

Belonging to a Quaker meeting

OUR COMMUNITY

- 10.01 Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Penington, 1667

- 10.02 We know the power of God's Spirit at work in the lives of people within the community of our meetings. These people may have been drawn into the community by a sudden convincement, a long period of seeking, or have grown up within it from childhood. We also know that we are engaged in a life-long growth into faith, and experience a continuing irruption of grace into our lives which demands and sustains a commitment to a life of discipleship. We recognise this power at work in people of all ages, races and creeds: a transforming power which can issue in lives of joy, humility and service.

London Yearly Meeting, 1986

- 10.03 The Religious Society of Friends is organised into local meetings, each of which should be a community. It is our search for God's way that has drawn us together. In our meeting we can each hope to find love, support, challenge, practical help and a sense of belonging. We should bring ourselves as we are, whatever our age, our strength, our weakness; and be able to share friendship and warmth.

Some of us now live away from our families; some of us move house quite often. Although surrounded by others we may be leading isolated and lonely lives. It is important that our meetings

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welcome newcomers warmly and that we include them in invitations to our homes

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. If all those who belong to our meeting are lovingly cared for, the guidance of the spirit will be a reality. The celebration and commemoration of life's great events draw us together as we share the occasion and rejoice or mourn with one another.

Our shared experience of waiting for God's guidance in our meetings for worship and for church affairs, together with careful listening and gentleness of heart, forms the basis on which we can live out a life of love with and for each other and for those outside our community.

1994

- 10.04 *William Charles Braithwaite (1862-1922), a lawyer and banker, was the author of The beginnings of Quakerism and The second period of Quakerism. He was active in establishing the Swarthmore Lectures and in the transformation of Christian Doctrine 1883 into the 1921 Christian life, faith and thought.*

The life of a religious society consists in something more than the body of principles it professes and the outer garments of organisation which it wears. These things have their own importance: they embody the society to the world, and protect it from the chance and change of circumstance; but the springs of life lie deeper, and often escape recognition. They are to be found in the vital union of the members of the society with God and with one another, a union which allows the free flowing through the society of the spiritual life which is its strength.

William Charles Braithwaite, 1905

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- 10.05 We recognise a variety of ministries. In our worship these include those who speak under the guidance of the Spirit, and those who receive and uphold the work of the Spirit in silence and prayer. We also recognise as ministry service on our many committees, hospitality and childcare, the care of finance and premises, and many other tasks. We value those whose ministry is not in an appointed task but is in teaching, counselling, listening, prayer, enabling the service of others, or other service in the meeting or the world.

The purpose of all our ministry is to lead us and other people into closer communion with God and to enable us to carry out those tasks which the Spirit lays upon us.

London Yearly Meeting, 1986

- 10.06 The custom of appointing certain named Friends to attend our meetings for church affairs may lead others to the mistaken conclusion that their responsibility for these gatherings is of less importance than that for the meeting for worship. But the privilege of membership implies that every Friend should feel concerned to attend these meetings.

1959

- 10.07 We must place within the reach of all our adult members advanced religious teaching similar in aim to that which we have seen to be needful for our children. We seek to secure such a general condition of church life that spiritual growth shall be fostered, and a high standard of spiritual intelligence shall be maintained. We are but seeking a rich and well-tilled soil from which every type of ministry shall spring with a robust growth.

John Wilhelm Rowntree, 1899

See also 2.77-2.78 & 27.33

- 10.08 After a leisurely and useful preparative meeting, Friends sat at a long table in the children's room to enjoy supper together. We depend on those who till the soil, and tend the produce which forms our daily

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food, so it was good to remember them in thankfulness and for us to eat in fellowship the food mutually contributed, prepared and served. It was sacramental, in the sense in which Friends so profoundly believe. We spoke of those unable to be present, so that there was a sense of the entire meeting gathering in community.

This feeling of community pervaded the weekend. In preparative meeting the allotment committee reported and outlined plans for an orchard in the upper section of our ground; the fruit may not remain to be gathered by us but the blossoms will gladden everyone. The entire ground is in our care: allotments, burial ground, lawns, and we see it as one unit together with the meeting house which it surrounds. Yet true significance lies not in the grounds and buildings but in the people: those who tend the flowers, the grass and the allotment; members of the poetry group (some of whom gave pleasure by readings after supper); the study groups; the gathering of younger people; those whose activities lie in other places... The gravestones speak of the past, of those who also served the meeting, whose lives are woven into ours, as ours will affect those still to come.

William G Sewell, 1977

- 10.09 We were meeting in the long sitting-room, and the floor-space was as usual filled by the children. The room was pretty full. Then Sophie's father came and put her in her carry-cot on the floor. She was very young, and we hadn't expected to be greeting her so soon. I looked around the adults, wondering which of us would minister.

At the other end of the room Cathy, aged three, slipped down from her mother's knee. Slowly, carefully, and mostly upright she clambered in and out, past all the other children. She reached the carry-cot and peeped in at the baby. Then she turned and gave everyone a smile of pure delight. Still smiling, without a word, she returned to her mother.

Nobody else spoke either. Sophie had been welcomed into meeting.

William Fraser, 1989

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- 10.10 If we take seriously the nurture of our children in the worshipping group, we must start by re-appraising the whole life of the group. What kind of communication exists between us all? Do we know one another as people sharing joys and sorrows?

Do we have enough confidence in each other to know that our problems as well as our convictions and uncertainties can be shared with understanding? How is the child and the stranger received amongst us? Do we see our young people as individuals we want to know and care for and do we want to provide opportunities when they can get to know and care for us? Are they encouraged to feel that they have much to give us, that we value them and are the poorer without the insights and questioning they provide? Are we across all the ages a community learning together? Do we consciously look for experiences which can be shared by the whole community? Children and young people need their own peer groups but are encouragingly appreciative of the whole group sharing when they feel an integral part of it and can share in situations which deepen relationships and form lasting friendships. Part of that sharing is learning to know of our past as Quakers and of our Christian roots but even more necessary is the sharing of what we as Quakers believe today and how this should be shaping our lives both individually and corporately. Together we have a task in exploring our faith today with all its implications for action.

Peggy McGeoghegan, 1976

- 10.11 It was said of the early Christians, 'Behold, how they love one another'. Could this equally be said of us? Or are our meetings places where newcomers may not always be welcomed, where people feel alone? What happens to those who are part of our meetings? Are their lives changed? Do they care more? Love more? What do we know of one another's lives outside of the meeting? Of one another's spiritual journeys? Do we seek to share joys and humour as well as sorrows, or are we perhaps too near the 'sober-sides' images of popular belief? Surely the nurturing of relationships and the response to their breakdown will arise from the willingness of each of us to enter with imagination and love into one another's lives. If we truly know one another then we are likely to be sensitively aware of one another's needs. Often it is just being alongside someone; listening; a gentle touch when words cannot be

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found. Our extreme busyness, and the pressure and tension of modern life, make it at once more necessary and at the same time more difficult that our meetings should become living and loving communities.

June Ellis, 1986

- 10.12 It is a good practice and one which has taken place in Friends' meetings I have known, for a small group to hold a meeting for worship in the bedroom of a seriously ill member, who feels that he or she would like others to come to them in this way. Since we have no set form of service for such occasions or for funerals, it is of great importance that elders and concerned Friends should be sensitively aware of the need of a real 'word of life' to be spoken and should be prepared for such needs and for ministry to the bereaved. I have been a member of more than one loving meeting, but I have to admit that the word I longed for was not spoken to me or my family when we suffered great grief, though much sympathy and kindness were shown to us. I am thankful to say that I have both before and since that time heard it spoken to others.

Ruth Fawell, 1967

- 10.13 Quakerism need not be defined exclusively as white, Christian and middle-class, and such culture need not be adopted as the culture of those who are convinced. When this does happen the inequalities and unequal power dynamics of our society are reflected in our meetings and in this way Black people are discouraged from fully participating in worship.

Our Society is often blind to the gifts and richness of other traditions and this cultural chauvinism impedes its development. Racism within the Society of Friends is perhaps more damaging because it is unconscious and springs from stereotyped assumptions: 'And no harm is meant by it. Harm may be done but it is never meant'.

Epistle of Black, white, Asian and mixed-heritage Friends, 1991

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- 10.14 Er mai Saesneg fu prif gyfrwng y Gymdeithas yn yr ynysoedd hyn trwy'r blynyddoedd, dylid cydnabod fod rhan o'i bywyd wedi ac yn cael ei fynegi trwy ieithoedd eraill, ac yng Nghymru hefyd trwy'r Gymraeg. Darostyngir traddodiad ein Cymdeithas, ein hanes a'n tystiolaeth os anwybyddir hynny. Yn ddiarwybod bu i rai siaradwyr Cymraeg gael y teimlad iddynt gael eu hymylu. Dylid sicrhau fod y Gymraeg yn cael ei phriod le yng ngwaith a gweithgareddau'r Cyfarfod Blynyddol yng Nghymru.

Cyfarfod Dwyfor, 1994

For a translation of this text into English see page XXX

- 10.15 We know that the spiritual growth of the meeting is inextricably linked to the growth of its life as a community, and that spiritual development is a continuous process for both older as well as the younger members of a meeting. Many young people have had and are having bad experiences in their local meetings, especially the smaller ones, where they often feel patronised, smothered or bored, and where they have found little evidence of a spiritual search amongst the older Friends: in places the Society seems fossilised, locked into the past or a mistaken comfortableness.

Young Quaker, 1985

- 10.16 For many years The Leavers was my only contact with the Society of Friends and, despite being a birthright Friend, I would probably have drifted away from Quakers completely without the influence of the Quaker Youth Theatre.

The summer residential projects had a sense of purpose which I did not find at my Young Friends gatherings and used skills which appealed to me personally. Living and working together so closely towards a common goal always bonded the company together well, but in the heady mix of exhaustion and adrenalin caused by the long hours and public performance the intensity of friendships formed was extra special. I came home from these gatherings invigorated and uplifted, filled with the joy and wonder of life that now forms a central part of my spiritual outlook.

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The necessary noise and activity of The Leavers emphasised the quiet and peace of meeting for worship which began and ended each day. More than ever before I learned how Quaker worship is something to be treasured, a real act of sharing.

Nick Putz, 1994

- 10.17 The spiritual welfare of a meeting is greatly helped if its social life is vigorous, and its members take a warm personal interest in one another's welfare. The pastoral work of the Society is specially committed to the overseers, but our members generally should not allow themselves to feel that they are relieved from responsibility. In the greater events of life, such as marriage, the birth of a child, illness or death, it is our duty and privilege to share in one another's joys and sorrows; and sympathy thus shown is a potent means of binding us in closer fellowship. Those who hold public offices, or are engaged in various forms of social service, should be made to realise that they have the sympathetic support and prayers of their friends in their work. Opportunities might well be found for such Friends to tell of their activities, and receive encouragement and counsel; the other members of the meeting would thus acquire a deeper sense that they are called to a real share in the service.

1925

- 10.18 To make a safe home for small children, to comfort one person in sorrow, to do one's work as efficiently as possible, to listen with understanding, to be gentle with the old and courteous to the young – these are the humble tasks to which most men and women are called. They build the home or the meeting or the community which is the first step towards the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The second is to be aware of greater tasks and to be ready to be used in solving them – ready, not worried or anxious or envious, but content to wait, exercising a ministry of prayer to sustain the healers and the reconcilers already at work in their thousands.

Olive Tyson, 1966

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- 10.19 In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!

Parker J Palmer, 1977

- 10.20 One of the unexpected things I have learnt in my life as a Quaker is that religion is basically about relationships between people. This was an unexpected discovery, because I had been brought up to believe that religion was essentially about our relationship with God.

If we are sensitive, we find that everything that happens to us, good or bad, can help us to build a vision of the meaning of life. We can be helped to be sensitive by reading the Bible and being open to experience of nature, music, books, painting, sport or whatever our particular interest may be. It is in and through all things that we hear God speaking to us. But I do not think I am alone in my certainty that it's in my relationships with people that the deepest religious truths are most vividly disclosed.

George Gorman, 1982

CONFLICT WITHIN THE MEETING

- 10.21 There are times of conflict in every meeting when we are required to find and show the love we have for one another and to face our difficulties squarely, for it is only when we work through them, using our meeting for church affairs and other appropriate methods, that we can move forward together. Such conflict may involve a clash of personalities, a difference over the quantity or style of vocal ministry, or issues about the place where meetings for worship are held. Problems may become tangled and one sort of issue may masquerade as another. Care will be required to identify the root cause. Skill, time and great love are needed to overcome these problems, but where they have been openly faced and successfully

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overcome, meetings have sometimes been much richer for the experience.

The primary responsibility for finding a way to resolve these problems lies with elders and overseers. It may be that the use of a meeting for clearness (see 12.22-12.25) would offer a way forward.

Deep-seated problems are sometimes more easily resolved when an experienced facilitator from outside the situation is called on. Quaker Life or monthly and general meetings may be able to suggest Friends with an understanding of how groups and individuals interact with one another and who are able to spend time with a meeting that has got into seemingly insoluble difficulties.

1994, 2001

- 10.22 Part of the creative experience of a community is learning how to deal with conflict when it arises, and Friends are not usually good at this. 'Speaking the truth in love' is a Quaker cliché, but 'papering over the cracks' is the principle more commonly acted upon. Conflict met in 'brokenness' of spirit can take a meeting a long way on its spiritual journey, whereas unresolved it deadens the life. We are a small Society. Clashes have always arisen, just as they arise in any family group. In one sense the members of a family know each other too well, in another sense not well enough. It is impossible to impress one's relations, but they can be a great stand-by in time of need, and it is then that they come to know each other better, if the bond is strong enough.

Joan Fitch, 1980

- 10.23 One of the realities of our meetings these days is that sometimes two people, whom we have come to know as a couple, are unable to sustain their relationship and decide to separate. However much we may regret it, separations are becoming commonplace in society at large. Quakers are not immune to this affliction and when it happens the event often challenges the meeting in all sorts of unexpected ways. The reasons for the break-up may perplex us and we may feel hurt and unsettled, particularly if the estrangement deprives us of the company of a familiar friend. 'If it could happen to them where

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will it end?' There may even be a sense of guilt as if somehow the meeting allowed this to happen. 'If only our oversight had been better.' 'After all, Friends should endeavour to uphold the sanctity of the marriage relationship.'

Through all of this we must remember that we are often only bystanders who may not be aware of all the circumstances that led to the breakdown. It is important to affirm our love for all those who are directly affected, especially if there are children known to the meeting. The task of supporting an abandoned partner may call for special sensitivity and a willingness to be available during the dark moments. But the need to show our care for the other partner should not be overlooked either. Above all the meeting must try to affirm that of God which is in all of us, whatever our feelings about who is to blame. This is a time for great prayerfulness, unobtrusive caring and gentle support. We must trust that, with grace, we may all find paths to grow, leading us out of the painful experience.

John Miles, 1994

- 10.24 In our desire to be kind to everybody, to appear united in spirit, to have no majorities and minorities, we minimise our divisions and draw a veil over our doubts. We fail to recognise that tension is not only inescapable, however much hidden, but when brought into the open is a positive good.

Kenneth C Barnes, 1984

See also 4.23 Disputes among Friends, 20.67-20.75 Conflict & 22.47-22.50 Facing change and difficulty

INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT

- 10.25 When we consider the criteria for membership, the two greatest factors are community and commitment. Not just a practical commitment, but a spiritual willingness to grow and learn, out of which our practical commitment will evolve... YFCC [Young Friends Central Committee, which in 1993 became Young Friends General Meeting] has demonstrated that it is possible today for a

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large Quaker meeting to operate without any formal membership whatsoever. Our membership is more positive: simply our commitment to attend, our willingness to participate as 'Young Friends of the Truth'. In recent years, recognising the importance of oversight has been an essential part in creating the community spirit with which we are now blessed. We feel that the present lack of basic communication in our local meetings can be helped by such work and by the consideration of active Friends... We must be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable and care for each other. We suggest that methods of increasing communication be widely used, so that all active Friends are visited annually by other Friends, to listen to each other and to confirm the spiritual growth in our lives which we so often ignore.

A group of Young Friends, 1986

- 10.26 One of life's hardest lessons is that there is no justification for expecting that our neighbour is to traverse precisely the same path as that which we ourselves have followed... The difficulty a man has in grasping this truth is increased in proportion as his own experience has been vivid and clearly defined. One who has been lifted out of the horrible pit, has had his feet set upon a rock, and a new song put into his mouth, finds it hard to believe that another who has arrived quietly and without crisis, with no strong consciousness of guilt and no corresponding ecstasy of deliverance, can really be a disciple at all.

William Littleboy, 1916

- 10.27 Are there not different states, different degrees, different growths, different places? ... Therefore, watch every one to feel and know his own place and service in the body, and to be sensible of the gifts, places, and services of others, that the Lord may be honoured in all, and every one owned and honoured in the Lord, and no otherwise.

Isaac Penington, 1667

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- 10.28 It is often hard to accept that other people have their own valid relationship with God, their own specialness and insights. We are not just disciples – we are disciples together.

Our vision of the truth has to be big enough to include other people's truth as well as our own. We have to learn to love difficult unlovable people. Accepting each other, and each other's relationship with God, let us continue to hold together at our deepest level. We are a forgiven community. Part of the cost of discipleship is living with the other disciples.

Beth Allen, 1984

- 10.29 *Pierre Ceresole (1879-1945), the Swiss pioneer of work camps and founder of International Voluntary Service, suffered repeatedly as a conscientious objector. He broke with Christian orthodoxy, which he felt no longer believed in its own dogmas, and joined Friends in 1936.*

I feel very strongly ... that the spiritual life absolutely requires that we should not remain isolated. It is this deep need of getting out of a prolonged and dangerous relative isolation which urges me to ask now to be admitted among the Quakers. It is more and more clear to me that it is only in the bosom of a religious family, freely but very strongly constituted, that the individual can render to the world the services it sorely needs and which no politics, not based on a deep inspiration, can hope to organise.

Pierre Ceresole, 1936

- 10.30 Even if it were possible to be a member of every church at once, there would still be incompleteness; the infinite fullness of God will always exceed our powers of understanding and obedience, even our powers to receive vision and joy. Dual membership for me is not a formula whereby I may find satisfaction because to be both a Friend and a United Reformed Church minister has all the gaps of one tradition filled by the other, though it is certainly a practice in which there is a great and satisfying measure of complementarity. Membership is rather a commitment, and membership of the People of God is a total commitment. But it is a fact of this earthly life that the total claim of God must be expressed in the actual and limited

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claim of those people with whom in fact life is shared. It has been my tremendous privilege and joy to find myself so committed in two communities, receiving from each more than I could well express and believing I am called to give in each whatever God enables.

Dorothy Havergal Shaw, 1994

- 10.31 Friends are not about building walls but about taking them down. For us as rural Friends, living many miles from each other and a Quaker meeting, having dual membership is a way of acknowledging our involvement with where we live: with local activities including Christian ones. Our origins have been in other branches of the church, giving experience which we value. Yet we wish to affirm that, for us, waiting on God in the silence of Quaker worship is at the very centre of our lives and the mainspring of our other activities.

Some members of North Northumberland Meeting, 1994

- 10.32 Why, I ask myself, did I go to worship with those rather small and not very distinguished groups of people? Surely it was that sitting among these quite ordinary people, to most of whom I remained a stranger and a foreigner for some months, I sensed an experience of belonging – of community. A true Friends' meeting for worship drawing individuals with varieties of temperament, talent and background always manages to engender a climate of belonging, of community which is infectious and creative. This experience of 'belonging' has remained with me over the years and it has grown both in intensity and universality... The 'giving out' of such a sense of community is the natural witness of a Quaker meeting which has in it the seed of life and creative experience.

Ranjit M Chetsingh, 1967

- 10.33 Why am I a Friend? Because Quakerism takes a whole view of life. Everyday living and religion are all of one piece, and we are including, not excluding, in our approach... Over the years the Society has given me continuing friendship. To be human is to be a separate person and, therefore, to know the fact and the mystery of

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aloneness. Although I find I can make surface contact with people quite readily, I am often lonely and experience stretches of doubt and dryness. Then especially I need friends who will accept a quality of friendship which involves praying for me. By this I mean that they care enough to think of me, to ask themselves if there is any special need of mine they can meet, to commend what they don't know about me to God's wisdom, and when we meet to make me welcome.

Donald Court, 1965

- 10.34 I suppose the question to ask is not, why am I applying for membership, but, why not sooner than this? All I can say is that I am not a hasty person. I have been considering applying for at least four years. I have felt myself to be part of Friends for so long that it has shocked me, on occasions, to realise that I am not thought of as 'one of us' but rather 'one of them'. I have come to see that how I perceive myself in terms of commitment and belonging is not necessarily how I am perceived. At times this has made me sad. But I can see that I owe it to Friends to make my position clear. If the Society can be thought of as a ship, I would like to be one of the crew, not a passenger, and to be seen like this.

Jai Penna, 1989