



Quaker Life in Meetings

Explorations



**Opportunities for Meetings to
explore their Quaker life**

Final Review



Final review of the Quaker Life Explorations initiative

Introduction

In 2009 Quaker Life Central Committee envisioned the development of a spiritual growth initiative that would be offered to meetings. Rather than just concentrating on Meetings with issues, Quaker Life would encourage meetings to explore what they already did well and consider what they might like to do better.

It was intended that Explorations would be a good opportunity for Quaker Life to engage with the wider Quaker community, and would be a good opportunity to promote what was then a fairly new initiative, the Quaker Life Network. Explorations were developed and in early 2010, members of the Quaker Life Network were trained in the Appreciative Inquiry method of facilitation at a Woodbrooke weekend led by George Gawlinski. The initiative was launched to meetings at Quaker Life Representative Council in Spring 2010.

Since the autumn of 2010 there has been interest in Explorations from around 40 meetings, and all of the meetings that have enquired were offered a facilitated day, working together to explore their Quaker life.

The Review

To carry out this review we have consulted with three different categories of people who have been involved in Explorations events.

1. The Participants

This includes both the participants to the events and the facilitators of each event. This part of the review was carried out by members of the Quaker Life Network who had not previously been involved in the initiative in any way. They used the participant and facilitator feedback forms that were completed at the events and were looking to discover if Friends thought that the initiative was a success. This question was not directly asked on either of these feedback forms so it was decided that the measure for this would be if Friends would recommend the Explorations initiative to another meeting.

2. The Meetings

In September 2012 at the beginning of the review process we contacted each of the meetings that had received an Exploration to that point. There were 31 meetings that we contacted in total. At the beginning of this section of the review is a break-down of the meetings involved which explains why these meetings were contacted. We asked each meeting one simple question, “How has your Exploration enabled your meeting to prosper?” This part of the review was also carried out by one Quaker Life Network member who had not previously been involved in the Explorations initiative.

3. Quaker Life staff members

The final part of the review has involved the members of staff that have been involved in the initiative. An evaluation was circulated to each member of staff asking quantitative and qualitative questions about their involvement. This part of the review has been designed and carried out by Oliver Waterhouse, Michael Booth and Howard Nurden who are all members of the Quaker Life staff team.

Information on Explorations

Participants

The next table gives details of the number of Friends that have been involved in the initiative. In some cases a different number of Friends attended the morning and afternoon sessions of the workshops, this shows an overall figure. The table also shows the number who completed a reflection sheet, and the number that were willing to be contacted in future as part of a follow up review.

Total number of Friends attending the events	621
No. of Reflection sheets returned	434
No. of Friends willing to be contacted in follow-up	246

Meetings

To give some context to the review there is some background information that will frame the findings and help the reader to understand why it has been carried out in the way that it has. The table below shows a break-down of the requests:

Number of requests for events	40
Number of events unable to be delivered	5
Total number of events delivered (including outstanding at the beginning of the review)	35
Total number of events outstanding when review was initiated (one of which was also unable to be delivered)	4
Number of meetings that were not asked to complete the meeting review (Geneva meeting, as it is not part of Britain Yearly Meeting)	1
Total number of requests in the meeting part of the review	31

Facilitators

This table shows the total number of Friends that have facilitated Explorations. It shows how many Friends have facilitated more than one event.

Facilitated 1 event	20
Facilitated 2 events	15
Facilitated 3 events	5
Facilitated 4 events	1
Total number of different facilitators	41

Participant review

How Many Friends Considered their Exploration a Success?

It is impossible to answer the question with any degree of certainty, for two reasons

1. It was not put to participants
2. There is evidence that it would be mistaken to rely on answers (analysed below) given to the different question, *Would you recommend an Explorations visit to another Meeting?* Some Friends in Exeter, South London and Sunderland, most in Wrexham were clear that, although they would recommend the exercise to other Meetings they did not feel it had been a success in their own. They had expected to be working on Conflict Resolution, which they needed, and that need was quite deliberately not addressed by the Explorations facilitators, who instead, followed:

The usual Quaker way of clinging obstinately to the light and refusing to confront the dark... The dark is not so terrible that it cannot be confronted (Friend 1).

As someone who has only just returned to Quaker Meeting after a 4 / 5 year gap, it did unfortunately remind me why I have stayed away (Friend 2).

Half successful but failures were ignored (Friend 3).

Would you recommend an Explorations visit to another Meeting?

Meeting	Yes	No	Maybe	No Reply	Total
Bath	11		1	1	13
Bedminster	10	1	2		13
Bury St Edmunds	17		1		18
Chesterfield	18				18
Cirencester	16		2		18
Exeter	21		1	2	24
Great Ayton	6		1		7
Harpenden	14		1	1	16
Horfield	14		1		15
Leiston	2				2
Lewes	22		1		23
North Scotland AM	6		4		10
Nairn - no replies returned ¹					

¹ No feedback forms were handed out at this event

Meeting	Yes	No	Maybe	No Reply	Total
North London AM	18		1	5	24
Redland	23		1	2	26
Romford	7				7
Scarborough	12		2	1	15
Selly Oak	13		3	2	18
Shrewsbury	9				9
South London	15		4	1	20
Staines & Egham	6				6
Stourbridge	14		1	2	17
Sunderland	3	1	2		6
Sutton Coldfield	12				12
Truro	5	1	5	1	12
Uxbridge	10	1	3	1	15
West Scotland AM	13			2	15
Wensleydale	7				7
Wincanton	8		3		11
Woking	9		1		10
Wokingham - no replies returned ²					
Worthing	11		1		12
Wrexham	12		2	1	15
Totals	364	4	44	22	434

² No feedback forms were handed out at this event

Are there recurring themes from facilitators?

Prior planning and meeting essential

In some cases facilitators were faced with difficult situations and had to work extremely hard to overcome the problems. In one case a Meeting wanted to turn the Exploration into something different but the facilitators were able to spend time discussing the problem before the day began. This illustrates the need for skilled facilitators having prior contact with meetings to discuss the meeting's expectations.

It was clear the majority of facilitators had devoted a lot of time and effort to ensuring they were well prepared and had prior meetings/contact with the relevant meetings.

However feedback from participants reflects the fact that where facilitators were not sufficiently prepared and / or had not worked together then the Exploration was not as satisfactory as they had hoped.

It is difficult to find any common themes in facilitators' Reflections, other than references to the majority's determined adherence to an Appreciative Inquiry model of working, even in the face of evidence it was not what a meeting needed / was looking for.

What was discussed

- Getting to know each other
- What they enjoyed about Meeting
- Importance of being a Quaker
- Meeting for Worship
- Issues in the Meeting often linked to problems within the Meeting House/tenants/users of the building; making best use of the Meeting House
- Overwhelming workload felt by some members
- Strengths of Meeting
- Wishes for Meeting
- What did the Meeting want to do to develop as a worshipping community
- Increasing witness.

One overview is a good summary: Discover Dream Define Deliver (a) What's good, done well; consider our own spiritual journey; (b) spiritual life of the meeting, what is longed for; Dreams - what might be possible - discernment - select what to connect to?; (d) How to make it happen. Meeting for Worship and spiritual life of Meeting and members.

What was achieved

- Listening to one another;
- Shared experience;
- Growing enthusiasm for setting goals and strategies to achieve them;
- Sense of being able to do things;
- Opening up and talking honestly about difficult issues not directly addressed previously;
- Resistance to change and strong related negativity;

- Previous hurt in Meeting had not been fully explored or healed and further work could be beneficial;
- Wanting to develop better sense of community;
- Sense of Meeting's skills and energy;
- Commitment to action (special business meeting to be arranged);
- More hope for change.
- Including children and young people in the life of the meeting

Next steps

- Threshing meetings to discuss particular problems; Seek mediation / conflict resolution
- An Area Meeting Retreat
- Think differently about roles and work in the Meeting
- Instigate name labels and photo-board to identify members of the Meeting
- Appoint a group to draw up programme of talks, study groups and other events to help the Meeting develop deeper spiritual awareness and closer community;

Follow up by Quaker Life

Suggest Quaker Life have follow up possibly in 6 months time in recognition of impact Exploration days have on Meetings.

Areas of concern

- Negativity and fear of change hard to shift
- Format too cerebral - need activities (which were used by some Facilitators – musical chairs, poetry, 'snake' exercise appreciated)
- Lack of form
- Prior contact necessary
- Guidance for facilitators including advice to set, share agenda and timing
- Clear explanation needed about the reason for doing this
- Feedback forms could be made available electronically
- In small Meetings concern raised about over-burdening small number of members.

Overall Impression

From reading through the Facilitators' reflections and the participants' forms my overall impression is that for almost all meetings the Explorations were a worthwhile exercise. One person stated that she felt resentful at giving up her time but at the end of the day felt it was worthwhile. Response from the majority of participants in response to the facilitation of the Exploration expressed the view that the event and facilitators "acted as a catalyst"; "having external Facilitators really helped"; Facilitators seen as "tender, loving, supportive, enabling". It was clear that in a number of cases the meeting was given an opportunity to tackle a real problem which it possibly had not had time to deal with before and / or had been avoiding tackling.

Comment on Reflection forms

It is plain from the figures on page 3, that in several instances a significant proportion of participants did not complete the Reflection forms³, and even fewer participants were willing to be contacted. It is unclear why this happened.

Possible reasons

- Facilitators' insistence that Explorations focused on positives and resolutely avoided any negatives, may have led some (not all) of those Friends who had negative responses to feel they were denied permission to offer anything other than praise, so they did not complete the forms.

Facilitators were quick to intervene when they didn't feel groups were speaking positively. This was not always helpful & interfered with the flow of the group & important things being said. (Selly Oak Friend who did complete a reflection form).

- There are some indications that less experienced and less confident facilitators were unable (or did not see any need) to translate the 'jargon' of Appreciative Inquiry into plain English. Some participants may have felt bewildered and / or inhibited by the way the jargon affected the terms and language facilitators used. Some Friends voiced their objections to it, more seem to have found the jargon difficult to cope with. It is easy to see why, when it led to such aberrations as, 'developing the inclusivity of elderly Friends;' (apparently intended to mean, 'organise transport for Friends with limited mobility'!)

I was stumped by the word dream (Exeter Friend).

The questions asked were a bit esoteric (S. London Friend)

- As Explorations are designed to be group exercises, the fact comparatively few participants were willing to be contacted later may have been due to their feeling it might be more appropriate for their Meeting as a whole - not them as individuals - to be asked whether the exercise had led to positive changes.

³ In spite of being low, Explorations average return rates were well above a good average campaign response rate

Meeting review

Introduction

This paper analyses comments received by Quaker Life from meetings that held an Exploration between 2010 and 2012. 31 meetings were asked for evaluations; 19 responded (21 if one Area meeting is counted as the three constituent meetings that attended one event). Five Explorations could not be completed due to difficulties within the meeting. Two more events are due in early 2013. Whether the meetings that have not responded failed to do so for positive or negative reasons is impossible for me to say, but may be important. Each number in brackets refers to the number of meetings which provided this feedback to Quaker Life.

Evaluations took the form of responses to the question "How has your Exploration enabled your meeting to prosper?" Responses range from a few lines to two pages of A4. Feedback came in the form of minutes, or the observations of one or two Friends. The quality of feedback depended partly on time: meetings found it difficult to remember two years after the event. Some memories were jogged by notes made on the day. One meeting said that it had given feedback previously and clearly did not feel the need to revisit it.

Background to the day

What led to the request for an Exploration? It may have arisen from a period of transition, or from a sense of being stuck; sometimes there was an energetic sense of a meeting wishing to explore issues and grow in faith. In some cases (3), issues around the use or running of the meeting house, including the difficulty of reducing carbon emissions, were a pre-occupation and formed the core of the day. In one instance, the departure of many Friends to a newly constituted nearby meeting meant there was a need for re-grouping, as well as a sense of loss. Likewise, for another meeting:

The explorations day was held six months after we had lost three deeply valued members, two of whom had played major roles in all aspects of the life of the meeting. The workshop provided a valuable space to remember these friends but also to move on and hear the new voices of those Friends and Attenders who are now stepping forward into the roles necessary to sustain the meeting.

One meeting in its application had requested a focus on:

Our meeting as a spiritual community, to give an emphasis on building and maintaining a community with a spiritual foundation. This would cover outreach and inclusion as well as pastoral care, serving the meeting, working with children and young people, and worshipping together.

While another acknowledged:

A depletion of both spiritual and physical energy amongst the more active Friends in the Meeting. The colloquialism used was that the Meeting had 'Run out of Puff'. The hope for the day was that we would uncover ways of regenerating both these energies.

Outcomes

In general, the responses are positive. Some Explorations involved a high proportion of local Friends (fifty at one event); one report pointed out that this gave authority to the day's decisions. Meetings felt that the event gave impetus to positive developments already underway, or opened up new avenues for exploration. Outcomes included:

- a meeting for learning on spoken ministry
- a spiritual journeys group
- a visit to Woodbrooke (2)
- an Experiment with Light day
- better business meetings
- closer working across the area meeting, including AM spiritual away days (2)
- discussion groups with other faiths
- establishing new social groups: a music group and shared walks, shared lunches and a book group
- focus on integrating children into the meeting, or on all-age worship (2)
- inviting Woodbrooke on the road
- make better relations with tenants
- more effective attempts to publicise the meeting (2)
- plan a garden day project
- reviewing the system of pastoral care
- set up a group to look at making better use of the meeting house (2)
- setting up a midweek meeting for worship (2)
- study groups (2)
- take a decision to host Quaker Quest
- taking steps to set up a Young Friends group
- thought given to welcoming newcomers; developing a welcome pack.

One meeting reported that its finances are now more secure!

These are notable and hopeful developments.

Some extracts give a flavour of the events

The small group discussions helped us to get to know one another better, and highlighted the variety of our spiritual journeys; some people found this particularly reassuring.

Newcomers to the meeting were able to share their positive experiences of being welcomed into our community and everyone expressed a desire to learn more about each other and build on existing personal relationships and friendships.

It was useful in enabling us to reflect on ways forward and indeed how we manage to look both outward and inward

Those of us who were able to attend and participate in the afternoon on 'Explorations: spirituality in decision making', found it helpful and encouraging. We were invited to share our hopes and fears for our Meeting, and articulate our dreams for the future. We resolved to engage more carefully with our Quaker business methods, be less forceful with our

opinions, to listen more attentively to one another, and to leave more spaces in our meetings for worship for business to allow the Divine Other to work amongst us.

Ambivalences

While there were no clearly negative outcomes, four meetings seemed neutral in their evaluations. Their workshops mostly occurred in the early stages of the project. To give a flavour of two:

I am not sure that the Explorations day did anything of any lasting help to the life of the Meeting. There was a useful prompt for more positive contacts with our major tenant which has been helpful but I wouldn't be able to point to anything else.

While, from another member of the same meeting:

*I can say that our Meeting **is** prospering, though how much this is directly due to the Exploration, and how much to a greater vitality, particularly among our elders, is hard to say. It was this greater vitality, and enthusiasm for change, that led to us asking for an Exploration.*

When talking to Friends 18 months after the event and asking what they got out of it, several people said they were disappointed. They were expecting more answers and guidance...

In the first part of the event we aired our loss and concerns about the future of the Meeting. In the second half the conveners attempted to create a positive attitude and 'empower' the Meeting. This didn't feel appropriate at the time, the Meeting wasn't ready to move forward yet.

Some of us felt that the Exploration event was valuable because it gave us an opportunity to have time together and express our sense of loss, uncertainty and worry for the future of the Meeting. Some Friends felt that the session helped them to think things through and were left feeling positive.

Some meetings which expressed ambivalent feelings about the day reported subsequent developments which seem positive. It should also be noted that some of the early Explorations received very favourable evaluations.

Difficulties

One meeting discovered that the agenda they had set for the day was too wide. Some found that the appreciative enquiry agenda was restrictive, especially in inhibiting the acknowledgment of negative feelings which needed airing.

Regarding the use of the appreciative inquiry method, we generally welcomed its positive accent and its emphasis on producing deliverable results. On the other hand, it seemed to some to make constructive criticism and radical change more difficult, and to move too fast at times.

Other meetings liked the approach and used it in subsequent events, both at local and at area meeting level.

Sometimes there had been too little preparation by the facilitators. One meeting said:

The facilitation was not as strong as it might have been as it was the first time the facilitators had met, let alone worked together as a team.

One workshop suffered from the late arrival of a facilitator. Two reports, however, highlight the facilitators' skill at drawing out important themes.

What might have been different? One meeting on reflection found that the focus of the day had been too superficial:

The day was called a spirituality day. We do not feel we stayed with and developed this - we got away with the easier factual things like `letting the building more', `dealing with the kitchen waste` for example.... So although we had a good day building acceptance, friendship and a greater awareness of each other we do not feel that we stayed with the `Religious' or more spiritual side to help us develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and what being a Quaker means to us.

Facilitators need the confidence to challenge a meeting when the real focus is being ignored.

One day in more depth

One Exploration at least took an unexpected turn. While the presenting problem was a lack of energy, the issue that emerged was the meeting's relationship with the nursery which used the meeting house for five full days a week. There was a sense that the nursery

Was intruding on our perception of the building as being a place of worship and calm.

When addressed, this issue took on a positive aspect:

Much energy was released as a result of spending time reflecting on the issue and hearing the views of many who do not normally actively participate in the running of the Meeting House. Much work was subsequently done and we can now say that the interior of the Meeting House has taken on an improved appearance and that relationships with the nursery management are also enhanced.

This required flexibility and openness on the part of the facilitators:

We wish to record our appreciation of the skill and perceptiveness of the Explorations facilitators in drawing these issues out and enabling us to respond to them in a positive way.

Some summaries

The reviewer found it a pleasure to read these reports. Many record developments that have made a real difference to the life of a meeting. This is reflected in some of the comments.

The spiritual life of the meeting has shown signs of recovery.

The Exploration has enabled our Meeting to prosper by encouraging participation, supporting discernment, and introducing us to the appreciated enquiry method.

We think that the Explorations was the jump start we needed to revitalise our Meeting - it seems to be working well, Thank you!

And some longer reflections

The redevelopment of the Meeting House continues to be both a difficult task and an opportunity for the Meeting ... The Ambience Group has tapped into a well of energy and care for the Meeting House. The decisions we take at local business meetings are better thanks to the Group's ground work. We'd never have thought of forming such a group without the opportunity provided by the Explorations day to step back from the day-to-day business of the Meeting and dream.

The Explorations Day workshop was productive, profound and fun. It has certainly helped the meeting get through a difficult phase by helping everyone come together to share our feelings and experience and appreciate the strengths of the meeting and individual members when we might otherwise have been left to feel lacking in energy and vision.

The day was well organised and went smoothly. What we did get from the day was a deeper sharing of belonging to the same meeting, what we have achieved and a look at what we may be able to do together. We were more aware of how we care for each other, how tolerant we can be and how supportive we are.

The Exploration exercise and related activity have required extra effort and inevitably brought some disturbance; but they have stirred our meeting up and opened us to new ideas and new ways of working and being together. We have embarked on a hopeful adventure... We all appreciated the opportunity to get to know one another better, to exchange ideas and experiences, and to find fresh vision and depth in the cauldron of inquiry.

Evaluation

On the evidence offered, this project was worthwhile. The format adopted appears to have worked, though more flexibility was needed in the way that some facilitators used Appreciative Inquiry. Meetings found that explorations have given them renewed vigour, a sense of togetherness, and a focus on the - sometimes unexpected - things that matter. Others have used the exploration to address and move on from a loss of direction. Many have taken to heart the issues that arose on the day, which are now shaping their life as a community. Those who devised the initiative, the facilitators who carried it out, and the meetings that whole-heartedly embraced the opportunities offered, have created something that will be of benefit for some time to come.

Quaker Life staff review

Introduction

Over the course of about three years eight members of Quaker Life staff have been involved in the continuing development and administration for the Explorations initiative. We hope that what we have developed has had a positive effect on the meetings that have chosen to be a part of it. But it has also been an initiative that has given members of Quaker Life staff the chance to work together in a way that they haven't done so previously. On many occasions in the past the work within the department has overlapped and staff have worked together. The Explorations initiative was developed by Quaker Life staff from all areas of work collaborating in this way for the first time.

We intend to show in this part of the review of Explorations that the amount of effort that Quaker Life has put into the Explorations initiative has been worthwhile, cost effective for our staff team; individually and working together; and for the overall life of the department. We would also like to show that working together on this project has had a big benefit to our staff team; in terms of the work that we are able to produce and deliver together; but also for the development of the staff team as a group, as colleagues and also as friends.

Background to the review

There have been eight members of staff that have been directly involved in working on Exploration. Of these members of staff six are still employed by Quaker Life. These six were asked to complete an evaluation of the day and the answers to the questions that have been asked have been compiled to for this part of the review.

There is some quantitative data, and some qualitative data. Much of the quantitative data is estimates based upon personal records and memories. Where there are gaps with staff not being around we have made estimates based upon information that has been given by colleagues working in similar roles. Qualitative data has been exclusively gathered from the colleagues that are still present.

Time taken

Staff were asked to estimate the amount of time that they had spent working on the Explorations initiative. They were asked to remember to include: overview meetings; time developing resources; facilitating events; training of volunteer facilitators, time as staff lead.

The overall time that we estimate that we as a staff team have spent working on Explorations is about 12 weeks were spent working on Explorations by 6 staff members. Two of our colleagues are no longer working with us. It is estimated that these colleagues would have spent an additional 3 weeks work. This gives a grand total of 15 weeks work from Quaker Life staff on Explorations.

Has the time that Quaker Life spent on Explorations been used well?

All of the staff questioned think that this time has been used well, even though it was quite time consuming for some. The reasons for this include that:

- It has engaged and empowered Friends and meetings in a positive and encouraging way so that they could explore what they are doing well and how they might build upon it. And so that they could use Appreciative Inquiry in other parts of their communal life.
- Quaker Life as a team learnt a lot from this and benefited from the collaboration among its staff members
- It has enabled 35 meetings to experience a day of exploration
- It has given Quaker Life a chance to be part of the meeting community in a good cross section of meetings. It has helped us to understand more about what meetings are doing, and discover ways that we can support them better. Quaker Life has often been invited to work with meetings when there is a problem. Explorations has been different and in many cases has given us a chance to see meetings that work well.

What benefit has there been to your work from being part of this initiative?

Individually staff suggest that working on the Explorations initiative has been of benefit to their work and to some of the wider work of the department. There is also some indication that reaching out into the Quaker community has been, or will be of benefit to Quaker Life's work. Some of the comments include:

- *It has strengthened my skill base in terms of leading and facilitating these kinds of events and it has also given a very helpful insight into the importance of the links between outreach and inreach*
- *I feel much more aware of what is going on in meetings*
- *It was useful to learn a new technique*
- *Every contact with interested Friends and with facilitators helps me to discover Friends that might have ministry to offer the Yearly Meeting*
- *Starting my job after the initiative had started was a challenge, especially as this was intended to be my piece of work. It did give me a good opportunity straight away to get to know a wide group of my colleagues. And also through offering to facilitate an event early on with a very experienced Friend, gave me confidence to work in meetings*
- *Anything that encourages the development of community within Friends may very well provide good ground for the growth of children's work*
- *I have also gained a great amount of knowledge about meetings which has helped me in the part of my role that is about supporting and offering advice*
- *The benefit has been linking up QL work areas in support of meetings.*

These comments are encouraging. But there has been a flip side to this with some colleagues in the Children & Young people's work team feeling that there was not as much take up from meetings requesting to explore and develop their children & young people's opportunities. The further comments reflect this:

- *The benefit has been less than was hoped originally. The Explorations that have focussed on children & young people's matters have been very small. Initially we wanted to have a list of options for meetings requesting an Exploration to choose from (including children & young people's work). This was not agreed with and the result has been that very few meetings have specified children & young people's work as an issue to explore. This is what we feared if the option wasn't there for them and has been a shame*

- *It has been good for some of the children & young people's trainers (cluster) to engage with Explorations although a shame that more did not take up this opportunity.*

What benefit has there been to the Quaker Life staff team, and to the Quaker Life work overall from us offering this initiative?

All agree that Quaker Life has benefitted from staff members working closely together on this shared project and has been strengthened as a team. Links have been made between staff members, leading to a more cohesive team. As well as enabling Quaker Life to help meetings to explore as spiritual communities it has helped to identify things to develop. The Explorations initiative has helped to raise the profile of Quaker Life's work throughout the society.

- *It has certainly showed that together we can achieve more than we can separately*
- *I think that I have learnt a lot more about my colleagues which has strengthened the overall team*
- *The QL Network is a good way to break down barriers that have developed over time*
- *As a department we recognise the benefit of this wider working and are initiating projects that involve not only a wider group from Quaker Life, but also more cross departmental working.*
- *We also saw how we each approach the work in our own way. This has given us a chance to work as a whole team, which in turn has led to greater understanding of what each of us does for the department*
- *By discovering each other's strengths and skills, colleagues were able to see similarities between their work rather than just the differences.*

Please describe any ways that you think this initiative has been successful?

Answers were given as follows:

- *I think that meetings have taken risks and opportunities they may not otherwise have taken and, in some cases, have really grown as a result of this*
- *Enabling 35 meetings to spend time thinking about themselves and identifying ways forward*
- *Providing opportunities for Quaker Life staff to work together*
- *Promoting Quaker Life within Britain Yearly Meeting*
- *Offering the Quaker Life Network lots of opportunities to give service*
- *Friends and meetings want to use Appreciative Inquiry to look at their own communities both within and out with the Society*
- *It has given Quaker Life a good reason to be invited to meetings and see them when they are working well*
- *It has helped us to learn from meetings things that they are doing well that might be shared with others*
- *It has helped enormously with the development of the Quaker Life Network*
- *Meetings have benefitted from having Friends work with them, rather than feeling that Friends House is sending someone in to sort them out.*

Evaluation

As a summary all of that has been shared by Quaker Life staff members. What has been developed and shared with meetings by Quaker Life through the Exploration initiative has been valuable. It has offered 'value for money' in terms of the amount of staff time that has been put in to develop and deliver it to meetings. It has been of value to members of Quaker Life Staff that have worked on it. One exception to this could easily be a lesson to learn in the way that a future initiative is offered to meetings. It has benefitted the department as a whole. It has allowed staff to learn more about each other's work, and so see where the similarities lie, and to collaborate more. Also it has given Quaker Life an outlet to meetings that has been about something other than solving problems. We have had a chance to see meetings working and learn from them. This has helped to raise the profile of Quaker Life throughout Britain Yearly Meeting.

Bringing the pieces together

In drawing the threads for this review I have found great pleasure in reading each of the three parts of the review. Having been close to Exploration for all of the time that I have been in my role in Quaker Life I have a unique insight to the initiative. I have been involved in some way with the planning for many of the events. In conversation with Friends, I have seen them become excited when they learn about the way that an Exploration is structured. And I have witnessed a buzz that has been created around this initiative.

Participants and facilitators have on the whole enjoyed the experience. There is the occasional grumble from both of these groups about the structure to the day, and the fact that there was too much rigidity in the format. There is evidence that this has been one of the strengths at some of the events. What is clear is that it has given Friends a chance to remove themselves from day-to-day meeting life and enjoy the chance to reflect upon. Participants and some facilitators have been disappointed that there is no follow up or continued contact between the facilitators and the meetings after the events. It was set up this way on purpose and facilitators were asked to avoid making further contact. Some felt that developing this working relationship could have been taken further. What it has meant is that Quaker Life Network members have felt that they have the freedom to offer on more than one occasion, and develop what they are offering as they gain experience.

Many meetings have picked up the idea of Explorations and run with it, others have walked, and fewer still have been stopped by what has been offered to them. Few meetings have reported that it has been a completely negative experience. Even when Explorations have not worked as they have been hoped for, or intended to, there has usually been some kind of turning point, or realisation of what needs to be addressed that has been a catalyst for change at this point or in the future. The general picture that comes through is that the spiritual life of meetings have benefitted from having a chance to step away and assess their situation, then take the time to identify simple things that can be done that make a difference to everyone.

For Quaker Life staff, that chance to work together in this way has been a great opportunity, as individuals and as a team. We have developed our understanding of each other's work, which has meant that we work as a better unit together. We already have other projects that we are working on as a whole team, instead of as individual areas of work. There has been a little bit of disappointment at the way that the initiative was marketed. Overall the benefit to Quaker Life, and its staff, has been positive.

My final conclusion is that Explorations has been a success. While the Explorations initiative was by no means perfect; it was not always what meetings wanted, or even needed; but it was well received in almost all the forms that it took. It has had a positive effect on the spiritual lives of the Friends and meetings that participated in it. It gave a great boost to the Quaker Life Network, and helped Quaker Life to train over 75 Friends with facilitation skills for working with meetings. Explorations has been a piece of work that Quaker Life staff have both enjoyed working on, and developed individually, and together as a team.

Oliver Waterhouse, February 2013

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