

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

**Belgium and Luxembourg
Yearly Meeting**

Supplement to
Britain Yearly Meeting's
Quaker Faith and Practice

Part I

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Epistles of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting

Epistle 2013: What can we say?

To Friends everywhere: 'What can we say?'

Dear Friends,

We send greetings from Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting. We have met over the weekend of 17-19 May, at Kortenbergh Abbey, near Brussels. Though we have held residential meetings before, we were together as Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting for the very first time.

The theme - for children and adults alike - was 'Speaking our truth'. Our children were part of the Meeting throughout the weekend; a team of adults led them in a programme carefully planned to parallel the adult sessions. Our programme was full of diverse activities, but there has been a sense of flow and connection throughout the whole weekend, as we have shared with each other at a deeper level than we normally can.

Geoffrey Durham from Hampstead Meeting (BYM) shared his journey with us. Truth is a challenging, uncomfortable word; he reminded us that what counts is not parroting what we have read or been told: for something to be true for us it must be *our* truth. Quakers 'don't believe what they are told'.

Our truth flows out from the centre of our life as a Quaker community, which is Meeting for Worship. In the expectant stillness, we reach out to each other, and beyond; we listen to ministry with hearts as well as heads, accepting that the truth is always incomplete and often accompanied by uncertainty.

Meeting for Worship is not separate from the rest of our lives. The gathered communion can comfort us: yes; but if we allow, it can also give us the courage to question, to be troublesome, to go out from Meeting and live adventurously.

Truth is not our destination, then, but the way we travel life's path. It is a way of behaving that is grounded in our experience in worship. We need to learn to trust the experience, to trust our leadings. Do we dare rock the boat, throw the bankers out of our hall of heroes, sit with the homeless on the pavement and see the world from the perspective of those who do not possess the earth? For

truth combined with love requires us to act, to seek that of God in improbable people and places.

We have been challenged: how can we learn to “sing higher and louder” in order to be heard above the background chatter of the society we live in?

Truth is tested by outreach. Having to explain our truth to others obliges us to dig deep into our spiritual resources, and so develop further our understanding of the truth, and our ability to live it. We have learned that in-reach and out-reach are closely related and that we need to keep them in balance.

With this in mind we have again taken up the threads of our reflections last year about what it is that we want to be and to do. We feel called to take the risk of being more deeply centred, more potent, and more effective witnesses to the truth. We are a small Meeting, but we are clear that we will find the necessary resources. Our new resource plan will help translate our vision into action, and our recently appointed Meeting Fundraiser will help us in this.

We will invest in nurturing our Meeting. Building on the work of our Ministry and Oversight group, we will establish groups of Ffriends to offer each other mutual support.

Equally, we will invest our time, energy and money in witnessing to the world, and in showing solidarity with vulnerable people in our local community, working wherever possible through existing organisations.

We will work for economic justice. We will continue to draw attention to the obscenity of the arms industry. We will challenge the growing militarisation of the European Union. To this end, we will significantly increase our support for the vital witness of our Ffriends at the Quaker Council for European Affairs.

We realise that the first chapter of the ‘Acts’ of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting will have scribblings and strikings-out; but that is quite alright. As we heard during one of our Worship-sharing sessions, *‘there are no wrong steps, only right steps and left steps, one after the other, which move us forward’*. We will make mistakes, but we will learn from them, and trust that love and truth will stay with us on the journey.

Epistle 2014: What does it mean to be prophets?

To Friends everywhere: What does it mean to be prophets in 2014?

Dear Friends,

We send greetings from Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting. Over the weekend of 6-8 June 2014, at La Foresta, near Leuven, we have come together as a Yearly Meeting for the second time.

Our theme has been 'Finding our prophetic voice: What does it mean to be prophets in 2014?'

Through our programme's varied activities, in which all have played their part, we have experienced a keen sense of connection, as we have shared with each other at a deeper level than we normally can; our community has been strengthened. Children have been fully involved throughout the weekend; their programme has been mostly play, but they have also shared in some of the main sessions, and considered similar themes, such as 'darkness and light'.

Our links with other Quaker communities in Europe have been deepened as, for the first time, we have welcomed Friends from France, Netherlands, German, and Britain Yearly Meetings, as well as the Europe and Middle East Section of the Friends' World Committee for Consultation . We have valued their contributions.

We have approached our theme in a variety of ways. We have considered what is 'Light' and what is 'Darkness' in today's world, and their relationship with our prophetic calling; we have considered our Quaker community as a base for prophetic action, which can be incremental, growing as we grow.

Who are prophets today? The biblical prophets seem very different from those we might find among us now.

What stops us from being the prophets we are called to be?

Arthur Pritchard, of Britain Yearly Meeting, has shared some reflections on Quakers, arms, slavery and consumerism. He has told us about John Woolman as an example of an 18th century Quaker prophet who believed that it was 'Better for all to have a little instead of some who have none.' Woolman did not like to use the post, the fastest way to send messages at the time, because he objected to the abuse and suffering of both horses and children employed. He noted that stagecoaches were mistreating horses and even driving them to death. The small boys who were used to guide the lead horses were often found

frozen to death. Arthur concluded by asking 'who are the John Woolmans of our time?'

The answer is that we all can be prophets, if we 'let our lives speak'. This requires a change in each of us; as William Penn said: 'They were changed men before they changed others'.

In 2014 we are faced with many celebrations of 'the Great War to end all wars'. At our last Yearly Meeting we committed ourselves to undertaking more outreach. We have decided to mark the centenary of World War I by holding public, open-air Meetings for Worship, in places associated with the war, at which we will present information about who we are and why we do this. Through this prophetic action we will not only speak out against war and violence but also promote the search for peaceful solutions when others are celebrating the 'heroics' of war.

We also agreed last year to nurture our own spiritual growth; as part of this endeavour we have agreed to publish a booklet entitled 'Approaches to Meeting for Worship - Reflections and Useful Practices' prepared by our Ministry and Oversight group. It comprises contributions from Friends and attenders on their experience of Meeting for Worship.

For many of us, 'prophesy' has been a disturbing theme, but we have nonetheless benefited and been enriched by our reflections on it; we now understand better the need for each one of us to voice our Truth, and will continue to reflect on this.

Our shared evenings have been brought to a conclusion in thoughtful epilogues. We leave you now with two of the excerpts we have heard: from Emily Dickenson: 'The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind'; and from Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem': 'There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.'

Epistle 2015:

Leaning into the Silence, Leaning into the Light

To Friends everywhere: Greetings!

Thirty-eight of us have come together as a Yearly Meeting. It is a rare event for so many of us to be able to be together, scattered as we are across Belgium and Luxembourg. We were pleased to be joined by Friends from France and Britain Yearly Meetings, and to have seven children amongst us.

Under the guidance of Helen Meads and Andrea Freeman we explored our theme 'Leaning into the Silence, Leaning into the Light'. For six hours in stillness and in silence, we took part in meditation, making collages and worship sharing. We have begun to glimpse the power and potential of opening ourselves up, and allowing ourselves truly to see, and then 'Let the Light do the work' that needs to be done.

We were introduced to some ideas from 'Experiment with Light' and have sought to 'Mind the Light', to open our hearts to Truth, to wait in the Light and to accept what it may show us.

Light and dark have been key words, in their different meanings. We had rich and varied experiences; of illumination and insight, as well as struggles. Making collage has allowed young and old to experiment with a new and creative way of crystallising and expressing our deepest reflections. Children led all of us in intuitive play activities and finding our sense of fun and joy. In Meeting for Worship outdoors in the spring sunshine we were reminded of early Friends.

During the weekend we learned we could be flexible and pragmatic, whilst maintaining our enthusiasm. We take a new sense of experimentation into our worship.

Holding the stillness, maintaining the silence – even at coffee times and meal times: this has challenged us, but also allowed us to grow in our knowledge of one another, and of the Spirit within. Our challenge, now, is to apply these insights to deepen our worship and action in the world.

Epistle 2016: Who are we as Quakers in this rapidly changing world?

To Friends everywhere: Greetings!

The theme of the 2016 residential meeting of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting was 'Who am I as a Quaker in this rapidly changing world?' In our opening session, each of us dropped a stone in a bowl of water. We were able to see how even the smallest action can have a rich, rippling effect.

Thirty F/friends and attenders gathered together in the Jeugdherberg (youth hostel) 'Die Loyale' in Maldegem in East-Flanders, Belgium. We were very happy to welcome visitors from Britain Yearly Meeting, France Yearly Meeting, the Netherlands Yearly Meeting, as well as the Clerk of the Europe & Middle East Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation. Friends who are no longer with us were also very much in our thoughts. We are thankful for the hospitality and the warm welcome extended to us by all of the 'Die Loyale' Youth Hostel staff.

We chose to explore the theme through the Open Space method. This was a new departure for many of us, and we were thankful to our team of facilitators from Meeting who talked us through the process step by step. As a result, through spontaneous contributions from all participants, we built our own agenda for the three-day gathering. The children and young people present were also responsible for the agenda and brought their ideas and energy to the gathering. All activities were open to all age groups. The children and young people led an exploration of our surroundings as well as games and craft activities. Meditation was happening alongside football. In building our agenda, we felt a great commitment to the success of our gathering.

This was a gathering that was as much about being as doing, and found space for deepening, lightness and fun. There was freedom to offer an activity, freedom to take part in activities, and freedom to move about between activities. We felt that the Open Space reflected the importance that we attach to freedom and to responsibility, both individual and corporate. Our programme included a wide range of themes, taking in the spiritual, the personal, as well as how we can make a difference in facing the challenges around us, such as the refugee crisis.

A number of us were attending the protest against the arms trade at Eurosatory in Paris and our gathering was an opportunity to reflect on our peace testimony. Our gathering testified to the energy and to the curiosity of our exploration of what it means to each of us to be a Quaker in a rapidly

changing world. The richness of the stories that we shared, the ministry that we heard, and the fellowship that we enjoyed, gave us renewed hope and confidence that our voices – and our silences – may be heard in these troubled times.

Epistle 2017: **Quaker lives, personal lives – what can I say?**

Greetings to Friends everywhere from the Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting,

We held our residential yearly meeting for the second consecutive year at Maldegem in East Flanders, from 12 to 14 May 2017. The guiding theme of this year's gathering was "Quaker lives, personal lives – what can I say?" Twenty- six adult Friends attended, as well as three children. We were pleased to be joined by Friends from Britain Yearly Meeting, France Yearly Meeting and Netherlands Yearly Meeting, as well as by a representative of the Europe and Middle East Section (EMES)- of the Friends' World Committee for Consultation, who brought a message of greetings from the EMES. We also received a message of greetings from the FWCC's World Office. We began on a joyful note by welcoming a young Friend into membership.

We adopted an open model of organisation: Friends attending the gathering were invited to put forward subjects for workshops which they wished to hold and these were put into the timetable: there were three or four such sessions for each timeslot and Friends could choose freely which groups they wished to take part in, with the possibility of moving between workshops.

The subjects of the workshops could be divided into four broad groups: nurturing and developing our meeting; examining our faith; living our faith; and living as Quakers in the world. In considering the holding of meeting for worship, while trying to strengthen Quaker practice, we are minded that we should not only tolerate but embrace each other's differences, strengths and weaknesses. Although we have a thriving Quaker community, we are mindful that constant effort is needed to maintain this and to reach out to people in the different language communities. At this Yearly Meeting some workshops naturally moved into languages other than English.

Although we have no creeds, we have Quaker testimonies, but these must not be imposed on Friends as a substitute for a creed. Our faith is grounded in silent worship and comes from leadings from within. We spent some time discussing theological terms, especially those used in Christianity, and we found that they opened up a deeper debate. One result of this workshop was a resolve to see how this discussion can be taken forward in future deepening sessions. As Quakers we can find inspiration in many places, and a workshop on blues music and Quaker spirituality surprised us with new insights. We also learned that even simple questions such as "who am I?" can lead to thought provoking responses.

It has never been more important to speak truth to power and we resolve to continue the discussion on how we can improve our visibility and influence, amplifying our voice in order that we can live our faith in the world more effectively.

There is a need and a desire for Quaker values in the world and we note that many people, especially the young, share our concerns. We are convinced that there is an important role for Quakers and for organisations such as the Quaker Council for European Affairs in an increasingly troubled world. It is up to all of us to increase our efforts to meet this need.

Epistle 2018: Nurturing the seedlings

To Friends everywhere,

“Sit up and take notice. There's no time to waste, when there's spiritual work to be done!”

This was the command of a shaman from Papua New Guinea, that our guest speaker, Alastair McIntosh, shared with us during his talk on developing community and nurturing seedlings, using the example of his involvement in the land reform movement on the island of Eigg, in the Inner Hebrides, Scotland. Against considerable odds, the whole island community purchased Eigg when it came on to the market in the 1990s. Alastair shared the experiences that the islanders faced in their quest to reclaim their land and heritage and build community.

Alastair's presentation inspired three days of intensive discussions about the future direction of our Quaker community in Belgium and Luxembourg. Ours has traditionally been a relatively small meeting, with a majority of members and attenders coming from outside Belgium. We recognize the important role eldership and oversight play in the life of any meeting. However, recently we have struggled to fill vacancies for these roles. Our three-day residential meeting has given us the time and space to explore the roots of the issue as well as to seek clarity on the way forward, to develop our knowledge and understanding of each other and to enjoy being together. We made considerable progress during this meeting and we also made concrete plans for the rest of the process.

We took the time to reflect on the specific nature of our meeting, recognizing that different people come to us with different needs and expectations, which also vary over time. We seek a harmonious balance between providing a place that is hospitable to the soul, a space where we can just *be*, and acknowledging the responsibilities that come with being part of a community. We are all responsible for the welfare of each other and of the Meeting.

At the same time, we are encouraged to note a growth in interest in the Quaker way that has led to the setting up of a new worship group in the city of Ghent. We feel both humbled and heartened by these developments, which bring with them new challenges in learning from and supporting each other, including better reflecting the linguistic diversity of our community.

We are called to provide a richer soil in which the seedlings of our gifts, our fellowship with each other and our witness to Quaker values can flourish.

Epistle 2019

When we 'Let our lives speak', it is what they speak that matters

To Friends everywhere,

We, Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, held our Residential Yearly Meeting in Drongen Abbey, near Gent, Belgium from 15 – 17 November 2019.

We welcomed our speaker, Paul Parker, Recording Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting. We were delighted to see Friends from all three of our Meetings in Brussels, Ghent and Luxembourg as well as representatives from Britain Yearly Meeting and Netherlands Yearly Meeting, and visitors from Belgium, the UK, the USA and the Netherlands. We also welcomed five young people, who in their separate programme learned techniques of interviewing and used them to discuss their choices and their lives with Paul Parker.

The chosen themes of our Yearly Meeting were “Living adventurously” and “Trusting the Light in our daily lives”. Our speaker, during his presentation shared his spiritual journey to where he couldn’t imagine himself being anything other than a Quaker. He reminded us that the use of language can be a hurdle to our understanding of the process of seeking the Inner Light and encouraged us to seek the metaphor that speaks to us. He used the image of a daffodil that, placed in a vase of water into which dye is added, slowly takes on the colour of the dye under the influence of light. We were thus reminded that the power of transformation and embracing of the Inner Light may not be an instantaneous event but a gradual process.

Living adventurously, guided by the Light, is a constant exercise in discerning the path towards that Light. By seeking to live without fear, daring to take risks and trusting that our promptings to change will lead to transformation, we recognise that sometimes we tumble into challenging situations but that what is important is how we deal with them.

Taking the risk of truly listening to others whom we might instinctively avoid opens us up to change as well as indicating a path for them to hear us. Our relationship with people is an essential part of our Faith: it is a way of connecting with God.

We have considered what it means to live adventurously. We often interpret this as being either a frightening challenge or an exciting leap - poised at the top of a roller coaster can feel terrifying. Letting go becomes easier when we know that we will be cushioned in difficult paths of the journey by our community. To use another metaphor, we don’t have to see the whole staircase to take the next step.

We need to learn to be brave, to take our Quakerism out to the wider world trusting that we can come back to the Quaker community for replenishment. We should remember that being led by the Light may not feel comfortable. What is important is the path, and to always remember that we ourselves might be mistaken, for example in the failure of Friends to adequately address issues such as gender, racial and sexual orientation equality. Things start to change with that discomfort; we grow to no longer be the person we were before the change began.

“Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.” George Fox, 1656

Epistle 2020:

Letting Our Lives Speak: Linking Quaker Theology, Spirituality and Social Action

To Friends everywhere,

We, Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, held our 'residential' yearly meeting over the weekend of 10-11 October 2020, online via Zoom, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Our theme was 'Letting Our Lives Speak: Linking Quaker Theology, Spirituality and Social Action'.

Although Friends regretted that the current situation prevented us from meeting face to face and enjoying informal social interactions in person, gathering online enabled geographically distant Friends to join us, including representatives from yearly meetings in Britain, Switzerland, Ireland and the Netherlands. Some 45 members and attenders were present, from Belgium and Luxembourg, as well as Germany, France, the UK and the USA.

No children attended this year's online yearly meeting. Their joyful presence and participation were missed.

Our keynote speaker was Craig Barnett, member of Britain Yearly Meeting and author of *The Guided Life*. Craig reminded us to 'Take heed...to the promptings of love and truth in [our] hearts' (Advices and Queries 1). He used his own spiritual journey as an example of lived action from those promptings, reminding us that the teacher is within.

Testimonies are not externally imposed aspirations but rather are descriptions of where generations of Quakers have been led by the Spirit. There is no perfect Quaker. We each have our own unique purpose in the world and the Quaker Way leads us to discovering it. We bring our promptings to the Quaker community in our Meetings (Business, Threshing, Clearness, Experiment with Light, etc.) to help us discern what are true leadings.

A guided life is not necessarily a successful life. The life journey itself is more important than the goal, and along the way, weakness, failure and suffering can be powerful teachers. When faced with adversity, remain open and surrender. Vulnerability may open us to new leadings. For example, George Fox needed to feel despair himself so he could speak to the condition of others. Reflect on what you yourself have learned when led into areas of weakness.

Our second speaker was Anya Nanning Ramamurthy. Anya is a British Friend and climate justice activist who is engaged in the UK Student Climate Network. She has been inspired by historical Friends who acted on their

beliefs. One in

particular is the Quaker American civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who encouraged 'angelic troublemakers' to use their bodies to 'disrupt business as usual'. Quakers have upheld children and young people as leaders from our earliest days when children kept meetings going while adults were imprisoned.

Anya encourages Friends to recognise that we cannot work against climate breakdown without addressing inequalities and social injustices.

Friends from Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting shared testimonies on how they have been led by the Spirit to serve their communities in unexpected ways. In reaction to the mistreatment of Muslim students, Isfried Rodeyns was led to develop creative forms of inter-religious dialogue. Karen Lang's life 'master plan' was disrupted by a series of chance encounters which led to unexpected opportunities for service in multiple areas including human rights education.

We have considered how the Spirit can lead us either to social action close to home, to 'bloom where [we] are planted' and 'find [our] own Calcutta', as St Francis de Sales and Mother Teresa were quoted in testimony -- or how we may be led to venture wider into the world.

Margaret Fell wrote that the Light 'will rip you up, and lay you open'. We need to remain open, to seek discernment of our promptings and follow our leadings. The journeys on which we are led are their own rewards.

Acceptance of our limits and being gentle with ourselves can help us to find authenticity in our lives and avoid 'Quaker guilt' at not doing enough. We can see ourselves as 'well-oiled cogs' in a bigger machine. We do not move, spiritually or physically, in isolation, but rather in concert with others. Our own movements affect and propel and perhaps inspire the movements of others. As a community of faith and searching we are all connected.

Corona times have provided us with challenges and unexpected opportunities. The crisis woke us up to our collective vulnerability and connected us with people of other times and places. Like George Fox at the precipice of darkness, accepting our own feelings of confusion, disorientation, fear, anxiety and the heartbreak of separation from loved ones allows us to persevere and serve others. The Quaker Way is an active, adaptable path, guided by the still, small voice, through fear to gratitude. Together with our neighbours we are slowly building the beloved community.

Quakers: a Journey into Silence

2013

'Be still and cool in your own mind and spirit from your own thoughts, and then you will feel the principle of God'

George Fox, 1624-1691

A Quaker Meeting

On arrival we like to settle down in the Meeting Room a few minutes before the appointed time. The Meeting begins when the first person sits down in the meeting room and begins the silent journey inwards, so it is important to be as still and quiet as possible right from the beginning. Make sure that you are sitting comfortably early in the Meeting.

The Meeting Room is a simple room with chairs arranged around a central table. On the table are copies of the Bible, copies of *Quaker Faith & Practice* and *Advices & Queries* (these two books give the essence of the Quaker way). Anyone may refer to these books during the Meeting if they feel that they could be helpful to them. In some meetings there may be a lighted candle or some flowers.

Our Meetings are held in Silence. There is no ceremony or ritual; the Meeting takes the form of a silent contemplation or meditation. There is no priest or pastor; everyone is equally responsible for the Silence and for the words that may be spoken. Anyone may speak if he or she feels that the Silence will be enriched, however hesitant or imperfect the words may be. In this Silence we become less aware of external noise, more aware of one another, and more able to tune in and listen to God. Through this we can find God in ourselves and in other people.

We seek to 'know one another in that which is eternal'. If you find it difficult to stay focussed in the Silence, this may be because of some inner restlessness, troubled thoughts or external disturbances. Acknowledge their presence and gently let them go.

Our expectation is that the Silence will deepen. Gradually we develop our own methods of helping to achieve this, but it takes time and patience. Sometimes the whole hour is silent, but it is more usual for the Silence to be broken (but not interrupted) several times by a thought, a reading or a prayer from one of those present.

As the Meeting proceeds, you may notice a common thread running through it. If what is said does not seem right for you, remember that it may be exactly what someone else needs to hear. Try to be open to what lies behind the words that are spoken in the Silence. Quakers aim to build a community of trust and

mutual acceptance. No two Meetings for Worship are ever the same, so it is a good idea to come on several different occasions if this is possible.

At the end of the Meeting, all those present join hands. Visitors are welcomed and you may introduce yourself if you wish. Information is then shared about activities in the Meeting and in the local area that may be of interest. Finally, everyone is invited to have tea/coffee. Do not be shy: speak to anyone present and ask him or her for more information about Quakers. Everyone will be happy to tell you what he or she knows.

Who are Quakers, what do they believe?

Quakerism started in England in 1652 mainly as the result of the work of George Fox who was convinced that true religion was not about ceremonies and rites performed by a priestly caste or about complex theological arguments, but rather a personal inward experience, a direct link with God and a consequent transformation of everyday life. He acknowledged the 'Inward Light' as his authority in religious matters. He reminded us that we can meet 'that of God' in every person. The early 'Friends of Truth', as they called themselves, met in Silence so that this Inward Voice could speak through them and so that they could share the message it brought.

Quakerism began in a period when Christianity was central to the way of life of the whole of the community, so naturally the early Quakers expressed themselves in similar terms. Today, many Quakers would still see themselves as essentially Christian, while others adopt a broader religious vision and look for the truth in many different religious traditions.

Right until the present century, Quakers have continued to meet together in Silence, without priests, ministers, special ceremonies, holy days or beliefs precisely formulated in words, trusting only to the inspiration that is given them in Meeting for Worship, personal spiritual practice and the Quaker way of life.

Quakers often have widely different ideas and personal beliefs about almost everything, but this diversity is gathered into unity in the stillness of our Meeting for Worship.

As an early Quaker said, '...when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up...'

The Quaker vision that there is 'that of God' in everyone has led them to reject violence, discrimination and exploitation in all its forms. The Society of Friends (often described as one of the historic Peace Churches) has long worked for peace and against war; in periods of war, many Quakers have been conscientious objectors. Quakers were some of the first to accept women as

equal members of the community (even if they did not always manage to live up to their principles), and to work for the abolition of slavery and the reform of prisons, for the rights of refugees, for education to be available to all and for the mentally ill to be treated as people who need loving care and understanding. We try to continue this work today. For example, many Quaker groups are working to change the law to establish same sex marriage on an equal basis with heterosexual marriage and to authorise Quakers to solemnise these marriages in their Meetings. There are also new ways to practise traditional Quaker simplicity by living a simple environmentally-friendly life style.

Some long-standing Quaker guiding principles or Testimonies are: equality and justice, truth and integrity, peace and simplicity. The list of Testimonies is not fixed and may evolve with time. The Testimonies are not abstract principles, but guidelines for living.

We welcome the cultural diversity that modern global society has made possible and do our best to build a tolerant multi-racial, multi-cultural community. Quakers strongly support the work of international organisations such as the United Nations that attempt to establish and keep the peace and protect human rights. The Friends World Committee for Consultation acts as the parent organisation for the Quaker United Nations Offices in New York and Geneva. Friends seek to influence European Union policy makers on issues relating to human rights, peace and development cooperation worldwide via the Quaker Council for European Affairs, an organisation with which Belgium and Luxemburg Yearly Meeting has strong links.

A Gentle Reminder ...

... to us all of the part we can play in maintaining our Quaker tradition of worship

1. Consider how you can prepare yourself throughout the week for Meeting for Worship. How can you arrive with 'heart and mind prepared'?
2. Meeting for Worship begins when the first person enters the room. Enter the building, and the Meeting room, in this spirit.
3. Meeting for Worship is communal. Individual meditation or reading can inspire, but can also hinder you from being truly present. Consider your thoughts and actions. Do they foster or hinder the collective worship?
4. Powerful ministry can be silent. If you feel moved to speak, check that the message is coming not from you, but through you. It is unusual for the Spirit to move the same person to minister twice in the same hour. There will be time after the Meeting has closed for spoken contributions that may not be Ministry, yet could have value.
5. Spoken ministry stems directly from our lived experience. It is most effective when concise. Standing may help you deliver your ministry with clarity. After spoken Ministry has been offered, allow a period of silence so that Friends may absorb it.
6. During announcements and at other times, some Friends use electronic devices to store information; while these can bring order to a busy life, some find them a distraction. Consider the effects on others of your reliance on gadgets.
7. Remember that Meetings for Business are also Meetings for Worship; do you take part in a worshipful manner?

This text was adopted by Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting on 12 December, 2010.

Approaches to Meeting for Worship: Reflections and Useful Practices

Text published by the Yearly Meeting in June 2014

This collection of reflections, independently written by 11 members and attenders of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, has been published to stimulate consideration of how and why we worship as Quakers, in Meeting for Worship. The Friends concerned have not been named.

One

Centring down begins on Sunday morning before Meeting. In the quiet of the morning, I gather my thoughts, sifting through the events of the week. What do I wish that I had said or done differently? Or, indeed, not at all? What were the moments when I sought guidance?

The walk to Meeting is another stage in the process of centring down. Giving myself plenty of time means I can meander and dawdle, alive to the sights and sounds of Jourdain market. I sometimes think my worldview was influenced by the Richard Scarry books that I read as a child, “*What do people do all day?*”, and “*Busy, Busy world*”. Another big influence in taking life more slowly was the novel “*The discovery of slowness*” by the German writer, Sten Nadolny. I also think about the words of George Fox, who invites us to walk “cheerfully” over the Earth, seeking that of God in everyone. I find that once you do so, it’s difficult to stop.

Sometimes I think about all the Quaker Meetings that are about to start all over the world. People walking, driving, cycling, on a bus, tram, or train, travelling to gather together for worship. Sunday, for me, is First Day, and holds such promise. I remember a discussion in Meeting about the apostolic succession, and about how the Catholic Church had a chain of popes going back to the beginning of Christianity. A Friend told about the Quaker way, in which we have a chain of worshipers shaking hands with each other down the years, to link us to the first Quakers.

I mostly come to Meeting in Brussels; but when I travel, I like to visit other Meetings. There is an open greeting at the door of the Meeting House, a murmur of conversation, a taking off of coats and scarves. Smells of coffee. Mobile phones being switched to silent.

A skylight at Quaker House in Brussels draws light into the heart of the building. I approach the Meeting room slowly, wondering which one of the temperamental floorboards will creak. I remember the feeling of nervousness and excitement as I walked into my first Meeting.

Some Friends may already be there. I remember that Meeting starts when the first person enters the room. Entering into shared silence is a very special feeling. There is something welcoming, reverential, holy about it.

There is an obvious physical reality to our Meeting room, the faded carpet that is so familiar, with its pink and yellow flowers; the rich, golden wallpaper; the stained-glass hearts. Try counting them the next time that you are there. But as I settle and centre down, I gradually seem to distance myself from place. This is in spite of my feet being square on the floor, and my senses open to the world. I can hear the buses changing gear as they come down Ambiorix, dogs barking, laughter.

Some of the techniques that I draw on in the process of centring down in Meeting derive from the Alexander Technique. Writing about 100 years ago, F.M. Alexander, an actor, encouraged his students to 'leave themselves alone', essentially returning the body to its natural, non-self-conscious state. Having the body open and relaxed strikes me as a necessary pre-condition for having the soul open and receptive. There are some breathing exercises that can help, or focussing on the third eye, or repeating a mantra. Eyes closed, or half-closed.

So, for me, begins the journey of moving into silence, of bringing stillness into my heart, and, quite simply, waiting.



Two

'Come to Meeting with hearts and minds prepared' is one of the advices that speaks to me. I try to set aside at least ten minutes every day to wait silently on God. Sometimes I think of a passage from the Bible and at other times an advice or query. I find that all of these help me for when I come to Meeting on Sundays. This discipline is for me a way of opening myself up to allow light and space into my everyday work. This is one of the ways in which I put into practice the idea of life being sacramental.

Our Quaker worship for me is based on the silent waiting on God, the Spirit, the Divine. For me the silence is not an empty silence it is a way of being open and willing to be led, to listen both inwardly to the Spirit and outwardly to each other which might lead me to experience anticipation, stillness, peace, healing and unity. This does not happen every time I go to Meeting but when it does, it

allows me to grow spiritually and be refreshed from the struggles and worries of daily life.

One of the ways that I find helpful when “centring” down in Meeting is to reflect that Quakers have been meeting in silence for over 350 years and that for early Quakers this silent worship was based on a deep, experiential, religious search within the Christian tradition. When I think of this, I feel joined in spirit with those early seekers and this both fills me with peace and challenges me.

For me being in a relationship means working at building a strong basis of trust, listening, understanding and love. This is the way I also see my relationship with God. Meeting for worship is an opportunity to open myself up to the promptings of love and truth of God in my heart. Sitting in stillness can take me to a place of communion with God and with others in Meeting.

Meeting for Worship is for me a way of dedicating myself to God and giving thanks for all the blessings in my life. I don’t always feel thankful in Meeting as there are times when I’m troubled and maybe angry, resentful or sad. At these times, Meeting helps me towards self awareness and self-knowledge. I can then reflect on what motivates me to act in the way I act and to think about the consequences of my actions in my relationship with those close to me or with those I’m in contact with.

Meeting for Worship is not just an individual exercise. The strength of Meeting for me is that it is a corporate undertaking. Meeting for Worship is an act of communion between the people in Meeting and the divine. Together we are responsible for creating the quality of the Meeting and for the deepening of our spiritual experience. ‘Where two or more meet in my name, I am there among them.’ This, for me, is a promise that gives me encouragement when I find Meeting empty and unfulfilling.

I believe that we all have a yearning to grow spiritually and finding a group of like-minded people is an important step towards this growth. One of the things that I would want from our Meeting is for it to be a spiritual community committed to mutual support and accountability where we can take our place and are able to come to spiritual maturity, discernment and a deepening understanding of that of God in everyone.



Three

I was asked by a child in Children’s Meeting, ‘What are the grown-ups doing in there, sitting with their eyes shut? Are they asleep?’ This led me to think about the meaning and purpose of my own silent stillness in Meeting for Worship.

One of the things I particularly appreciate about the Meeting for Worship is that there is no priest or minister directing a service – it means that I have the chance to develop a spiritual life at my own pace in direct communication with God. It is not a lonely individual activity, because many members of the Meeting are experienced and share their own findings. It works both in a Meeting for Worship and in a Meeting for Business so long as everyone present is focused on seeking the will of God, or the most loving outcome for the matter in hand. This involves those who vocalise their views and those who uphold the meeting in silence. There seems to be something happening that allows the balancing of individual insights with the shared wisdom of the group. But it is not easy; it demands effort and awareness.

Early Friends called themselves Children of the Light – they were transformed by George Fox's way of worship, as was Margaret Fell; 'I saw it was the truth, and I could not deny it' (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 19.07). This changed her outlook and way of life from that moment on. My own attentive seeking in hopeful expectation is what I would like to be the inspiration for all my daily activities. But being human I fail. I have to keep reminding myself to attend to the Light within. It sounds simple: stand still in the Light, or, Be still and know that I am God. I have come to realise that I do not have to go dashing about searching for faith – for me it is more a change of attitude. I like to be aware of all aspects of life, but when I need to take action I think of it as standing still and changing direction, maybe a quarter turn to the right, or whichever direction the light is. It is also a trusting that I will be helped with whatever challenges me, even though I will not know what form that help will take. This knowing that I will be helped gives me confidence, so that I gain the strength to be patient and unafraid of the future.

Most Quakers I have met find that their batteries feel recharged when they come out of a Meeting for Worship. It is much more than that. For me it is a sort of trusting that if I listen and give attention to my deepest inner promptings I will be answered. I might feel stuck or shattered at some points in my life, but I have to hold on to the knowledge that there is always new life and that gradually a way forward opens up.

I like the way Quakers speak from their own experience. We all have different experiences and what we discover about the non-material world is true for us as individuals, but also often resonates with others – perhaps that's why Quakers are so voluble during tea and coffee time after a silent meeting. We agree to share common values that feel real and important to us as a group and relevant to us as individuals. This is sometimes arrived at after much vigorous discussion and listening to opposing viewpoints. I like the way that Quakers allow extreme views to be expressed and trust the group to reach a robust decision.

Most people who come to Meeting for Worship a few times have experienced, even if fleetingly, something of the inner life we seek to guide us. I find it important to pay attention to this, to nurture this seed, to give it time. For me there are often opportunities when I am out walking. In our busy lives it is so easy to be overtaken by everyday concerns that we fail to connect with the spiritual depths that can give meaning and purpose to our actions. Jo Vellacot, in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 20.05, compares living in the Light to doing housework in semi-darkness, only occasionally remembering to open the blinds, and she ends with the words, 'but in fact I perhaps don't altogether want to take the demands involved, don't want to see all the dust in my life.' Personally, I need to work hard, discern right actions, attend to friends, deal with difficult people, be compassionate ... the list is endless. For myself, I like to keep it simple and remember the image of the ocean of light overcoming the ocean of darkness.



Four

Preparing for Meeting is an on-going process, and you could say that it begins as soon as the previous Meeting ends. Coming to Meeting calmly and with a still mind provides us with the best preparation for the silent hour. Some of us find it helpful to get up early enough to prepare in an unhurried way and to walk or cycle to Meeting. Others may see weekday life as part of a spiritual whole in which work, rest, leisure, diet, study and reflexion are all part of a longer term preparation process. In a sense, Meeting for Worship never ends: we hope to take the inner stillness, if not the silence, out into the world with us as one Meeting ends and bring it back with us as we enter the next week's silent hour.

Once we arrive at the Meeting House, we try to continue this stillness and bring it into the Meeting with us. Remembering that the Meeting has most probably already begun, it is often helpful to leave conversations that are more than simple, quiet greetings until the social time after Meeting has finished. The Meeting begins for each of us as we walk calmly up the stairs, turn the door handle and take our place with the least disturbance possible – all of this helps us to sink into the waiting silence. We bring the stillness in with us like a seed to plant in the waiting group, in the hope that it will grow in us, and our fellow Friends.

In this early stage it is also important to settle ourselves as comfortably as we can so that we shall not be distracted by physical discomfort later in the hour

of waiting. For each person this may be different, but many Friends have discovered that sitting upright with feet placed flat on the floor and with hands placed gently on your lap loosely and comfortably clasped is often a helpful way to sit. Eyes slightly lowered towards the floor in front of you or focused on the table in the centre of the waiting group, or even on the candle that burns there steadily, can be helpful. Being aware of gentle breathing in and out helps to steady our minds and calms us for the period of silent waiting.

Once we are settled, there are a number of ways to begin the process of centring down, and each of us must find out for him/herself, what works best. I like to look around those who are gathered together and think about their lives and situations; as the *Advices and Queries* say, 'enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other's lives'. This may lead on to thinking of other Friends who are not present, and then move outwards to others, Quaker or not, whose existence we are unaware of, and beyond those to the whole world. Being thankful for the miracle of our own existence and that of the world, contemplating the fact that all is ever changing and will one day be no more. In this way, we come to feel 'unity with the creation' as George Fox said.

It can also be helpful to focus your mind on a text that inspires or challenges you turning your thoughts inward towards the calm that you are encouraging, nurturing. *Advices and Queries*, with their pithy character, can be very helpful in this process. 'Take heed dear Friends to the promptings of love and truth in your heart ... Live adventurously ... Let your life speak ... Know one another in the things that are eternal ... Enter imaginatively into one another's joys and sorrows ... Consider it possible that you may be wrong.' *Quaker Faith and Practice* is also a good source of contemplative material, as is the *Bibler* and other writings from both the Christian and other faith traditions. For some, poetry speaks directly to the heart whether its theme is overtly spiritual or not.

'In stillness there is fullness. In fullness there is nothingness. In nothingness there are all things' (17th-century Quaker ministry by an unknown Friend). I also often think of this in the opening stages of Meeting.

As the Meeting progresses, you may find that you continue to simply focus your attention on ideas that arise in your mind, at other times it may seem as if you are going nowhere in particular as your thoughts swing back and forth through the everyday and banal. Do not fight these thoughts, but gently place other calmer reflections alongside them and let things settle. Sometimes, the hour passes and you have still not gone beyond this stage. Alternatively, you may feel that you have passed beyond thought into a realm of pure silent feeling where you are 'beyond what words can say'. Either of these two states

may

plant in you a seed of insight that urges you to share your experience with those gathered in the silence. You may also develop a special openness to the spoken contributions of others in the Meeting. Both of these may help you to move onto a deeper plane of experience. When many of those at a Meeting enter this state, we call this a 'gathered meeting' and it can be a very wonderful experience. At its best, a Quaker Meeting is outwardly simple, while, in fact, not being at all simple. It takes practice and patience and its reward is a calm inner strength.

The Meeting comes to an end when the Friends whose task it is to close the Meeting, shake or join hands with those on either side of them. This is a symbol of friendship and peace, unity and equality – important concepts for Quakers over the centuries. Our task is to take this message and practice out into the everyday world and bring it back enriched the following week.



Five

Ideally, Meeting for Worship should be an extension of how we live our daily lives, but I often find this difficult to remember. I will therefore deal only with my own practices during Meeting as I know others have covered the subject more ably than I ever could.

It's important to prepare physically for Meeting before entering the meeting room, in order to minimise disturbance for other Friends: removing coats, switching off phones, finding handkerchiefs etc. It should be possible to sit down quickly and quietly immediately on entering the room, without any fussing with belongings.

I find it helpful to sit in an upright position, both feet on the floor and my hands in my lap, either lightly clasped or with upturned palms. Periodically throughout Meeting I remind myself of one of the tips taught in the Alexander Technique: imagine you are suspended from a cord attached to the crown of your head.

I start the process of centring down by attempting to come into the present, which starts by becoming aware of my breathing. I find it useful to mentally repeat the word 'one' or 'now' on each outgoing breath. The next stage is to become aware of all sensory input, starting with the feeling of my weight on the chair, my feet on the floor, and the touch of my clothes against my skin. The sense of hearing is also important. I try to acknowledge and accept all sounds, within the meeting room and outside, letting my hearing run out to the furthest sounds, reminding myself that there are no 'bad' or disruptive sounds. I try to

keep my eyes downturned – or occasionally closed – throughout Meeting and avoid directly looking at other Friends. Although worship is a joint activity, I feel that we are all entitled to privacy in this quiet time. I also try the more difficult exercise of holding an image of the room, the house, the square, moving outwards through town, country, continent, planet etc. and my physical place in all this. If I am having difficulty with the above exercises, I read something suitable for a few minutes before starting again.

I periodically repeat the centring exercises throughout Meeting. Each time I become aware that my mind has wandered away from the present – and it may have been absent for quite long periods before I realise this – I observe the passing thoughts without self-criticism and let them go. If I am capable of observing my thoughts, I cannot *be* those thoughts. Some part of me that is nearer to the centre of my being is acting as the observer – or the ‘watchman’ as it’s called in some traditions.

The urge to fidget – moving my legs, scratching my nose etc. – can sometimes be distracting, especially if I’m feeling tired. I find the best way to deal with this is to put off the movement for as long as I possibly can before giving into it. This gradually increases the interval before the next fidgeting spell returns. A more personal problem is the tightening of my jaw and throat muscles, which I become aware of and relax every few minutes throughout Meeting.

In meetings which I perceive as being ‘gathered’, the shared silence quickly starts to feel like a presence in the room, a presence that both includes and transcends the individual presences of the Friends around me. On rare occasions, this can seem almost palpable, and I have to focus on my breathing to avoid becoming ecstatic, which would be a distraction. However, this kind of experience – though welcome – does not seem to me to be the real point of Meeting for Worship, but rather a manifestation of Graceto be gratefully accepted and acknowledged without any expectation that it will be repeated.

In those meetings that are less ‘gathered’ I sometimes find feelings of irritation arising in me. This may be due to traffic noises coming from the street, but more often to the sound of Friends constantly squirming on squeaky chairs or flicking noisily through books. I also find myself occasionally becoming irritated or even angry during ministries, either because they seem to me to be overly long and self-indulgent or because I strongly disagree with the views being expressed. At times like this, I try to remember that it doesn’t matter if a ministry doesn’t speak to my condition, and that it might be helpful to someone else. In any case, events that I perceive as disruptive are grist to the mill. They remind me that I don’t own the silence and offer an opportunity to work on the task in hand, which is to remain present and centred. I also find it helpful to turn my hands palms-up if I’m feeling powerless to stop the irritation – whether in Meeting or elsewhere. This position produces a feeling of

surrendering to the negative stimulus, thus allowing it to drain away. If all else fails, I meditate on my preferred Christian mantra for a while, which deepens my sense of connection with those around me.

And finally, if I feel the need to minister myself I wait for as long as possible without speaking to try and establish whether it's a true leading or just something originating in the ego. I find that only about one in four passes the test!



Six

I look forward to the shared calmness of Meeting. Just the thought of being able to sit in collective worship with others, united in our very diverse backgrounds and experiences, gives me hope. Knowing that we view an Infinite Being from many stances, yet find common ground in the things which are essential and eternal helps me to overcome the despair I sometimes feel during the week when I hear the news just once too often.

I try (clearly not always successfully) to come to Meeting with heart and mind prepared. Waiting for the Spirit to reveal some truth, sometimes about matters I have been agonizing over the preceding week. Just entering the Meeting Room calms me down and gives me a sense of being in the right place. And in the stillness, I am sometimes surprised by the thoughts and Ministry of others which reflect on an aspect of what has been in my mind from the start.

For me, one of the most significant and important texts from the Bible is 'Be still and know that I am God'. Often I centre down by meditating on those words. What do I understand at that particular time to be the nature of God? This is not a total constant for me, because aspects shift as I grow and change. I focus on what it means in the context of our current existence. This exercise helps to provide an entry point to my worship. I attempt to see its relevance in applying its significance to all that might be going on, not only personally, but also our community of Friends and the world at large. And no matter what state I find myself in, this can provide the starting point for making sense of all that has gone before and is now going on around me, both in my life and in the wider world. I find it a constant and ephemeral mystery – what do I understand by 'knowing'? And what difference does it make to me/ to us as a Meeting if I believe I do know that there is a God and struggle to understand the nature of this God in a world which is so complex and exhausting?

I also often reflect as a starting point on what it means to meet that of God in every person. It is a challenge that deeply moves me, mainly because although it seems such a straightforward, even simple, idea, its carrying out in the practical sense is such an enormous challenge. But I believe it sets us the goal to strive for, because the idea puts to the test the 'otherness' of fellow human beings behind which it's so easy to hide. So every prejudice, false idea, preconception or anger against another person that I might be feeling is held up to a scrutiny by such a seemingly straightforward notion.

Not surprisingly, I find the experience of reading *Advices and Queries* alone completely different to when it is read aloud as Ministry. Going to Meeting is sharing in community - the gatheredness of engaging in our deepest inner self, whether or not overtly expressed. It gives me the strength to move forward, even when I don't want to do much, other than run away from the numerous problems around in the world. Together, we gather an understanding of what it is to work and move together as community and all the joys and frustrations contained therein!



Seven

I always have trouble centring down, and I cannot remember a time when I have successfully cleared my mind of thoughts that get in the way. I begin by sitting quietly (and most times I only do this), and wait. After a while I become aware that my hands are folded tightly, so I pay attention to these and keep my hands unfolded, not tightly wrapped around each other. Closing my eyes helps, as does looking at the candle flame. I prefer to have a visible focus, and a candle works for me.

When I feel my attention wandering, I look back at the candle, and recall the words from one of Gospels from Jesus, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also'. This concentrates my mind properly into a better state of humility and offering up of whatever I am, and waiting for something to emerge, or not. It doesn't get any more complex than that.

If I were to feel satisfied and as if I had achieved something after Meeting for Worship, it would be because a problem in my life had found a solution, or something that had been making me feel unsettled, snappy, or worried, had become clear and a way forward made possible. Things emerge from the depths for me during Meeting for Worship. Though I might feel, at the end of

the hour, that I had thought of nothing but To Do lists, and smug daydreams or re-enactments of situations that troubled me, there was clearly a need for me to process these things that were bothering me, to be set out in the open, before resolution can happen, or a way forward can be perceived. I am full of mental energy after Meeting, and have plans bubbling to be carried out as soon as I've left the Meeting House.



Eight

Meeting

Finding the circle,
Drag footed, or buoyant,
Reaching the meeting house,

Wooden, or gilded,
Empty, sometimes cramped, Settling
to sit.

Bid thoughts quietly leave.

Though they linger and Delve
into darkness or sun, Flit
dragonfly -winged

Over the surface
Of yesterday, or of later,
Mesmeric and swift,

Watch them for a while, iridescent,
Then bid them go again Elsewhere,
beyond that pane.

Now the place they emptied
Blossoms with the tumble Of
blood in the veins.

The heart's humble bloom Of
blood flow flowering; Alive to
the circle

Each breath is like a gift.
In the lift of lung and
longing, Growing and slowly
gathering,

Silence swells like tide.

Words here are
woven Into the
circle
Or slip wayward,

Incidental, or
inspired, Like grain
or gravel.
Or like birds

High above, distant
And descending
In spirals to swoop

On the trembling
Prey below, talons
Piercing into
prayer,

Grasping the soul,
Then rising into nowhere,
Without trace, while

We sink into Silence.

Rippled circles of worship,
Now a wisp of grace
On water undisturbed.



Nine

'Heart and mind prepared' is the phrase that is always in my head, thinking of Meeting for Worship. Preparation for us is essential, as a family, though it has often more to do with the physical practicalities. We agree the intention to go in advance, but it always has to remain a last-minute decision. Upon waking there are a number of questions to be answered. Will I be well enough to get washed and dressed? Will I need help? Can it be given, if so? Can I cope with the ride to Brussels? Can my partner manage the drive? Can I handle physically sitting through Meeting for an hour? Will I need one of the soft chairs to be brought in for me? Is our son up to going? He varies, sometimes he is very keen, sometimes he would rather avoid it altogether. It seems to be entirely ruled by mood, but is still important to keep account of. What is the traffic likely to be like? Are there any cycling competitions in our area, or any grand event at the Expo, which could slow us down enormously and make the journey even more taxing.

When all these things are considered, and the answer is: 'Yes, let's go', we have to get ready, and by then we are usually under pressure of time.

By the time we are all settled in the car, and on our way, there is quite a lot of background noise in my mind, including the excitement of being able to attend, and looking forward to seeing Friends again. Trying to get that to calm down is the true exercise in getting my heart and mind prepared.

Then there is the discipline when arriving to avoid getting into conversation and catching up with Friends before going into Meeting, as there often is lack of time. I am always acutely aware that Meeting for Worship starts as soon as the first person has entered the room. I wish to be respectful of that, as soon as I go into the building. Usually, though, I get distracted. Getting my son in with the children, facing the stairs, seeing Friends after what has mostly been a long time since our attendance is so irregular.

This continues into Meeting for Worship itself. Eyes scan the room and the people in it. Who do I know? What is happening in their lives? Eye contact is made, with that nod or smile of recognition. To some extent this process continues all the way through Meeting. Meanwhile there is silence, first only around me, and then little by little stillness comes inside too.

It is a fine balance between the intense sense of peace that this stillness brings, and the restlessness it causes. Once within a group of Friends we considered how each of us used the silence in Meeting. Our search for Truth meant we had to admit to using it, at times, to consider our shopping list, say, or other practical, seemingly trivial, things. Then one of us offered the idea that we are supposed to put our whole lives in front of God, and shopping and other such considerations are very much part of that. I often remind myself of this. It allows me to free my mind, and let it roam, where ever it will go. Repeatedly I have found myself counting the patterns in the carpet, or the window panes in the door, looking at the decorations on the houses across the road, and intently listening to the noises inside

and outside of the room. People shuffling around a bit, the rhythm of each other's breathing, the traffic.

The hour is long for me, every time. It requires discipline. Many times I have counted the minutes, looked at the hand as it moves around the clock. There always comes a time when I start to expect some kind of ministry. I wonder what is on other people's minds, what they might bring to my awareness. At the same time there is the consideration whether I have anything to offer myself.

Sometimes I am so full of all that is going on in my own life that that takes the upper hand, the whole time, even beyond other Friend's ministry. Despite the silence, there is so much clutter in my mind. Yet it often leads to discernment, to guidance, to understanding and to peace. I guess the art is to let the noise be and listen beyond it. Give the excitement, the pain, the happiness, the fear, the gratitude, the anger, whatever it may be, space to roam, to sing out loud in my heart if it needs to, to cower away and whimper if that is more healing. And then to hear whatever is left.

Sometimes the answer does lie in other's ministry. If and when it comes, the challenge is to listen to it, truly listen. What message is in this for me? It happens that my first sense is resentment, my inner process is getting disturbed by someone else's voice. Sometimes I have to search for the words that touch me, that speak to my condition. Other times a Friend will say exactly what I needed to hear, at the time I needed to hear it.

Equally it can be my own ministry that brings me clarity. I learnt very early into my Quaker life that being guided to minister is as much a physical, as a mental, and emotional process. How do you know whether the time is right? I just do, I feel it with my whole heart and body. In fact, for a while I had to wear a heart rate monitor. Just at the time when I was about to make that final commitment to speaking out loud, it would start to beep. My heart rate goes up. It rarely is well prepared or considered. I know what I am led to say, but how I should put it comes as I am doing it. More often than not it is revealing to myself, however it may be received by those around me.

I love those gathered Meetings: sometimes entirely quiet, sometimes with several pieces of ministry flowing into one another as if we are all of one mind, sometimes challenging, sometimes soothing. That sense of oneness, of being all part of a bigger whole, I find unique to my experience of Meeting for Worship. I seek it every time I attend, and thankfully find it often enough.

The transition to the social interaction immediately afterwards I find quite difficult, despite the gentle step up through notices and announcements. I am in my own world, me and God, and though everyone and everything has become very much part of that, the interaction now required fits awkwardly. There is so little that really needs saying any more, yet so much left to be said and heard.



Ten

I have been going to monthly Children's Meeting for quite some time. Earlier as a little kid, now as a teenager. I remember how I used to both hate and love the five minutes we kids would spend with the adults.

My reasons for disliking that time were very diverse. They reached from having to stop working on whatever I was working on (which was usually a drawing) to having to spend around five minutes in complete silence. In those five minutes I had to scratch myself at least ten times, yawn, cough, sit on my father's lap and then decide to go sit on the floor to sit with the other kids, whisper, get into staring competitions with my sister and, usually, end up giggling about something.

My reasons for liking the five minutes of silence were that I liked staring at the lit candle that was on the table in the middle, I liked looking out the window and seeing how every-day life out there would go on normally while I was inside wrapped in a bubble of silence and, of course, I loved the thought that in five minutes I would be allowed to have a cookie! Now I don't dislike the silence at all, in fact I have learned to love it. Every time I am in it, part of it, I find it mesmerizing. Quaker meeting is one of the only places I have ever experienced such a complete silence that is so peaceful. It gives me a whole different perspective on life. I often use the silence to think through my problems, find solutions for them or sort through what I want to get done during the day. Sometimes during Meeting I try to meditate, to empty my mind and just enjoy the few minutes before everything goes back to normal.

Nowadays, I never get bored, but I used to. It just never occurred to me, that I could just let my thoughts trail, like in class when everything from sharpening pencils to writing notes to my friends seemed more interesting than listening to my teacher but I couldn't do that without getting noticed.

When I can't find anything interesting to do, I imagine opening a box and finding another box inside it, that I then open and so on. Other times I look around the room and get lost in either the wallpaper, the ceiling or the carpet, because they really are interesting, even if you wouldn't think so at first. Quaker Meeting changes a lot, people come and people go but the silence always stays the same.



Eleven

When I leave home to go to Meeting for Worship, I prefer to walk, at least part of the way. On Sunday morning the city feels different than at any other time. It relaxes from the week's business and noise – and so do I. I try already to begin entering into the stillness, especially to quiet the constant chorus of my own thoughts.

What strikes me is that I almost always notice somebody or something that recalls me to the purpose of meeting or gathering together for worship. The experience may be reassuring – somebody's act of kindness, bird calls that otherwise are drowned by the noise – or disturbing – somebody looking alone and forlorn, leftover signs of Saturday night. The point is not what occurs. The point is that I'm making space for the simple experiences of truth-in-life.

Spirit is at work in the world – or sorely needed – everywhere at every moment. The possibility of gaining insight or guidance from spirit, or God, or Light, or Truth, is always available. The choice to become an example of 'good rising up' in the world is always open. And that is what Meeting for Worship means for me.

A brief hour on Sunday morning, sitting with like-minded and like-hearted souls 'waiting expectantly in the Light' is my one best chance to practice earnestly what I want to become, and live.

Sometimes I practice easily – I feel the silence and the gathered attentiveness of others in the circle. I feel worshipful.

Sometimes it is difficult. Many Quakers speak of the ways they 'centre down' or come into their stillness. Breathing helps. When my mind is particularly busy, or when I am preoccupied with my own concerns, I try to get my talkative mind to help me. Silently I ask a question. "What would be helpful for me to understand today?" Or, "What do I need to understand about what is bothering me?" Then I try to sit quietly and wait for an 'answer'.

Am I waiting for God to speak? The higher part of myself? Wisdom from the universe? I still don't know, after more than 20 years.

But insight does come – not always, and not always right away. The most astounding thing is that it often comes from the words of another Friend whose own worshipful listening has brought them to the point of speaking. On more than one occasion, I've felt their ministry speaking directly to my condition.

Ministry in our Meetings

Text prepared by the Ministry and Oversight Group in 2017

What is ministry? What are the guidelines for ministry? How is it different from contributing to a discussion? Was I right to speak or not? Most Quakers have many questions such as these about ministry in our meetings for worship. There may never be a satisfactory answer to many of these questions, but in this small booklet nine Friends share their thoughts.

“When prompted to speak, wait patiently to know that the leading and the time are right...”

Pray that your ministry may arise from deep experience and that you may be restrained from unnecessary and superficial words ...

Beware of speaking predictably or too often, and of making additions towards the end of a meeting when it was well left before.”

(Britain YM, Quaker Faith & Practice, 1.02; 2.55)



One

Members of the Religious Society of Friends like to emphasize that we don't possess a creed to which we must subscribe in order to be considered members in good standing. Unlike the followers of most faiths, we are emphatically not subservient to scriptures that have remained unchanged for centuries - or in the case of some faiths, even for millennia. Yet despite this insistence on the absence of theological precepts, for more than three and a half centuries Friends have been vigorously thinking, talking and, most important, writing about Quaker testimonies, Quaker values, the Quaker way of life and Quaker worship. This might seem paradoxical. We don't have a creed but we apparently love to reflect on and write about our beliefs and practices. After all this effort, is there anything left to say that has not already been said?

Well, actually yes there is: our Quaker faith is *experimental*. In other words, Quakers believe that we come into contact with the divine, with the light, or however you may choose to describe it, through personal *experience*. For Quakers, faith depends not on reading scriptures, valuable though these may be as a source of inspiration, but on a continuing revelation that is available to everyone, which means that there ought never to be a time when Quaker “theology”, such as it is, will come to an end. Quakers don't have *ministers* to tell them what to believe; but they do have *ministry*, and it is open to all.

The notion of ministry is central not only to Quaker worship but more broadly to the Quaker way of life. Most frequently, when Friends refer to ministry without any other qualification, they mean spoken ministry, that is, the vocal contributions that punctuate

the silence during meeting for worship and in these reflections I shall be concerned chiefly with this kind of ministry.

Nevertheless, ministry can take other forms. Elizabeth Fry lobbying for prison reform, British Friends supporting William Wilberforce's campaign to abolish slavery, American Friends smuggling escaped slaves across the Canadian border, Quakers working with the Friends' Ambulance Units in wartime, members of our meeting picketing the Eurosatory arms fair or bringing assistance to migrants waiting to claim refugee status - these are all examples of the assertion of our Quaker testimonies, and as such they constitute practical ministry. They are a visible expression of the Quaker way of faith and of Quaker values. If you have seen the film *Chariots Of Fire* you will recall that the evangelical Christian Eric Liddell (not a Quaker) ran brilliant races as a way of expressing his worship of the God who had endowed him with his great athletic prowess, and I like to think that Quakers can worship in unorthodox ways. In my own case, there are Sundays when, instead of attending Meeting, I go out walking in the country: I believe that a few hours spent marvelling at the beauty of creation is my ministry for that day. Nevertheless, I consider this exceptional and I believe that it is important for us to worship regularly in the company of other Quakers, sharing our silence and vocal ministry together.

Although the practices that have become established among Friends must never become a confining straitjacket, there are some tried and tested principles that we should keep in mind when we feel moved to minister in meeting for worship.

First and foremost, spoken ministry should be spontaneous, not prepared or rehearsed before meeting. Quakers who practise unprogrammed worship do not compose sermons around a text in the way that the clergy of other denominations or faiths do. Personally, I find it important to try to empty my mind before I leave for meeting of anything that might tempt me to pre-formulate ministry for subsequent delivery. I want to be completely open to the leading of the Spirit. One way that I often do this is to listen to music and allow abstract sounds to replace thought.

Ministry should not normally take the form of a commentary on news and current affairs, nor should it be a recital of one's own recent experiences and activities. However, this does not mean that such things must never be mentioned. It's clear that our reaction to momentous events, whether in our own lives or in the wider world, may loom so large in our mind that we feel unable to shut them in, unexpressed, and sometimes they may indeed provide a route into a more general reflection on existence, on faith, on spirituality, on our testimonies or on our relationship to one another.

Although ministry should be spontaneous, this does not mean that it should be an unstructured stream of consciousness. In my own experience, if I want Friends who hear my ministry to understand what I am trying to express, once the initial surge of inspiration has come I take the time to order and structure the words with which I intend to express it. Even the most insightful leadings of the Spirit can be wasted on other worshippers if they are blurted out as a torrent of incoherent ideas that may make perfect sense to the speaker but are difficult for listeners to follow.

There is a "rule" that Friends try to respect which states that one should minister only once during meeting for worship and if one does not take the time to reflect on the best

way of presenting one's ministry there is always the risk, as I know from experience, that one will forget some point that one wished to include, and meeting etiquette frowns on adding postscripts to previous ministry.

There is another reason for biding one's time before contributing spoken ministry. Recently at Brussels Meeting a Friend referred to "silent ministry", meaning thoughts that are not expressed but which somehow transmit themselves to the other people in the meeting room. This notion of unspoken ministry may seem nebulous, even far-fetched, and yet there can be very few Friends who have not experienced the almost miraculous way in which ideas that one has been turning over in one's mind are sometimes alluded to in another Friend's ministry. At this point you may decide either that you no longer need to minister or that you have something to say that complements what has gone before.

What if one disagrees with another Friend's ministry? This is a tricky question, because our Book of Discipline makes it clear that spoken ministry should never take the form of a debate, still less a quarrel. In over 35 years of attending meeting for worship I can recall only one occasion when I was seriously disturbed by spoken ministry. It was contributed not by a member of my own meeting but by a visitor, a foreign Friend whom I had not met before and have never seen since, whose ministry seemed to me to favour the sometimes bloodthirsty God of the Old Testament over the loving and compassionate God of the New Testament. What he said troubled my spirit, but after reflecting on what he said I decided not to say anything, believing that I could rely on the other Friends attending meeting that day to share my own misgivings.

These are some of my personal reflections on ministry and should not be taken as rules or precepts. Friends have always been fond of quoting a widely known passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and I can do no better than repeat an extract from the frequently cited Epistle from the (Quaker) Elders at Balby of 1656, which uses some of Paul's words:

"Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."



Two

Letting my mind be still enough to centre down, and meld into the broader, deeper stillness of Meeting for Worship doesn't come easy. It helps me if everyone else is centred, and if there are no distractions.

I am very much affected – body, mind, soul - by the physical space in which I'm worshipping. In an old Meeting House, I feel grounded by the solidity and permanence of

the stone floor, held by the encircling strength of the walls that keep out noisy distractions, uplifted by the dappled light filtering through the leaves of the old tree outside the high window. In an old chapel, I sense a connection with those who've been there before me, planted their feet on this floor, sat on these benches. This awareness of the space – and time - helps me centre, guides me in, and I sink more easily into the deep.

In places where I don't feel this, places that I experience as restless and flimsy, there's still a chance of centring down; perhaps a troubled sleep the night before will bring the gift of just enough drowsiness to let my thinking, fussing brain switch off and empty.

Sometimes, oftentimes, I get stuck in thinking. Sometimes my brain *tries* to craft a 'nice piece of ministry'. That never works. But when the conditions are right, I am occasionally blessed with a different, deeper state, a state in which *being* seems to take over from *thinking* or *doing*. It's a state in which my experiences in the past few days give rise to images or ideas but they arrive not in a linear, literal, logical way, but randomly, loosely and fluidly.

Just as poetry strikes us by juxtaposing ideas and images in unexpected ways, so, in this state of centredness, sometimes connections seem to form in my consciousness, connections that seems to go beyond the everyday, connections that have *meaning*. Phrases start to form.

Of course, that's when the struggle starts.

'This seems to be important', my head says, 'I should speak'.

I become aware of my heartbeat.

'No, I don't do spoken ministry', I tell myself.

My heart is pounding.

'Maybe this is message is just for me and not for the Meeting....'.

My skin is clammy.

'I really don't want to do this.... It's embarrassing.'

My heart is thumping.

But the message won't go away.

It seems right.

It seems *meant*.

I will feel bad if I silence it.

I get shakily, quakily to my feet: "Friends"

The fact that it's not easy, the fact that I tremble and my voice shakes, seems like a validation. If I'm not quaking, I hold my peace. The words will come from someone else's mouth today.



Three

I believe that speaking out of the silence is central to the Quaker experience of encountering the Divine. The content, nature and amount of vocal ministry can vary but I understand and experience vocal ministry as having its roots in my practice of daily silence, prayer and in listening to the Spirit. This kind of practice helps me to be open to differentiate a true leading of the Spirit to speak and share what I hear, from speaking because I want to appear wise or need attention.

I find it extremely enriching to experience the silence growing deeper as this enables me to let go of daily distractions to encounter God. When this happens, vocal ministry can follow as the outward expression of what has developed for me in the silence. There have been a few times when subsequent ministry builds on what has been said before and for me this is the movement of the Spirit showing that the meeting has truly been a “gathered” one. I find being used to speak for the Spirit amazing, awesome and humbling.

In the old book of Christian Faith and Practice there is a paragraph that talks about the Meeting affecting the ministry as truly as the ministry affecting the Meeting. This is something I feel we need to be aware of in our own Meeting. It is good to remember that Quaker vocal ministry has a power not found in our experiences of other settings but it is found in interior worship and, as such, asking ourselves the question of where the words are coming from can help us discern whether what we want to share is truly ministry or something else. We need to remember that Meeting for Worship is not a meditation group, a debating group, a therapy group, or a support group. It is a worshipping community.

Some meetings may be totally silent with no one feeling moved to break the stillness. When this happens I sometimes experience a reluctance to break the silence which for me is an indication that what I might be thinking or reflecting on might not be something that will build the spiritual life of our community. I believe that vocal ministry fulfils the silence of worship rather than breaks it. When I feel led to speak in Meeting for Worship, I usually feel that I am shaking and for me this is a sign that what I am led to speak does not come from me. For me, besides being a time of praise and thankfulness, the Meeting for Worship becomes a time of learning to listen, of acceptance of frustrations and hopefully of stopping judgements: all of which are vital aspects of the self-discipline that helps me on my journey.



Four

I've only ever given “real” ministry once. That is, spoken ministry, where it wasn't in any way prepared. I do tend to set a “high bar for ministry”, but still very much appreciate others' contributions in worship, as they often deepen the worship, making the meeting feel more gathered, focussed around the contribution.

The occasion on which I gave ministry came at a summer camp for young Quakers in the

UK, at which I was an adult volunteer. In one Epilogue out on the front lawn, I found myself

ruminating on the idea that each of us has different, but equally valuable gifts. The thought came quickly, suggesting that it had been on my mind throughout the week, without me having had time to consider what it meant for me. Then, in the gathered stillness of the meeting, I had that opportunity.

The theme of the camp was Activism, and there had been ongoing discussion of different types of activism, linked to particular gifts. I'd been looking at the other volunteers throughout the week performing tasks, or doing things that I didn't feel I could perform, at least very well, or not as well as them, thinking that my gifts lay elsewhere, although exactly where was (and is, and will probably remain) unclear.

I found myself impelled to speak around this point, my mouth almost opening involuntarily, but my nerves subdued the impulse. I continued to follow the thread; the feeling of inadequacy and insecurity, thinking about learning to accept my own gifts, as well as those that aren't mine, while still doing all I can to better myself.

Finally, the urge to speak overcame my nerves, confirming to me that this was a message for others as well as myself. I spoke for a minute or two, my heart rattling in my chest, and tailed off. I still felt shaky afterwards, but I was glad I had ministered.

My ministry came from my sense of vulnerability, of being inadequate, and less than, but also from the recognition that others might have the same (in their case, misplaced) feeling. It was also very much born of the context – when I ministered, I was approaching the end of my time at university, and I was completely unsure about what I was doing next. The questions of where my gifts lie, and how I can best put them to work to build the world I want to see – while always highly pertinent – were at that time particularly prominent in my thoughts.

Finding the balance between self-acceptance, and self-improvement is tricky, and like so much in my spiritual life, can often feel like a contradiction. All the same, it was clear that the line has to be walked. In making myself vulnerable through ministry, and through the words of those who spoke to me afterwards, I was able to find reassurance, if not answers. However, in my experience, having answers is often less helpful than knowing the right sort of question to ask.



Five

What is Ministry? I cannot speak for all Quakers, nor would I wish to do so, but having grown up a Quaker, I believe that there is that of God or goodness in us all and that one of my tasks in this life is to seek out that goodness and to speak of my belief in peace, human rights, social justice and the rightful sharing of the world's resources.

To my mind Ministry is what happens when we allow that of God in us to become an outward expression of our commitment to living a life according to this inner experience.

For me, this outward expression does not necessarily or even primarily take place in Meeting for Worship or even in Meeting for Worship for Business, although this may be where it can be seen in its clearest and least diluted form.

Ministry in its broader sense is the lifelong commitment to living a life that is the outward expression of the inner commitment: lifestyle, choices, attitude, and behaviour. If we see Ministry as not only a form of the expression of the leading of God but also as a necessary and inescapable form of communicating with society, of participating and taking an active role in it, the logical conclusion is that our entire life is a form of Ministry. Our actions then become pebbles thrown into the pond of life that may form ripples whereby those who witness our lives and our actions are drawn by that indefinable something that they do not comprehend and yet wish to include in their own lives.

The responsibility is huge and the commitment vast and all-encompassing – the smallest word or action can lead to inestimable and immeasurable consequences. A further result of this commitment is the responsibility that we must assume for our fellow humans – for if we assume that our actions can and will have an inevitable effect on those around us, and vice versa, we must accept that negative behaviour could also lead to undesirable results: hence the traditional Quaker choice not to gamble, take drugs or drink alcohol: if I drink alcohol and by my actions encourage someone else to do likewise, I am in part responsible for that person's demise if they become an alcoholic.

I recently attended both a wedding and a funeral conducted in a Quaker manner where the majority of participants were non-Friends. In both cases, I was astounded at the Ministry that took place. Moving and sensitive contributions were offered during both events and those present appeared to feel the need for reflection and thought between each one. So maybe there is, after all, no direct relationship between one's potential belief in that of God in each and every one of us and the worthy and valuable Ministry. Perhaps we do not need to believe that there is that of God or goodness in us all for us to feel the leading to offer Ministry?

I very rarely offer Ministry in a Meeting for Worship. Is this because I am not led, or am less open to the leadings of the Spirit. Or is it simply that my form of Ministry is different? Private actions and words can have equal impact.



Six

Ministry is one of the things I like about Meeting for Worship. What I look forward to every week is silent ministry, the sense that we are all, in our different ways, searching through the stillness in same direction, all trying to open ourselves to whatever there is of God in us, to the strength that comes from collective commitment to listening. There is beauty in the expectant silence, and in journeying through it together - with everyone contributing something to it.

Spoken ministry is different. I have heard "ministry" of all sorts: short or long, drily or emotionally delivered, uplifting or melancholy, rambling or compact, heartfelt or dispassionate, personal or abstract, crystal clear or cryptic, proclaimed or almost whispered. Sometimes it delivers a sudden insight, or brings me up short. Sometimes it leaves me perplexed. It can be challenging to listen with complete openness of spirit to some speakers, especially when I have in the past failed to grasp meaning from the ministry of the person in question. But if in the end I feel I can take nothing from a piece of ministry, I let go of it easily because I know that for others it may have been exactly right and full of resonance.

But what is ministry meant to be? I think it is a message from God within us, intended to be communicated to the whole meeting, a channel for communication from Him. So it should resonate beyond the purely commonplace and be more than a moment for personal self-expression. It should have some universal, timeless quality about it, not tied to anything that is particularly topical or newsworthy, nor assuming particular political leanings. Ministry should not be simply a reflection of one individual's personal tastes, but rather it should remind us of some fundamental truths or values that inspires in our daily lives.

I think such messages from God are quite rare. But then sometimes I wonder whether my consciousness of their rarity makes me too cautious in identifying ministry. I often judge my thoughts to be just that - my thoughts. Or, even if those thoughts seem to contain a message, it is not clear to me that they are sent to me to be announced to everyone as relevant to them and their life, rather than just to guide me in mine. But perhaps I sometimes, even often, make the wrong judgment?

To sum up, for me true vocal ministry is inspiring and precious when it happens but it is not something I expect of Meeting for Worship each week. I do know that this is personal and that there are others who thirst for frequent spoken ministry. But for me the richest hour is often an hour of silent ministry.



Seven

Ministry is not ours.

It does not come from our intellect, our personal emotion, or our life experience, though it may use these as a vehicle.

It is not our own to keep or to brandish.

Ministry is the sacred holy guidance and insight of the Divine.

It can be brought to the surface of Meeting when we are truly still.

That doesn't mean outer silence. It means inner stillness. Stillness of thought and emotion. A humble listening and waiting.

Ministry means getting out of the way, being obedient to the still small voice which is God within.

Sometimes the speaker through whom it comes may still be a little in the way.

We can listen beyond that individual to hear the true Ministry.

Ministry is powerful, because it is beyond our individual scope.

Sometimes Ministry only becomes whole after several speakers have slowly added to it.

Patience and reverence for the gathered worship allows Ministry to come.

Silence before and after Ministry is really necessary.

Ministry is Truth and Light.



Eight

Quakers are often asked the questions 'What is ministry?' and, 'What are the guidelines for ministry?' For me, ministry has much of the character of poetry: it is not a rational argument or something that we have thought up in a structured way nor is it part of a discussion. Ministry comes from a deeper place and touches us more deeply than a logical or reasoned exposition. Ministry continues the Silence rather than breaks it. A Quaker meeting is not about discussion. Because Meeting is not discussion, it is not usual to speak more than once: having passed on the message that was given we do not need to repeat or reinforce it. It also seems to me that ministry is not the individual spoken contributions, but that rather those separate contributions are parts of a patchwork quilt that gradually forms and that may be seen from various angles according to the perception and experience of the listener.

I wonder if I would have appreciated what George Fox said; would I describe his words as ministry. More likely I would describe Friend George's utterances as preaching rather than ministry. We have very few records of ministry given in early Quaker meetings. We do have extensive Quaker writings and these may reflect what was offered as ministry in meetings, but few direct quotes. One ministry we do have is that delivered by an unnamed Friend at the meeting in which Robert Barclay was convinced: 'In stillness is fullness, in fullness is nothingness, in nothingness are all things.' That ministry* is very dear to me; it provides me with the only theology I need and also, for me, describes the process of the Quaker Meeting for Worship as we move from outer stillness towards a sense of the interconnectivity of all things and then move on to a space beyond things where there is total presence. This, in my experience, is rarely achieved.

In modern day meetings, many things are said, but how many of these utterances do we feel are ministry? For each of us perhaps the definition/understanding of ministry is different just as the impact of what is said is different. We can have our own definition and

standard, but we should be cautious about announcing it or attempting to apply it as a standard for others.

For me, ministry, at its best, is of the nature of poetry, it is partial, hesitant, fragile, often painful to deliver; it is neither irrational nor rational but comes from a deep place within or without. It wells up and is difficult to resist, we seem to have a choice but if we refuse to speak we feel disappointed at having let the Meeting down. Often we are on our feet to speak before we realise it, and blurt out the first words searching for the sense of what we must say.

Are we mistaken? How can we know? We can only do our best to be true to our prompting and conviction. Others will feel it speaks to them or not, but we should seek only to express what is given and hope that it will form part of the patchwork quilt of ministry that forms not just at that meeting but over time to produce a clearer vision.



Nine

Ministry is a word used by many people to mean many different things.

Jesus' ministry is said to have lasted 3 years. From when he was 30 until he was killed. Martin Luther King's ministry is described as being from when he left Baptist Seminary at 18 until he was killed twenty years later.

As European Quakers we talk about people ministering in our Meetings for Worship. I have met Friends from other parts of the world who are paid Quaker ministers for their Meeting, including some who have no special role in Meeting for Worship, but specialise as pastoral ministers.

I cannot offer a precise definition of either of these forms of ministry, but here are some ideas from my experience. I start with ministry as service, and then move onto ministry in Meeting for Worship.

Ministry as service almost always involves other people, so whilst ministry may be prophetic, it will also require tenderness and care. Ministry in the form of service is about giving oneself for a religious or spiritual cause. Even if one's work seems secular, merely political or humanitarian, ministry is rooted in something deeper.

I know a Friend who seems to be dedicating much of their life to campaigning against the arms trade. They said to me recently, "I just feel I must do this. I don't feel like there is any rational hope of success, but I can sense this is part of my purpose for existing".

Motivations for ministry are probably often felt less intensely by most Friends. We seem to dedicate our lives, or parts of our lives, to causes or purposes without really thinking much about why. I consider my current work to be the closest thing I have in my life to a ministry. It is something I think I am meant to do, but even so, I rather drifted into it.

One useful question for all of us might be: How can I be of service, given the gifts and leadings that I have been given?

Ministry is likely to give a sense of fulfilment that comes from walking in the footsteps one is meant to follow. Despite the examples of Jesus and Martin Luther King that I started with, it also doesn't have to end by being killed, but in some circumstances it will be right for us to have faith in that greater purpose.

Ministry is on behalf of more than just oneself. It needs the support of a Quaker community. Ministry is likely also hard, difficult and tiring work, and therefore a different kind of support is also needed. This rooting of ministry in Quaker community means that Meetings need to recognise the gifts of their Members. Often they do, but sometimes they don't, which can leave Friends feeling alone in their struggle.

Spoken ministry can be a form of service. For example, Friends who speak often in Meeting may have this calling.

I am grateful to early Friends for finding a form of worship that focuses on the individual relationship with the divine. I value listening, and am privileged to have found other people who want to share in a regular and communal listening to 'the still small voice'. I assume that like me, most of the Friends in our Meeting do not claim to understand exactly what 'the still small voice' is, and that there would be a diverse range of beliefs amongst those that are more certain.

When someone stands to speak in Meeting for Worship I listen closely. I treat it as something that a member of my community wants to share with the rest of us, and therefore it is important to me. I believe God can speak to people and through people, but whilst this can happen in a Quaker Meeting – it can happen anywhere.

However, I don't really believe that most Friends who minister are responding to a specific divine leading from the Spirit. Rather, I think the opposite is often true. Some ministry seems to be motivated by self-righteousness, ego, pride or competition.

Even if these traits are not motivations for ministry, they might be obstacles that one needs to overcome to speak faithfully the ministry one has been given. In order to give voice to the Spirit or carry a divine message, we need not only listen, but also to humble ourselves.

Some ministry seems to come from a desire to comfort another person in Meeting, a need to be listened to, distress or a political concern. Ministry in Meeting for Worship therefore seems to be about human community and not about the Spirit. Partly this is because European Quakerism is so individualistic that we barely speak enough of each others' language to be able to reach across the spiritual diversity in the room.

None of this is a problem in itself, but I long for a more spiritual space somewhere in my life. I think if I am to find that with Quakers, Meeting would need to be longer to allow for a deeper connection to develop and there would have to be a clearer focus on communal worship.

Testimonies to the Grace of God as shown in the lives of Members of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting

Testimony to the Grace of God as shown in the life of Elisabeth Baker,

1940 - 2007

Elisabeth was born in Stretford, Manchester, in the north of England, the eldest of three daughters. Her family was of the utmost importance to her throughout her life. Once she had completed her high school education she went to Manchester College of Commerce and Languages, where her studies included French, Russian and secretarial work.

After working in France and, for a short time, in a commercial company, she went to Friends House, London, for a year before joining the staff of the Friends International Centre as Irene Jacoby's secretary. She was involved very fully in the life of the Centre and became much more than a secretary. Her dynamic personality, sense of fun and her capacity for friendship were evident even then and the friends she made at that time remained in touch with her for the rest of her life.

When Margaret Gibbins of FWCC wanted her to join a Quaker committee, Elisabeth said that she could not because she was not in membership. Margaret's response was "well it's high time you were!" Elisabeth heeded that call and went on eventually to become a founder member of Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting.

From 1968 to 1973 Elisabeth worked in the Department of International Affairs of the British Council of Churches as administrative secretary to Noel Salter. During this time she also acted as interpreter at peace and youth conferences.

When Britain joined the then European Communities, Elisabeth and the Salters went to Brussels. Elisabeth first worked at the Coordinating Council of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and, in 1975, moved on to the Council of the European Communities, still dealing with the ACP countries. Her job involved a lot of travel, including attendance at the Lomé summits. She acquired considerable expertise and was greatly respected by negotiators at the highest levels. A member of Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting, himself a senior EU negotiator, remembers what an important role the ACP group, and particularly Elisabeth, played in bringing both sides together and building bridges.

She had an ability to help without anyone feeling she was doing anything special, a capacity to make herself invisible whatever the strength of her convictions and the depths

of her insight. Elisabeth's contribution often passed unrecognised but she accepted this with quiet grace, good humour and optimism.

Friends remember her warmth and the way in which she quietly and discreetly supported those in need, whether by helping to find lodgings or inviting them to her home or to one of her favourite Brussels restaurants. Indeed, many stray Friends found themselves living on her top floor over the years!

Elisabeth's struggle with cancer was a long one but she was able to give encouragement and strength to others when cancer struck their own families. She sat at bedsides and attended funerals and showed kindness and sympathy when she was none too well herself.

Elisabeth was a committed Friend. She was one of the founder members and keystones of the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA), an inseparable part of the institution, and was valued by all the staff and others who passed through the door of Quaker House Brussels. Despite her own failing health, she kept everyone sane through her support and sense of fun. She was modest but determined - and had quite strong views about how things should be done! Indeed, she only ever complained when things were not done as she thought they should be.

She never once complained about her illness, which she faced with fortitude and optimism. Elisabeth was interested in life to the very end. She took Open University courses, violin lessons and travelled round France on the trail of a historical agriculturalist with Pat Stapleton, who was one of the first two joint representatives at QCEA.

Many Friends remember her 60th birthday party, which started as a tram ride round Brussels, with champagne glasses in their hands. Elisabeth was so good at bringing her friends together.

A fitting epitaph could be the tram which used to pass the end of her road: it came from "Paix" and its destination was "Silence". How appropriate for a Quaker!

She was one of the kindest, most generous, helpful and unselfish people and her friends' lives were the richer for having known her.



Testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of Patricia Ann Margaret (PAM) van der Esch – Mitchell

1925 – 2011

Pam Mitchell was born in London but grew up in Victoria, Canada where she lived a very active life: riding, climbing and skiing with her father. Pam was a gifted student and at 17 she went to study history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and from there to do a Masters at Bryn Mawr in Philadelphia. Her thesis was about the similarities between the teachings of Jesus and Communism. As part of her studies Pam went with the Christian Youth Movement to help build railways in Yugoslavia.

Having been awarded a scholarship to the London School of Economics, Pam moved to London in 1947 where she wrote her thesis on the Spanish Civil War - one of the first books published on the subject - and gained a Ph.D. in History.

At the LSE, Pam met Bastiaan van der Esch, whom she later married, and the couple moved to Paris to undertake research. Pam continued to write while looking after the children: Phyllis, Mark, Andrew and Michiel.

The family lived in The Hague, Paris and then Luxembourg. Here Pam attended the young multi-national English-speaking Protestant Church. She was a founding member of the 'International Bazaar', which was to become the major charitable fundraising event in the Grand-Duchy and which still continues today.

It was when the family moved to Brussels in 1980 that Pam first encountered the Quakers. She began to attend Meeting for Worship with the small Quaker community and soon after was accepted into membership of Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting.

From 1986 onwards she served several periods as Clerk. She was also a very committed Peace Secretary, representing Friends at the European Ecumenical Conference on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in Assisi; at Pax Christi; at the Centre for European Policy Studies; at the Friends World Peace and Service Consultation in Namur; and at the 1991 FWCC World Conference.

Pam served for very many years as prison visitor. She was very impressed when for the first time she met a number of young Jehovah's Witnesses who had been imprisoned for refusing to do military service or to accept alternative social work organized by the Military.

Both inside and outside of Meeting, Pam never tired of testifying to what she felt was right. Women's Rights were one of her strong concerns. So, when the Taliban in Afghanistan made life very difficult for women, Pam joined the "Women in Black" who, with only a few participants would stand in protest opposite the European Commission's Berlaymont Building once a week. Pam was also one of the first Presidents of the Association 'Femmes d'Europe', which raises funds for humanitarian causes.

Pam was respected and loved by Friends in Belgium and Luxembourg and throughout Europe for her integrity, her forthrightness, her generosity and her hospitality.

We give thanks for the life of Pam van der Esch Mitchell.



Testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of Dieter Hartwich,

1927 - 2015

Dieter Hartwich had a happy childhood with his elder brother in Berlin Grunewald but was scarred by the Second World War. His father and brother were killed in Russia and he was left alone with his mother at the age of 16.

He owed much to the Quakers, whom he came across in the immediate post-war period, through, for example, Quäkerspeisung. He was also drawn towards Quakerism by Quaker involvement in the 'Kindertransport' of 1938-1940.

Quakers awarded him a fellowship to study economics in the United States of America. While there, he volunteered to build the first multi-racial kindergarten and attended Pendle Hill, the Quaker college in Pennsylvania.

Back in Berlin from 1948 to 1955, he obtained a degree in economics and worked for the Freie Universität Berlin. This was followed by a period working for the Ministry of Economics in Bonn. From April 1961 until November 1973 he worked for the World Bank in Washington DC, where he progressed from Loan Officer to Department Director.

He was at the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg from 1973 to 1994, becoming Secretary General in 1985.

In addition to his professional activities, Dieter was treasurer for 20 years of the Luxembourg NGO, WEGA, and was active in Russia, Armenia and the Philippines.

He was also a board member of the Luxembourg micro-finance association ADA (Appui au Développement Autonome) and his input was always interesting, concise and insightful.

He was awarded the Médaille du Mérite, Médaille de Pie Dix et Médaille du Mérite Européen.

In his free time, Dieter was a keen sailor and member of the European Investment Bank Sailing Club. He was also an enthusiastic choral singer and discovered Luxembourg Meeting as a result of a joint concert with a local orchestra.

He became a valued member of the Quaker community very quickly. Belgium and Luxembourg Friends and Attenders, and particularly members of Luxembourg Meeting, remember Dieter with gratitude, as a good friend – a gentleman in every sense - whose courtesy and humility were combined with an infectious enthusiasm and a tremendous sense of humour.

The wider family of Friends concerned and interested him and he found the annual Border Meetings in the region a great source of inspiration. He actively encouraged Friends from other Meetings to visit Luxembourg and join in our Meeting and the lunch and fellowship which followed.

Quaker values and the influence Quakers could have on the state of the world were close to his heart and this led him to play an active role in the Quaker Council for European

Affairs (QCEA) in Brussels, where his economic and financial expertise, to say nothing of his wisdom, were greatly appreciated.

He very soon became a member of the QCEA Bureau and Council. He supported the work practically in a quiet and unassuming way. He arranged highly fruitful consultations at the European Investment Bank, giving the Representatives a degree of credibility which, in time, led to amended policy decisions.

He never sought approval by talking about his personal achievements, though he was obviously a man of outstanding ability who had had an extraordinarily successful career. He used his skills and finances to do good.

Listening to Dieter tell us about his life was always fascinating for his breadth of experience and his self-deprecating manner.

He was always interested in the views of other people; he never took sides in arguments and made us feel important and valued. Even in his 80s he was keen to learn.

Knowing Dieter was an inspiring experience. He really did 'walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone'. We are pleased to have known such a memorable and impressive person; it is unlikely that we shall meet the likes of him again soon.

Our polite, respectful and ever indulgent friend will be greatly missed.



Testimony to the Grace of God as shown in the life of Edward Haasl

1939 – 2015

Edward (Ed) Haasl was a much loved and active member of the Quaker community in Belgium for many years. He was already serving the Meeting as Assistant Clerk, and as the Meeting's representative on the Quaker Council for European Affairs in the year 2000, when he formally applied for membership and in February 2001, the Meeting "with happy heart ... unite[d] in welcoming Edward Haasl into membership."

"In Quakerism," Edward was wont to say, "I finally found a religion that agreed with me".

Ed served as Clerk of the then Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting from 2002 to 2005. In 2008 he was appointed as the Meeting's representative to the Friends' World Committee for Consultation's Europe and Middle East Section (EMES). He is remembered as an enthusiastic participant in its work, especially its Peace and Service Consultation network.

From 2008 onwards, Ed served as the Meeting's Peace Secretary, an office he carried out faithfully until his death. He was passionate about organising a big Quaker presence at the protests against the Eurosatory arms trade fair in Paris, and actively encouraged other members of the Meeting to take part. He was also instrumental in forging closer links with other local peace groups.

Ed was the instigator of many other important initiatives in our Meeting; it was he who brought forward the suggestion that the Monthly Meeting should become a Yearly Meeting, which it did in 2014.

Ed was also well-loved by a Quaker community stretching far beyond Belgium. He was a keen supporter of the annual Border Meeting of Dutch, French, German, and Belgium-Luxembourg Friends, and regularly took part in Netherlands Yearly Meeting.

Ed was "a big man with a big heart" who left an impression on everyone he met: "his face would light up, his eyes would sparkle", and he was always ready with a learned quotation or a humorous quip. Ed's irreverent sense of humour and his deep gravelly laughter were a great blessing to Friends. Few who were at the 2009 EMES Annual Meeting in Moyallon, Northern Ireland and saw his performance as Jesus in a sketch about Martha and Mary will ever forget his humour and way with words.

Ed was a man of many skills; he could play guitar, piano, trumpet and harmonica and tap dance; he spoke several languages (and was an officially certified translator); he studied Czech, the language of his ancestors; in later life he learned to ride a unicycle and to canoe.

Ed had a boundless thirst for knowledge, ranging from mathematics, philosophy, and theology to nature and gardening. He had a keen interest in the history of propaganda and the development of pacifist movements in Europe before and during the First World War and, aged 65, he started to study for a PhD at the University of Leuven; he never completed

it: all he really wanted was access to the university library and all the knowledge that was stored there.

Many an Epilogue has been enriched by Ed's recitation, often by heart, of a favourite poem; and his delight in language led him to experiment with writing poetry. He was widely- read and skilled with words. His reports, informing Friends about meetings he had attended on our behalf, or cajoling them to take their Peace testimony more seriously, showed Ed as a man of enthusiasm and of passion. His depth and learning brought sparkle, wisdom and insight to many a discussion. His conversation was seldom trivial, often learned and touched upon matters of great philosophical depth. And yet, Edward was also a very private person; he gave away little about his own life, past or present; one Friend, who chatted with him regularly, "came away knowing nothing about Edward himself, except that I knew everything about him, such were the depths of our conversations".

Ed was born and raised in the USA. In the early 1960s he entered the Roman Catholic seminary and became a priest; but in the early 70s, he gave up the priesthood, got married and settled happily in Leuven. He was a loving father of three children, who spoke warmly at his funeral of his kindness, humour, pacifism, open-mindedness, and questioning spirit.

It was only a couple of years before he died that Ed spoke to his family of his former life as a priest; his Quaker Friends only found out about it at his funeral. Yet it should not perhaps have come as a surprise; as his son said: in some ways, he never really gave up being a priest; he never stopped helping others, even those whose behaviour was so difficult, or stubborn or racist that others would not or could not help them. Ed was always willing to roll up his sleeves and do whatever needed to be done; he gave generously, but quietly, of his time to care for Friends who were sick or in need.

As one Friend said, "with his big smile, abundant energy, encouraging, laughing, and caring attitude, Ed made each person feel present, real, and worthy. He made the world a little more beautiful, bright and principled".

In February 2016, the Meeting recorded Ed's passing and minuted that he would "be sadly missed as an integral part of our Meeting, with his powerful voice and heart, his passion for peace, his sense of humour, love for life and God and his quiet practicality in leading our Meeting forward as a community."

In the words of his sister: "Life was not wasted on Edward".



Testimony to the Grace of God as shown in the life of Anita Wuyts,

1944 - 2015

Anita was the third of four children born to Bertha and Louis Wuyts and grew up in the period of austerity that followed the Second World War. The deprivation of that left its mark on Anita's health, which was never robust. A important turning point came when she was eight years old: her parents, after long discussions and heart-searchings, took the controversial decision to leave the Catholic church, a powerful force in rural Flanders, and become Protestants, despite the social isolation that this inevitably incurred. Locally, Protestants were not numerous but they managed to build a Reformed Church in which the Wuyts family worshipped. Unsurprisingly, many of the preachers and teachers whom young Anita encountered were from the neighbouring Netherlands: her church in Boechout was part of the Dordrecht circuit, and she later revealed that even at this early stage she learned of Quakers through the novels of the Dutch Friend Jan de Hartog, who was later a founding Member of Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting. At the age of 19, when Anita had already begun work in an office following secretarial studies, she married Frans Ramakers, a Protestant pastor. They had two sons, Micha and Ezra, whose Biblical names reflected their parents' Protestant faith. Anita and Frans later went their separate ways.

Following her parents' example, Anita's whole life was a spiritual journey and she investigated religion both through formal studies and through her own exploration of religions from every tradition: not only Christianity in its varied forms but also Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Native American shamanism and Hinduism. She was also fascinated by other forms of spirituality, including Jungian psycho-analysis, mysticism, parapsychology and yoga. In the course of this open-minded seeking Anita discovered the traditions of the Religious Society of Friends and became a convinced Quaker, although she would continue her broad spiritual quest for the rest of her life, remaining open to insights from every kind of spiritual tradition.

A Protestant upbringing no doubt made it easier for Anita to embrace Quakerism, which was almost unknown in Belgium when she became a Friend long before a formal Quaker Meeting existed in Belgium. She never broke all her ties with her local Protestant church but as a Dutch-speaking Fleming she had established links with Friends from the Netherlands, links that continued until the end of her life. In 1974 she first attended a residential Yearly Meeting there. In 1995 Anita was invited to give a lecture at Netherlands YM: her chosen title was "Are we open to new light?" She always was.

Meanwhile, some British and Irish Friends came to work in Brussels following their countries' accession to the European Community and began to meet informally to worship. Anita established contact with them and when a regular Meeting was established in Brussels in 1975, Anita was delighted to worship with Quakers from around the world

who had come to live in her own country. With some sympathizers in the Antwerp region, two of whom, with Anita, came into membership of the Society, she began to hold occasional meetings for worship at various local venues, most often her own house in Boechout. Anita's acceptance of new responsibilities with Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting, with local meetings in Antwerp, Brussels and Luxembourg, which she served as Clerk for several years, did not stop her maintaining links with Friends all over Europe: in particular she always tried to attend Border Meetings.

When a group of Friends established the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) in 1979 to ensure a Quaker presence close to the European decision-makers, Anita was a founder member. In due course she would work full-time for QCEA as a salaried member of staff for 17 years. Without the help of a Belgian Quaker living on the spot, the sheer administrative difficulty of establishing an international non-profit-making advocacy and campaigning organization in Brussels would have been insurmountable. The presence of a Belgian in the office was subsequently a great boon for successive QCEA Representatives in Brussels from other countries, who could call on Anita to help deal with Belgian regulations and institutions. One former QCEA Representative, Richard Seeböhm, said that Anita made Quaker House Brussels feel more like a home than an office. He was one of numerous Friends and others who have commented on Anita's lifelong commitment to the human rights of minorities and the excluded, which led her to campaign for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants, for the poor, for the Roma, for Native Americans, for conscientious objectors and for people penalized because of their sexual orientation.

QCEA was an ideal setting for Anita's internationalism. As well her obviously close relations with Belgian and Luxembourg Quakers, she retained her longstanding links with Dutch Friends and with Quakers in the other countries bordering Belgium, as well as in Britain, but she established friendships with Quakers all over the world, prizing in particular her voyages to the USA, India and Cuba, where she recorded her astonishment at visiting nine Meetings. It was appropriate that from autumn 2000 to spring 2006 Anita served two terms as Clerk of the Europe and Middle East Section of the Friends' World Committee for Consultation. It was also during this period, under the auspices of QCEA, that Anita published "Human Rights in the European Union". Anita also acquired a new companion through QCEA: when the Representatives Ena and Nick McGeorge returned to the UK in 1988, their dog Toby stayed behind to live with Anita!

In 2004 Anita retired from her job with QCEA and devoted herself even more fully than previously to her sons and grandchildren and to friendships with Quakers around the world. Her health had begun to decline and she spent her final years in a care home in Brussels, no longer able to attend Meeting for Worship. She will be remembered as an outstanding figure in European and even in worldwide Quakerism, although Friends in Belgium and Luxembourg who look back over the history of our Yearly Meeting will inevitably think of the part played by Anita in the creation of what is now a thriving Quaker community. She had the rare ability to combine deep spirituality with a practical talent for managing office work that has enabled QCEA to become a strong Quaker voice in Brussels.

At her funeral in 2015, Anita's son Micha read the following text from William Penn that he considered fitting as an epitaph:

*And this is the Comfort of the Good,
that the Grave cannot hold them,
and that they live as soon as they die.*

*For Death is no more than a Turning of us over
from Time to Eternity.*

*Nor can there be a Revolution without it;
for it supposes the Dissolution of one form,
in order to the Succession of another.*

*Death then, being the Way and Condition of Life,
we cannot love to live,
if we cannot bear to die.*

*They that love beyond the World,
cannot be separated by it.*

Death cannot kill, what never dies.

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DRAFT

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting

Supplement to Britain Yearly Meeting's Quaker Faith and Practice Part II

Proposed new chapter: How we mark life's important moments.

Birth

When a child is born to members of our community, we like to wish her or him welcome. Usually, an Elder or other Friend will offer a few simple words of welcome on the first occasion that the baby attends Meeting for Worship.

Marriage

The idea behind every Quaker wedding is that it is not a person, nor the state, who marries a couple, but God. The purpose of a Quaker Meeting for Worship for the Celebration of a Marriage, therefore, is simply to provide a worshipful setting in which two people can commit themselves one to another before God and their community.

This is what happens in our Yearly Meeting:

- The couple wishing to be married inform the Clerk in writing of their wish for a Meeting for Worship for the Celebration of a Marriage.

- The request is considered by Meeting for Worship for Business.
- Sometimes, a Meeting for Clearness may be arranged.
- The Meeting for Business will usually appoint two or three Friends to accompany the couple in the preparation of this Meeting for Worship so that it meets the couple's wishes and is in keeping with Quaker traditions.
- Information for non-Quakers about Quaker worship and Quaker weddings is made available to participants in the relevant languages.
- At the start of the Meeting, an appointed Friend might say some words of introduction.
- At some point during the Meeting for Worship, the couple exchange promises they have composed.
- At the end of the Meeting, all those present are asked to sign the wedding certificate.
- At the next following Meeting for Worship for Business, a minute will record that a Meeting for Worship for the Celebration of a Marriage was held.

Meeting for Worship for the Celebration of a Marriage

Here is an example. At the start of the Meeting, an appointed Friend might say words like these:

“Friends, we are meeting today to celebrate A and B’s marriage. Among Quakers, marriages have been held in this way, without priest, minister or liturgy for more than 300 years. In the UK Quaker marriages have legal standing, here in Belgium the civil marriage must take place first and any later religious marriage ceremony is a personal choice.

Quaker meetings begin in silence, but later anyone, Quaker or not, may speak if s/he feels that they have a message to share with the others who are gathered together. What is said is usually short and inspirational rather than the factual argumentation of a point of view, and is not a comment on what someone else has said earlier in the Meeting. The opportunity to speak is open to everyone since Quakers consider that we all have ‘that of God’, an Inward Light or a Divine

Spark within us. After each 'ministry' we like to leave enough time to appreciate what has been said before the next person speaks.

Today's meeting is a normal Quaker Meeting for Worship, the only difference being that, early in the Meeting, at a time of their own choosing, A and B will stand and, taking each other by the hand, make their promises to one another.

The Meeting will then continue until we take the hands of those sitting on either side of us and we form a chain of hands around the room. The Marriage Certificate will be read and signed by us on behalf of Belgium and Luxembourg Quakers and then all of you are invited to sign the Marriage Certificate as witnesses".

The formal record might read something like this:

A and B, having made known their intention of taking each other in marriage, and public notice having been given, these proceedings were allowed by Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

A and B, being present at a duly appointed public meeting for worship of the Society at Quaker House, Brussels this 0th day of the 0th month of the year 0000, taking each other by the hand, declared as follows:

A declared: "Friends I take this my friend A to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him a loving and faithful companion so long as we both on earth shall live".

B declared: "Friends I take this my friend B to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him a loving and faithful companion so long as we both on earth shall live".

After this, the appointed Friend might say:

"In confirmation of the declarations they have made in this meeting, A and B will now sign the certificate of marriage, and X and I will sign on behalf of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

All those present at the above marriage today are invited to subscribe their names as witnesses".

Later life and preparing for death

Friends are encouraged to reflect on how our Quaker testimonies can help shape the way we live, including the way we die. This section provides some brief examples to stimulate further reflection.

Our testimony to integrity speaks of honesty and truth telling, keeping our affairs in order, and living a life that is coherent with our values. It guides us to make decisions ahead of time, pre-planning and, perhaps, pre-paying.

In later life, it may call us to make an honest assessment of our medical situation and to speak of it truthfully to all, including honestly facing our increasing need for care.

Our testimony to peace may lead us to state our wishes clearly, for example in advance directives and wills, in order to keep family members from arguing over our care or about distribution of the estate. It also invites Friends to make peace, to forgive and ask for forgiveness.

Our testimony to equality calls us to be fair in our dealings with family and all those we will leave behind. Approaching death can present us with an opportunity to restore justice, to make amends either in a personal or a global sense.

Our testimony to the integrity of creation reminds us that we have borrowed the earth from future generations. This might affect our instructions about the disposal of our bodies.

Our testimony to simplicity can guide our choice of burial arrangements, the conduct of any Memorial Meeting and reception.

(Adapted from Quaker Aging Resources, a project of Philadelphia and New York Yearly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends)

Preparedness

Our Advices and Queries can also guide us in making both spiritual and practical preparations for death.

"Are you able to contemplate your death and the death of those closest to you? Accepting the fact of death, we are freed to live more fully".

"Every stage of our lives offers fresh opportunities..."

"Live adventurously. ... Let your life speak. ..."

"Approach old age with courage and hope...."

“Responding to divine guidance, try to discern the right time to undertake or relinquish responsibilities without undue pride or guilt. Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be great busyness”.

“Although old age may bring increasing disability and loneliness, it can also bring serenity, detachment and wisdom. Pray that in your final years you may be enabled to find new ways of receiving and reflecting God’s love”.

“As far as possible, make arrangements for your care in good time, so that an undue burden does not fall on others”.

“In bereavement, give yourself time to grieve. When others mourn, let your love embrace them”.

(from Britain Yearly Meeting’s Advices & Queries, 27 - 30)

Be sure to make arrangements well in advance for your funeral, for dealing with your property and for any other practical matters related to your death, so that everything will be done as you wish; in that way, you will also avoid leaving a heavy burden for partner / family at a time when they may be distressed and unable to organise and make decisions easily.

Be sure to nominate a ‘next-of-kin’, who knows and understands your wishes; make sure that those close to you, and the Clerk of Meeting, know who this is and how they can be contacted.

If you wish the Meeting to help in funeral arrangements, leave clear information with your next-of-kin, so that the appropriate Friends may be easily contacted.

The following sections provide guidance about other practical matters to be considered.

Wills and Testaments

“When death occurs, difficulties are encountered where an unsatisfactory will or no will at all has been made. It is therefore recommended that Friends should make wills in time of health and should obtain professional advice. Wills should be reviewed from time to time...”

(from Britain Yearly Meeting’s Quaker Faith and Practice, 20.65)

Wills in Belgium can be handwritten but it is usually advisable to consult a notary so that all legal issues are taken into consideration. It is also advisable to register your will; the notary will explain how this should be done.

Remember that, in Belgium, taxes payable on death can be as high as 80% (for those without partner or children) so legal advice is needed to make sure your 'estate' goes to those people or organisations whom/which you wish to make your heirs. There is a form of Will known as 'duo-Will' which allows you to leave your estate to an officially recognised organisation (asbl or aisbl), such as QCEA for example, and which mandates that organisation to take a certain percentage of your inheritance and pass on the remainder of to your heirs. Obviously, such organisations stipulate a minimum percentage that they require you to leave to them (often about 20%) but, as the inheritance tax in this case is much lower, the amount received by your heirs is still much higher than if you named them directly in your Will.

Gifts can be made to family and other individuals long before your death, but such gifts may be subject to an immediate 7% tax. Ask the notary about this.

A list of Notaries can be found online at: <http://notaries-europe.com/belgium/>

Tax and inheritance advisers may also be helpful in advising about complicated situations involving transnational questions.

You may also like to draw up a Living Will saying how you would wish to be treated in the event that you are unable to make decisions for yourself in the closing stages of your life.

Premature ending of life

In Belgium you can also sign legally binding documents asking that your life can be ended prematurely under medical supervision if it is clear to your doctors that you will not recover and that what remains of your life will only be a period of suffering. This is usually referred to as the Euthanasia law, which has been in force since 2002. Obviously, you must be considered to be legally capable of signing such a document, so it is not to be undertaken when you are already in a state of distress or are incapacitated. In addition, it must be renewed every few years so as to confirm that it is still your wish. Ask your notary for advice/information.

Please feel free to discuss any of these issues, at any moment of your life, with an Elder.

See also Quaker Faith and Practice (BYM 1994-2016) on Wills, sections 20.65 - 20.66

Burials and Cremations – making practical arrangements

Information on crematoria in Belgium can be found on the websites:

www.belgium.be/fr/famille/deces/incineration www.crematorium.be

Information on undertakers in Belgium can be found on the websites:

www.pompes-funebres-belgique.be

www.belgium.be/nl/familie/overlijden/begravenn

Some Friends may wish to ensure that their funeral is environmentally friendly. As an example of companies organising eco-burials in Belgium Friends may wish to consult the following websites: www.funeraillies-ecologiques.be www.groenebegrafenis.be

There are other similar websites that can easily be found using the keywords contained in the website addresses above.

Quaker Funerals

The funerals of Friends can reflect our Quaker practice of being at one with a spirit of quiet worship in which peace and thanks can be expressed. In our worship we can give thanks to God for the life that has been lived and enable those attending to feel a deep sense of God's presence.

An Elder, or another nominated Friend, in consultation with the relatives of the deceased, is responsible for the right holding of Meeting for Worship during a funeral. Please ask your next-of-kin to inform the Clerk of BLYM of your death.

Some of the practical responsibilities that can be undertaken by the Elders or other members of the Meeting are:

- taking into account the wishes of the deceased;
- consulting with the family;
- liaising with the crematorium or funeral directors to clarify points of Quaker practice during the funeral service;
- the opening and closing of the Meeting for Worship;

- the reading out at the beginning of clear and short guidance of Quaker way of holding Meeting for Worship and procedures; and
- ensuring the presence of as many members and attenders as possible.

It will also usually be necessary to explain to the staff of the crematorium how the ceremony / meeting will take place and what their role is, if any, so as to avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate behaviour such as instructing the gathering to stand just before the coffin disappears from sight.

Non-Quakers will usually be in attendance, so a short introduction and explanation will be needed at the beginning of the Meeting. An Elder, another member of Meeting, or another Friend whom the deceased, or his/her family, has/have invited to carry out the task, may welcome everyone and make this introductory statement.

A form of words that may be used for the opening of Meetings at Crematoria or other places is the following:

"Friends, we are meeting here today to (bid farewell to) (celebrate the life of) our friend A.

"Quaker meetings take place in expectant Silence during which anyone may speak if they feel that what they have to say will nourish and deepen the Silence. What is said does not need to be a professional or carefully constructed contribution: a short, simple and sincere message is often more precious than a long, elegant sermon.

"Quakers believe that we all have 'that of God', an Inward Light or a Divine Spark within us and that this inspires what we say. After each spoken contribution, we like to leave enough time to appreciate what has been said before the next person speaks. Quakers have met in this way for over 300 years without priest or liturgy.

"The meeting closes when a Friend at the front of the Meeting takes the hands of those on either side and we form a circle of friendship around the room."

Alternatively:

"Friends, we are gathered here today to bid farewell to our dear Friend A who died on 00. I am X.

The proceedings take the form of a Quaker Meeting for Worship. This is based on silent worship and contemplation. There are two aims in our

worship: to give thanks to God for the life that has been lived, and to help the mourners to feel a deep sense of God's presence.

There will be no set prayers or hymns. But the silence may be broken by anyone who feels moved to speak. Maybe you have a prayer to offer or maybe a memory of A that you would like to share. Please feel free to do so, allowing a few minutes pause for reflection between contributions.

The Meeting will last for about half an hour, after which time the curtains around the coffin will be drawn. A few minutes later, we will shake hands as a signal that the Meeting for Worship is ended. We can then greet each other and slowly leave.

So let us settle prayerfully. As we are told in the Quaker "Advices and Queries", "Accepting the fact of death, we are freed to live more fully. In bereavement give yourself time to grieve. When others mourn, let your love embrace them."

The same or similar opening statements may be made at Memorial Meetings.

For what follows the funeral ceremony, there is no fixed form, but it is usual to have light refreshments; crematoria usually have catering facilities for this, or the local worship group may help to organise this.

Quaker Memorial Meetings

Memorial Meetings are held to give thanks for the life of the Friend who has died. These can be held at a later time than the funeral to allow adequate notice to be given to Friends who may be travelling from afar, and to allow enough time for consultation with family and Friends on a suitable date and on the form of the Meeting.

A Friend should be appointed to briefly explain the right holding of the Meeting for Worship, the purpose of the Meeting for Worship and how long it is likely to last.

The length of the Meeting for Worship may vary and the Elder or other Friend responsible for holding and closing the Meeting needs to be sensitive to the spiritual condition of the Meeting as it moves to a natural ending.

The Elder or other Friend responsible for the right holding of Meeting for Worship may make a similar opening statement to those suggested above for funerals.

For what follows the memorial meeting, there is no fixed form, but it is usual to have light refreshments.

See also BYM's QFP on Death 21.49-21.58 and 22.80-22.95; on Quaker funerals and memorial meetings 17.01-17.16.

Parts of these sections need to be adapted to the situations in Belgium or Luxembourg, but serve as a general guide to Quaker practice.

Testimonies to the Grace of God in the life of

A Quaker Meeting will often ask one or two Friends to draft a 'Testimony to the Grace of God in the life of ...' a deceased Friend.

Part I of this Supplement contains a number of such testimonies at pages 48 - 57.

DRAFT

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) **Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting**

Supplement to Britain Yearly Meeting's **Quaker Faith and Practice Part III**

Proposed new chapter: Quaker Business, Membership

Meetings for Business in BLYM

Right Holding of Meeting for Business

Minute 19/04-16. Meeting for Business agreed the following guidelines for the Right Holding of Meeting for Business. These were slightly modified at Residential Yearly Meeting 2019 in Ghent.

At our Meeting for Business in January 2023, an additional amendment to the guidelines was made to take into account the fact the most of our MsfB are now 'blended' (in-person and online).

The guidelines now read:

1. If you are attending in person, do not raise your hand to speak or even try to catch the Clerk's eye, but simply stand and wait. If you are attending virtually, please raise your digital hand. In both cases await the Clerk's signal to speak.
2. If at all possible, speak only once on a subject, briefly and concisely and do not repeat what has already been said.

3. Be sure to leave enough time after the previous contribution before speaking.
4. While we welcome differences of opinion, we hope that these may be expressed gently without contradicting what others have said.
5. Please avoid speaking when the clerks are drafting a minute or deliberating.

NL: Correcte manier om Zakelijke Vergaderingen te houden.

We hebben deze richtlijnen goedgekeurd voor onze Zakelijke Vergaderingen:

1. Als u persoonlijk aanwezig bent, steek dan niet uw hand op om te spreken of probeer zelfs maar de aandacht van de griffier te trekken, maar blijf gewoon staan en wachten. Als je virtueel aanwezig bent, steek dan je digitale hand op. Wacht in beide gevallen op het teken van de griffier om te spreken.
2. Indien mogelijk, spreek slechts één maal over een onderwerp, kort en bondig en herhaal niet wat reeds gezegd is.
3. Verzeker jezelf ervan dat je genoeg tijd hebt gelaten na de vorige bijdrage eer je spreekt.
4. Hoewel we verschillen van mening verwelkomen, hopen we dat deze uitgedrukt worden met zachtaardigheid en zonder tegen te spreken wat anderen gezegd hebben.
5. Vermijd alsjeblieft te spreken wanneer de schrijvers een notule aan het uitwerken zijn of aan het overleggen zijn.

Dit is een licht aangepaste versie opgemaakt voor onze Jaarvergadering in Gent in November 2019.

FR : Nous avons adopté ces lignes directrices pour nos réunions d'affaires :

1. Si vous assistez en personne, ne levez pas la main pour parler ou même n'essayez pas d'attirer l'attention du greffier, mais restez simplement debout et attendez. Si vous assistez virtuellement, veuillez lever la main numérique. Dans les deux cas, attendez le signal du greffier pour parler.
2. Si possible, ne parlez qu'une seule fois sur un sujet, brièvement et de manière concise, et ne répétez pas ce qui a déjà été dit.
3. Assurez-vous d'avoir laissé suffisamment de temps après l'entrée précédente avant de parler.
4. Bien que nous accueillons les différences d'opinion, nous espérons qu'elles sont exprimées avec douceur et sans contredire ce que d'autres ont dit.

5. Veuillez éviter de parler lorsque les rédacteurs transcrivent ou discutent d'un procès-verbal.

Il s'agit d'une version légèrement modifiée préparée pour notre réunion annuelle à Gand en novembre 2019.

Meetings for Business: reflections by former clerks of BLYM

Here are some thoughts, based on our varied experience, on good practice for Quaker business meetings.

From the outset it must be clear that no particular custom or way of doing things is good simply because it is what has always been done, or because it is what they do somewhere else. The only relevant question is, does it help us achieve the goals that we have as a Quaker community?

We can, of course, look back to what earlier Quaker groups have done and we can learn good practice from other Quakers elsewhere in the world at the present time: Quakers of other times and places have faced similar problems and they may have found some answers that can guide us in our search. However, in the end, we must decide what works for us.

The basic idea is that, for Friends, a Business Meeting is in all respects like a Meeting for Worship, except that it has an agenda.

Who is in charge?

Meeting for Worship is based on the idea that everyone is equally responsible for the quality of the Meeting and equally capable of making a contribution, even if the contributions (or 'spoken ministries') are different, and even if they are silent. So, nobody is in charge of Meeting for Worship.

It is similar in a Meeting for Business: the Clerks are there to serve the meeting in its search for the solution to problems and questions laid before it and to record the decision; their task is not to run the Meeting.

Several things follow from this:

Coming with heart and mind prepared does not mean coming with established and well-researched positions, but rather prepared and committed to listening fully, being prepared to change our point of view. It is only possible to do that if we listen and remain open.

We are all contributing to the process and so we do not need anyone's permission to speak. In fact, the practice of putting up hands creates a tension that does not belong in a Quaker context: a concern about 'having your say'; it creates the question in one's head 'Am I before him or her?' or 'If I hesitate will someone else begin to speak?' or quite simply, 'it's my turn now!'

Contributions in a Quaker business meeting are made in the same spirit as spoken Ministry in Meeting for Worship. (We may expect, however, that there will be more spoken contributions and with greater frequency.) In a business meeting, unlike other decision-taking meetings, we are trying to hear what God is leading us to do.

A person who is moved to speak tries to speak on behalf of the Meeting as a whole and to contribute to a growing perception of the way ahead. This cannot be done if there is any sense of competition or time-related stress in the air. We should not be rushing to get our word in before someone else does, nor should we repeat our contribution to counter what someone else has said. There is also a place for silence between contributions; we don't have to fill all the space with more and more words in attempt to get the outcome we ourselves favour.

We should only speak once and briefly if at all possible and not follow up with supplementary arguments. We should not speak at all if someone has already said all that needs to be said or what we would have said

This also means that, before ministering, a Friend will listen carefully to everything that previous speakers have said and weigh it. If everyone's contribution is to be received in the same atmosphere of seeking the way ahead together, there needs to be a quiet time for reflection between contributions. There should be no conversations taking place.

For similar reasons, it is not helpful to signal one's reactions to what others have said by shaking the head or making aside comments on what has been said. Even if we disagree with what has been said, all contributions are made in good faith on behalf of us all.

Why don't we vote?

At its simplest, the Quaker business method has often been reduced to 'we don't vote'. This, of course, is true, but is only a very partial and inadequate explanation of our method; if we examine this we shall see that it is the tip of the iceberg of the Quaker approach.

Why do we not vote? Quite simply, because we seek an inclusive solution, not the victory of the majority. Only when everyone can contribute to the discussion in a free and unhurried way, without fear of having to defend a particular point of view, can we hope to make decisions that may go beyond what any of us had imagined at the beginning of the meeting. Where there is victory, there is also defeat and defeat breeds discontent and faction; this is not a recipe for a healthy community that can go forward together. After all, the minority view may well have a valuable contribution to make which would be lost if the majority view dominates.

We can cultivate an attitude of mind of 'non-voting': we can listen open mindedly, without showing or expressing disagreement, to what others say, even when we totally disagree; and we can avoid pushing our own point of view on the meeting. Quaker Faith and Practice advises us to say what we have to say, but not to repeat our contribution. Similarly we are advised against lobbying for a particular decision before a meeting.

The Minutes...

Writing a minute is often a very difficult task for the clerk, especially if the discussion has been wide ranging and if very different ideas have been expressed. It is important to 'uphold' the clerk at this point; very simply, this means 'keep quiet while the clerk tries to find the right words'.

Once the draft minute has been read to the meeting, contributions that clarify and improve the minute are welcome, and can be expressed with a view to uniting everyone's contributions. At this point, new issues and departures are not usually introduced.

As each successive minute is accepted, the business moves on to the next item and the process repeats itself.

At the end of most business meetings, the minutes are signed and then never altered. But of course, minor mistakes of spelling, punctuation or grammar are left to the discretion of the clerks when the final version of the minutes is written or typed up. The Minutes are the final record of the meeting's decisions on that day.

Those present make the decision for the community of the meeting and our method depends on the trust we have in each other to make the right decision that allows us to move forward together. If a Friend has not attended a particular meeting, the decision is made on behalf of him or her too. The next meeting cannot ratify or change the decisions that were made previously, so it is not the custom to ask if the minutes are accepted at that next meeting, since it cannot change them in any case. We accept and support the decision of the meeting, even if we were not present – we accept that the Friends who did attend acted faithfully in the way described above and that the MfB arrived at the best decision possible on that occasion.

So is it just about consensus?

There will be consensus of course, usually only about practical issues; more important matters will often require deeper consideration. Another way can open that none of those who attend a meeting for business imagine when they begin to consider an issue. This comes from imaginative listening, finding new perspectives, being prepared to hold back rather than pushing a pre-prepared solution or course of action. How you describe this process is a matter of individual choice, but many Quakers would say that it is the Spirit leading the meeting.

Advice on Quaker Minute Writing

- Write a brief introduction to context so that the minute can stand alone without additional explanation. Then focus on what has been decided rather than opinions expressed by individuals or course of discussion. Emphasise what unites the meeting rather than what may divide.
- When a minute is continuing an earlier discussion, write 'Further to minute 27.20XX...'
- When it is agreed to continue a matter at a later meeting, write 'Minute to be continued....'
- In final stage of minute, state who will do what for when.
- Be brief – the longer the more room for complications to be introduced.
- Always use present perfect tense when writing about what has happened in the meeting for business: 'We have considered / have agreed / have discussed' not 'we considered / agreed / discussed'.
- The usual verb tenses should be used for talking about past and future.
- Use full names of individual Friends e.g. 'David Jones' - not simply first names.

Clerkship

What is the nature of Quaker clerkship? To those coming from outside the Society, it may seem that it is a near equivalent to a pastor or minister. The origin of 'clerk' is, of course, the same as clerical, cleric and clergy, but this is deceptive and the only common factor is the idea of being educated or able to write, which in the Middle Ages was almost the same thing. For Quakers the essence of clerkship was the task of recording the minutes of the Society's various decision-making meetings. This still lies at the heart of the job even if other tasks preparing for and following up the meetings for business have accumulated over the years. Except when 'at the table' or carrying out those activities preparative to or following the Business Meeting, the clerk is another Friend, another member of the Meeting with no ceremonial or special function, or special status.

Some branches of North American Quakerism developed a pastoral system in which a pastor, with functions similar to a minister of religion, became an important leader figure. In some cases the pastor also exercised the role of clerk, and in others not. This development took place mainly because the Friends' Meeting was sometimes the only 'church' for miles around and so served as a place of worship for many non-Quakers who were not used to traditional forms of Quaker organisation. These communities also took to hymn singing, holding Meetings for Worship in chapel-like buildings,

sometimes with stained glass windows, and with programmed meetings resembling the services of other Protestant groups but usually with a few minutes of silence thrown in.

In our small community here in Belgium and Luxemburg, we may be tempted to think in similar terms to those Friends and expect the Clerks to play a more pastor-like role. However, that would come at a price: the responsibility of all members of the community for all aspects of our Meeting's activities should be a source of strength, giving us all a role to play. At recent Meeting for Business we were asked to consider ways of developing a sense of community. We hope that everyone will feel that we all have a part to play in leading activities in the Meeting, whether practical tasks such as doing the washing up after Meeting for Worship, leading a discussion group or accepting a nomination for a position of responsibility. This will make membership of our community more real for each of us.

The Structure of BLYM

Minute 22/09-26 (below) describes the structure of BLYM:

- BLYM has four worship groups (Brussels, Gent, Luxembourg and online).
- Pastoral care within our faith community is a shared responsibility amongst Ffriends.
- Each worship group shall nominate one individual to act as an internal contact person for that group.
- We encourage each group to ensure continued pastoral care within their group.
- BLYM has the following offices Clerk, Assistant Clerk (if possible), Elders and Finance Group. For all other roles there shall be a 'coordinator' in each worship group. This Ffriend acts as a conduit for requests for nominations or volunteers for specific events/services.
- Important roles such as that undertaken by former the Community Care Group are maintained by each group.
- Meetings for Worship for Business are held quarterly.

22/09-26 BLYM - looking to the future

We have been reminded of the discussion held during Residential Yearly Meeting and then more recently online with regards to the reality of the structure of BLYM and how we move forward, embracing this reality. BLYM currently has 4 worship groups (Brussels, Gent, Luxembourg and online).

The Clerk suggests that, in this current reality of four relatively small but distinct and active worship groups, we simplify our structure.

Other Quaker Meetings and organisations are grappling with the same changed reality post-pandemic, in which technology has allowed Friends to develop new forums for Meetings for Worship. We were encouraged to learn from their experiences. We recalled that pastoral care within our faith community is a shared responsibility amongst Friends.

We ask each worship group to nominate one individual to act as an internal contact person for that group and encourage each group to try to ensure continued pastoral care within their group.

We agree with the 5 proposals made by the Clerk to simplify our structures.

- We maintain the YM offices of Clerk, Assistant Clerk (if possible), Elders and Finance Group
- For all other roles (Community Care Group,) we seek a 'coordinator' in each of the four worship groups. This Friend would act as a conduit for requests for nominations or volunteers for specific events/services.
- Important roles such as that undertaken by the Community Care Group would be maintained by each group (as is indeed the case currently).
- The Clerk, Elders and Finance Group maintain their roles within YM and that,
- rather than monthly Meetings for Business, we hold Quarterly Meetings for Worship for the business of the YM.

Membership

BLYM has adopted a policy on responding to applications for membership, as follows.

09/17 Procedure on applications for Membership (Minute 09/12 refers) We agreed in June that:

- It is the duty of visitors to make clear the suitability (or lack thereof) of the applicant for membership; and
- (in visitation reports) there should be no specific recommendations to BLMM to accept or reject membership.

We asked Phil Gaskell, Harry Huyberechts and Kate Macdonald to discuss future visiting procedures, and report back. Their report has been presented and is attached to these minutes, and we thank them for it.

We agree that:

1. The letter of application be received by the Clerk and acknowledged promptly (see Quaker Faith and Practice 11.11).

2. At the next Meeting for Business two Friends be appointed to act as Visitors.
 - While QF&P 11.12 suggests that one of the visitors be from a meeting other than the applicant's, at present this is not practical in our situation.
 - It may be helpful to send a male and a female visitor, where this is possible.
 - In order to help develop the experience of Friends it may also be felt helpful to appoint as a visitor a Friend who has little experience of visiting, to be accompanied by a Friend with more experience.
3. The visitors contact the applicant promptly and arrange a convenient time to meet at the applicant's home, expecting to be in conversation for one or more hours.
4. The language of the visit depends on the visitors and on the applicant.
5. The two visitors have a brief discussion before the visit to establish the list of points to be covered; these could include, but not be limited to:
 - the applicant's reasons for making the application.
 - the applicant's personal experience of, and views on, religious belief and religions.
 - the applicant's experience of Quakers and Quaker meetings; and
 - the applicants' views on the main tenets of Quakerism (these will vary depending on how the conversation goes, but the peace testimony, the priesthood of all believers, and the nature and practice of Quaker worship might be common subjects).
6. The visitors co-write a report on their visit (which does not make a recommendation) and agree on a final version before sending it to the Clerk of Monthly Meeting.
 - Visitors should confirm factual information and issues of confidentiality with the applicant.
 - While the language of the report depends upon the visitors' and the applicant's own language, it would be helpful to have an English version in addition to any version in French and / or Dutch, for the records.
7. Upon receipt, the Clerk tells the applicant at which Business Meeting the report is to be discussed.
8. After discussion by Monthly Meeting, the Clerk, or another appointed Friend, tells the applicant of the Meeting's decision promptly.

9. Reports filed with the Minutes are open to members of Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting to peruse. We ask the Clerks to ensure that visitors have exercised discretion in the information they include in their reports, especially in the light of current legislation on data protection.
10. The Clerks shall supervise access to such reports.
11. [...]

Advice to those visiting Applicants for Membership

Minute 09/29 of Meeting for Business: Membership (Minutes 09/06 and 09/12 also refer)

'Visitors should inform the applicant that s/he should make it clear which personal information discussed during the Visit should not be included in the Visitors' report, bearing in mind that membership of the Society involves trust in the community and its members, present and future. The report on the visit is part of the minutes of the Monthly Meeting and as such is part of the records of the Quaker community of which the applicant wishes to become a member. The applicant and Visitors should agree what should not appear in the report or be passed on the Friends at the Meeting for Business. Visitors are encouraged check facts with the applicant after the Visit, while drafting the report, and it is hoped that this will offer the applicant sufficient control over personal information.

Access to our Minutes and associated papers should only be granted by the Clerk(s). If there is any doubt about the appropriateness of this in a particular case, the request should be referred to the Meeting for Business. Requests for access to reports on Applicants for membership should always be referred to the Meeting for Business and the individual 'Applicants' concerned while they are still alive and can be traced. If this is not possible, such reports may be made available 50 years after the date of the visit without further formality. For this reason, reports of applications for membership should be filed separately and clearly and individually dated.'

Nominations - the Quaker Approach

The notes below concern Quaker business practice in general but focus on **nominations** in particular.

We need to begin by looking at the basic intentions behind the Quaker approach; what is it attempting to do? A classic answer, is, of course, to listen to the spirit and make the decision in the Light during that experience. Whatever you may think about the theology, this has practical implications:

respecting all those involved in the task as equals, being open to everyone's contribution seeking to learn what each has to offer, seeking a solution around which we can all unite and which we can all support because we see it as the outcome of deep collective discernment.

We seek to avoid setting up factions and divisions of opinion, hierarchies of personal importance within the Quaker community; the method is the application of the peace testimony in the context of running the Meeting. We do not always succeed, but we do try!

What are the particular implications for nominations? It is a shared exercise, not an opportunity to push your own candidate. No priming of candidates or lobbying of candidates should take place. Nobody who may be nominated should be approached until the nominations group has discussed all the possible names and decided to ask each of those being considered if s/he would be willing to be nominated. This is a collective task not an individual one. The MfB may name a convener, but it may just as well not do so; in the latter case, the group should choose its own convener, but the task remains collective.

It is preferable that all members of a nominations group should be present, in person or electronically, at the first meeting.

Minutes, although only of decisions, not the discussion, should be taken in the usual Quaker way.

In order not to build up any sense of 'party' or faction, members of the nominations group should not tell the 'candidate' who in the group suggested his or her name, the invitation to accept a nomination should come from the whole nominations group, not the individual who thought that person should be considered. If a member of the group suggests the name of a person with whom s/he has a close relationship, the others need to be convinced this is a name that should go forward. All names considered for the nominations should be kept confidential and not communicated to those who are not in the nominations group. The only exception might be the clerks, but usually that should not be necessary, and should only follow a request from the clerks.

If the nominations group has been asked to find two names, it is possible that the nominations group will make a short list of three or four, but until the first two Friends have been asked and declined to accept, the others on the list should not be asked. In this way, we avoid the Friends whose names are finally brought to the MfB having the feeling that they are not the first choice. Knowing that you are second choice rarely motivates anyone and may sow negative feelings. The names of the Friends who are not asked or whose names are not brought to the MfB, should not be disclosed to others outside the group.

Care should be taken not to reinforce the attitude that filling positions in our structure is a matter of 'taking turns' and that it is acceptable to lobby for positions that are seen as personally desirable.

An old Quaker principle is that positions should **not** go to those who seek them, just as the newly elected Pope is supposed to refuse the position three times before finally accepting his fate. Not always a good way of getting the most skilled or enthusiastic person for a position, perhaps, but in terms of purity of motivation a good principle to bear in mind.

Finally, the task is to find names of Friends willing to serve the Meeting, but efficiency is not the only objective. It is better to take time to find the best person for the task or the best combination of names than to focus on rapidity. The purpose is not only to fill the empty position(s) in the list of the Meeting's officers and committees, but also to grow the links of Friendship and insight with the other members of the nominations group and thus to contribute to the depth of community in the Meeting.

Nominations groups should look for balance, skills and character / temperament suitability in Friends considered and geographical, gender and age diversity as far as is possible.

Friends should not seek or lobby for positions in the Society.

Nominations should not be explained either positively or negatively at the MfB. No objection or 'that name would not have occurred to me' should be explained nor should any detail be given.

Naming Groups

Nominations for most positions in the Meeting are brought to MfB by a Nominations group or committee. However, if we need to replace one of the members of the Nominations group itself, it is clear that it would not be in right ordering for that group to coopt new members and thus perpetuate itself. Quaker practice in this situation is to ask the MfB to set up a Naming Group to find a new member of the Nominations group.

Naming groups can also be set up when it is thought best not to ask for nominations direct from those attending a Meeting for Business. The intention here is to avoid rapid decisions that may not have been thought through, or the acceptance of the first name that is suggested.

Naming Groups should be immediately laid down once names have been presented to MfB.

Ruth Harland, clerk and Phil Gaskell assistant clerk –
advice on Nominations, 2019.