World Relations Committee (QWRC)

- 9.06 QWRC is a committee appointed by Meeting for Sufferings to maintain contact with other yearly meetings and with FWCC. It must ensure that the FWCC representatives of Britain Yearly Meeting are well prepared to communicate the concerns of this yearly meeting in the wider Quaker context, and to report fully on the meetings they attend. QWRC is responsible for drawing the attention of Britain Yearly Meeting to issues and concerns raised at world and section meetings of FWCC and for offering suggestions on possible ways to respond.

QWRC acts on behalf of Meeting for Sufferings to prepare letters of greeting to be sent to other yearly meetings. It encourages a lively exchange of interest between Britain Yearly Meeting and FWCC, and intervisitation between this yearly meeting and other yearly meetings.

QWRC is composed of up to fifteen Friends appointed by Meeting for Sufferings, names having been submitted by its nominations committee. In addition the Britain Yearly Meeting representatives to

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FWCC serve on QWRC ex officio. The membership is reviewed periodically.

Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

- 9.07 The European yearly meetings support the Quaker Council for European Affairs, which aims to bring Quaker influence to bear on the institutions of Europe and maintains representatives and support staff in Quaker House, Brussels. A British Committee of QCEA works to increase awareness and to raise funds. Local meetings are encouraged to appoint a British Committee correspondent. Britain Yearly Meeting is committed to the support of QCEA.

Meeting for Sufferings, on the recommendation of its nominations committee, appoints one representative of Britain Yearly Meeting, with an alternate, to serve on QCEA for three years. There will often be value in considering re-appointment for a second three-year term.

BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The historical background

- 9.08 Britain Yearly Meeting is not a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC). This is because its Basis of Faith was considered by Yearly Meeting in 1940 to require acceptance of a credal formulation. FWCC, being representative of Friends world wide, receives invitations and sends observers to the WCC and some of its constituent bodies. It also sends representatives to the annual meetings of secretaries of Christian World Communions, attended by representatives from the world bodies of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Baptist and many other churches.

Having declined membership of the WCC then in process of formation, London Yearly Meeting took the same position of

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principle in response to a similar invitation from the nascent British Council of Churches (BCC). In this case, however, it was met by the BCC's decision to extend its Basis of Faith so as to include in its membership those bodies which had previously been associated with the ecumenical movement, thus embracing London Yearly Meeting. Friends continued to play an active part, corporately and individually, in the BCC from 1942 to 1990; London Yearly Meeting was only precluded, as an associate member after 1965, from voting on amendments to the BCC's constitution. Through the BCC it developed an indirect relationship with the Conference of European Churches. Because of the Conference's credal basis, however, the Yearly Meeting was never a member.

Friends enjoyed full membership of the Scottish Churches Council which had no credal basis. Friends sent observers to the Council of Churches for Wales which did. Both Councils were, like the BCC itself, superseded by 'new ecumenical instruments' in 1990, as set out in the following paragraphs. During the lifetime of the BCC there was no national ecumenical body for England.

Formal relationships and their constitutional foundations

- 9.09 Britain Yearly Meeting is a member of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and of three national bodies, namely ACTS: Action of Churches Together in Scotland, CTE: Churches Together in England and CYTUN: *Egghysî ynghyd yng Nghymru*, Churches Together in Wales. These 'new ecumenical instruments', launched in 1990, have a broader membership than those of 1942-1990. Following Friends' participation in the five-year preparatory process known as 'Not strangers but pilgrims', the Yearly Meeting in 1989 after a difficult exercise decided despite hesitations to apply for full membership of the then Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (now Churches Together in Britain & Ireland) and the national bodies. Yearly Meeting in 1997 confirmed this decision. Each of the four bodies accepted London (now Britain) Yearly Meeting into membership under a clause (Clause 2b) which appears in each constitution as follows:

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A church, which on principle has no credal statements in its tradition and therefore cannot formally subscribe to the statement of faith in the Basis, may nevertheless apply for and be elected to full membership provided that it satisfies those member churches which subscribe to the Basis that it manifests faith in Christ as witnessed to in the Scriptures and is committed to the aims and purposes* of the new ecumenical body, and that it will work in the spirit of the Basis.

The Basis reads:

The Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland is a fellowship of churches in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- 9.10 The underlying principle of CTBI and the national bodies is the commitment of member churches to one another and to taking seriously the principle that the churches should only do separately what they cannot in conscience do together. Working this out in practice is not always easy and will take time, but it should be one of the underlying principles used in deciding on the work carried out in the name of Britain Yearly Meeting.
- 9.11 CTBI works through an Assembly and a Church Representatives Meeting, and through associated agencies, commissions and networks. The three national bodies have similar patterns of work. Increasingly Britain Yearly Meeting's committees and departments work directly with their ecumenical counterparts and its members serve on ecumenical groups and committees. It is a principle of CTBI that authority remains rooted in the decision-making bodies of the member churches.

* The *Objects, aims and purposes* of CCBI provide the context within which the *Basis and commitment* are to be understood. The relevant constitutional texts are available on request from the Recording Clerk.

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- 9.12 Meeting for Sufferings appoints Britain Yearly Meeting's representatives to CTBI and CTE Forum. The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (9.13) appoints to CTE Enabling Group and other CTE bodies.

The committee has agreed in principle that Britain Yearly Meeting should be represented at CTBI as follows:

- a. at the Senior Representative Forum by the Recording Clerk or a Quaker member of staff delegated by her or him;
- b. at the biennial Summit of Church Leaders by one or two Friends appointed on the basis of their relevant experience on the nomination of Central Nominations Committee.

General Meeting for Scotland makes appointments to ACTS; the Meeting of Friends in Wales makes appointments to Cytûn.

Representatives report to the appointing body and the Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations maintains contact with any reference group set up to support them.

Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (CIR)

- 9.13 The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations is responsible for keeping Britain Yearly Meeting informed of the various movements towards co-operation within the Christian church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and for responding on behalf of the yearly meeting so that Friends' views on issues of faith and order are represented to other churches and communities of faith.

The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations consists of up to thirty Friends appointed by Meeting for Sufferings, names having been submitted by its nominations committee. The Committee may co-opt a further ten members. The membership is reviewed periodically. The Yearly Meeting of Friends in Ireland (which is a member of the Irish Council of Churches but decided in

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1989 not to seek membership of CTBI) appoints a few Friends to keep in touch with the work of the committee.

Local implications

- 9.14 Britain Yearly Meeting's membership of CTBI does not commit local meetings or individual Friends to any particular course of action with regard to interchurch relationships. However, in 1989 Yearly Meeting asked monthly meetings and general meetings to review the involvement of meetings in local and regional ecumenical activities, encouraging greater participation where need be. The recognition by CTBI member churches of our yearly meeting's non-credal tradition which is implied by Clause 2b (see 9.09) may make it easier to formalise these local relationships.

LOCAL MEETINGS AND ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIPS

- 9.15 Local meetings are seeking to develop their religious life in relationship with members of other Christian churches, and with adherents of other faiths and of none. Any local meeting may find itself at some point along a wide spectrum of possible relationships designed to offer increasing degrees of commitment between churches. These range from local councils of churches, through Churches Together in a particular locality, to local ecumenical projects which may involve joint church membership (see 9.18), shared buildings, mutual recognition of ministers or all three.

Interchurch activity especially in England is often assisted by a sponsoring body – a formal association of appropriate church representatives which encourages, assists and oversees ecumenical activity within the boundaries of a city or county. A sponsoring body is enabling, not directive, in nature. Meetings need periodically to review their participation in sponsoring bodies, noting that all the churches have difficulty in matching up their geographical boundaries denominationally and ecumenically.

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- 9.16 Each meeting will decide in its local context the degree of commitment which is appropriate. Friends who are ecumenically active may need reminding of the need not to rush ahead at a pace beyond that at which their meeting as a whole is comfortable. Those who have earlier experiences of belonging to other churches will need to recognise that such churches may change over time in their beliefs and practices. Like Britain Yearly Meeting other churches include within their membership people of very diverse beliefs.

At interchurch meetings Friends are valued for our willingness to uphold Quaker testimonies and leadings as much as for our tradition of listening and openness. But many aspects of Friends' faith and practice are not widely appreciated; misunderstandings may occur when other churches' lack of familiarity with our discipline and structure of church government, and Friends' imperfect knowledge of theirs, produce mismatched expectations or faulty assumptions.

In defining the relationship between churches, the problem of appropriate wording will sooner or later occur. The wording under which London Yearly Meeting became a member of CCBI (now CTBI) and the three national bodies (9.09) may be helpful in this regard, but other much simpler forms may be preferable. In negotiating acceptable terms of membership, Friends should hold to our testimony that credal statements can fetter the free action of the Spirit.

See also 27.21-27.26 Creeds

- 9.17 Meetings may find it useful to check the wording of any local Basis of Faith to which they are invited to subscribe with the Recording Clerk, through whom advice may be obtained in case of need from the Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations.
- 9.18 Membership by a meeting of a particular ecumenical body may be impossible, for example because the wording of its Basis is unacceptably exclusive, or because the mutual recognition of ministers which is involved does not extend to the Quaker understanding of ministry, or because joint membership for all participating churches' members is required. (Such automatic joint membership is unacceptable both because of the practical problems

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encountered upon transfer into an area meeting without the same ecumenical experience, and because, in departing from the principle of the individual application for membership, it is not in accordance with our discipline as set out in chapter 11.) In cases of doubt, reference should be made (as under 9.17) to the Recording Clerk, through whom advice may be obtained. If membership of a particular body proves impossible the meeting will have to consider how its relationships with other churches can be carried forward in different ways. Many practical forms of joint activity, from Christian Aid Week to work on housing and other social issues, are well established and present few if any problems for Friends. Some will wish to go thus far and no farther.

- 9.19 Our relationships with other churches are likely to involve us in joint religious services of various kinds. Sometimes there will be opportunities to introduce members of other churches to Quaker worship, thereby broadening their ecumenical experience. At other times we may participate in forms of worship which broaden our own. It may be appropriate on some ecumenical occasions for us to arrange meetings for worship which include some programmed elements.

When we find ourselves representing Friends in worship arranged by other churches we may have to make difficult decisions about the extent of our involvement. The difficulty is particularly acute in eucharistic worship, where different forms of eucharistic sharing are now frequently offered and are commonly seen by other Christians as both the means and the end of unity. Friends' testimony is to a corporate life and experience of God which does not depend on the observance of outward sacraments. Abstaining from the outward sacraments does not inevitably follow from this, but is one way of witnessing to it, particularly when the importance of the outward sacraments in building up the life of the church is being stressed.

See also 27.35-27.36 Priesthood & 27.37-27.44 Sacraments

- 9.20 To sum up, meetings find themselves engaged in a variety of local ecumenical arrangements. These entail differing responsibilities and degrees of commitment to joint activity. In a time of rapid change and challenging ecumenical encounters, meetings must give careful

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thought to the implications of any new relationship into which they are invited to enter. They are under no obligation to enter into any formal arrangement, or to move from one kind of relationship to another. The ferment of new initiatives within and among the churches requires Friends to exercise discretion and discernment while seeking to respond to the promptings of the Spirit. We should be wary of prematurely committing our meeting; as representatives on ecumenical bodies we must be ready, on occasion, to say no even if this disappoints the expectations of the other churches. In giving effect to the concept of churches together in pilgrimage, meetings will go as far and as fast along the ecumenical road as each judges, in its local situation, to be consistent with unity in the meeting, with our understanding and practice of church government, and with Quaker testimonies and integrity.

See also 27.12-27.20 Friends and the Christian Church

FRIENDS AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS

- 9.21 Relationships beyond the Christian church embrace dialogue with other communities of faith. Individual Friends have long been active in interfaith work. Britain Yearly Meeting has not only pursued this work in the context of community relations, but has also come to appreciate the theological issues implicit in interfaith dialogue, the connections between our work for world peace, our work for understanding between faiths and the potential for mutual enrichment through interfaith sharing. This has come to be reflected in new emphases in the work of its Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations, which is a member of the Inter-Faith Network. Britain Yearly Meeting is a member of the Commission on Inter-Faith Relations of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland.

Friends' experience is that interfaith dialogue can profitably be undertaken locally, where local issues set the agenda of work which can most usefully be done together. Other communities of faith often find our meeting houses acceptable venues for their worship, and meetings are encouraged to make contact with other faith groups to find out whether their own premises could be so used. This approach, however, does not mean that Friends should see

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themselves as theologically neutral. We need to seek to be part of the dialogue, attesting to our own insights and convictions.

Meeting houses may also be used for multifaith worship. The hospitality of worship which Friends can offer through silence may serve as a meeting point for many religious traditions.

See also 27.01-27.11 Friends and other faiths