



Simpler Meetings Series

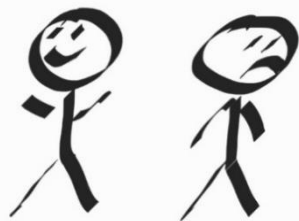
Area meetings working together – collaboration and structural changes

Hello Friends

This talk is about different ways that area meetings can work together. I hope you'll find ideas here you can use. They are responses to the situation many Quaker area meetings find themselves in, as I described in the Fundamentals topic in this series – where there are too many things to do, and not enough people - and where we need to find new ways and new light, to give space for the spirit.

I'm Jonathan Carmichael, I'm a Quaker from Watford meeting in Hertfordshire in the east of England. For the last two and a half years I've been working for Britain Yearly Meeting in the simpler meetings project.

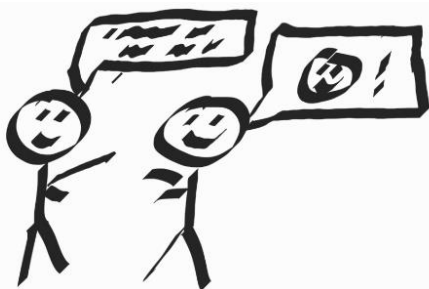
For the first part of this talk I'm going to use some little sketches, and here they are...



Here are two area meetings – each one represented by a stick person.

The one on the left looks happy. Not so in the one on the right. And they are not talking to each other.

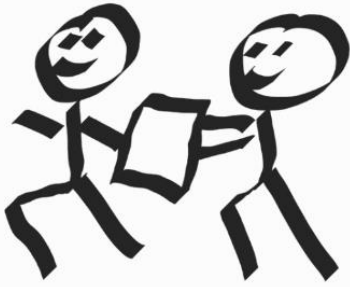
It is all too easy for two area meetings to ignore one another. Especially when one seems to be having trouble.



Offering each other advice and support

There are lots of easy ways to help one another, just by talking. Here they are exchanging some ideas.

This could include providing buddies for new role-holders, and getting together to share problems and solutions.



AMs can do things together

This could include some shared learning events, and sharing a few role-holders like registering officers – there are several pairs of areas doing this - safeguarding co-ordinators. Areas could use the same processes or solutions to common problems.



One area meeting can do something for the other

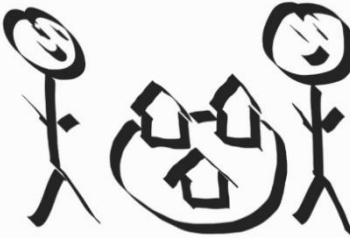
For example, one area meeting could have run a learning session, and could take this and run it for another area.

Or maybe one could employ staff who work for the other, to save both having to be very good at employment.



One or two local meetings switch area

Some local meetings may not fit well within an area's geographical boundaries. It might be better if one or two local meetings move into another area. All may gain from a more useful geography.



A common property trust takes responsibility for properties

across several area meetings, reducing duplication and enabling common solutions. There are several areas where there are property trusts, and maybe they could expand a little and cover more than one area. London has experience of doing this across seven areas, for hundreds of years.

What if we conclude
we can't continue
as a single AM?

But what if you conclude the you just can't carry on as a single area meeting? We've thought about and maybe tried some of these collaborative ways, and we just think we need to do something bigger, or different.

What else could we do?

Here are some ideas:



Disperse an area meeting

– 1 less charity, AM and trustees

An area meeting could lay itself down, and disperse its local meetings into the neighbouring area meetings.

This reduces the number of organisations, and role-holders.



Merge two area meetings

– 1 charity, 1 AM, 1 trustees

Two area meetings could combine into a single one, and do all of their business as a single entity. Each of the parts gets bigger – like the arms, the legs and the head here.

There are quite a few conversations around the country gently going on about the possibility of doing this.



Trustees in common

- 2 charities, 2 AMs, 1 trustees

Here, two area meetings could have a common set of trustees, playing this role for both area meetings. They could have back-to-back meetings, or be given the powers to be responsible for both organisations in the one meeting. This could be an interim solution, while other options are being explored.



A single larger charity

- 1 charity, several AMs, 1 trustees

Several area meetings could have a single charity that goes around all of them. This would have a single body of trustees, covering all of the area meetings. Each area meeting could continue much as now, holding area meetings in session and doing many of their appointments, discernment, social and learning activities in the current format. This is likely to involve area meetings trusting their trustees more, and probably holding one or more large meetings of Friends per year for big decisions and annual activities.

Now I want to explain about a real example of this last one, happening in Wales and the Marches
Symud Ymlaen is a committee, taking forward an idea. Symud Ymlaen means “Moving forwards”.

I’m using an explanation that Leslie Richards, the clerk of this committee gave in a session I was running a few days ago.

In Wales you have 4 area meetings – three entirely within Wales, and the Southern Marches area meeting which is partly in Wales and partly in England. And there is Meeting of Friends in Wales, a further charity. The plan is to put all those five charities together. It is like having one glove, looking after the whole hand, but you’ve still got the four fingers (the area meetings), and the thumb (Meeting of Friends in Wales) able to work separately, and working together.

If you look in Quaker faith and practice 4.02 it describes what an area meeting has to do. There are basically three paragraphs. And the first two paragraphs are things like membership and spiritual growth and outreach and witness, and all the things that are the reasons why you and I joined Friends in the first place.

The third paragraph is about things that you might call trustee stuff, it's the stuff that needs to happen in order that all the stuff in the first two paragraphs can carry on.

So the thinking is that the area meetings continue doing the stuff in the first two paragraphs. But we combine efforts on the stuff in the third paragraph, to keep things going.

So that the overall proportion of Quaker time that's put into running the show is rather smaller, so that you get a bigger proportion of time doing the stuff that you might want to do and you might feel is actually what really matters.

But you can't do what really matters unless you've got the housekeeping stuff done too.

This has been agreed upon in 2020 by the 4 area meetings and Meeting of Friends in Wales, that this is the direction of travel – in principle. They haven't signed on the dotted line and said “We will definitely do it” because we haven't been able to show them exactly what they're signing up to, but they're agreed it's the direction of travel. The aim is to have everything in place over three years.

This sketch map shows the four area meetings in Wales in different colours. The Gold Line around the outside will be the boundary of the signal charity.

But the problem is that wavy the black line. That's the boundary of Wales. So the national boundary and the Quaker boundaries don't match, which causes all kinds of problems like Meeting of Friends in Wales is for people who live in Wales, which doesn't include everybody in the whole charity.

If you were thinking about this for Scotland for example, you wouldn't have this boundary issue.



Now the first step, in 2021, is that in the interim the four area meetings are sharing trustees. So here's a diagram I hope that demonstrates sharing trustees.

So, of the trustees for North Wales, three are from North Wales, and one comes from Mid Wales, one from South Wales, and one from the Southern Marches (B is for Border in this diagram, because they'd already used up S and M). And the same for Mid Wales – three from Mid Wales and one each from the other three.

You can see there are 12 Friends who are trustees, who are between them being trustees of all four areas. Between them they know what's happening across Wales and it builds that sense of being together.

Now, I think that's quite an interesting experience and sort of hands on, on the job training that you couldn't get any other way by going on a course. They are learning – sometimes one or two will be thinking “this other area meeting does take a long time to do stuff”, and sometimes they're thinking “Now that's neat, we could do that.”. So there's a sharing of good practice. In May 2021, the trustees have already been doing this for five months. They're already beginning to be slightly closer together in how they're operating.

Zoom means that they can operate all sorts of meetings without having to travel.

There are various subgroups working on things: a finance group with the treasurers from the five charities, amongst others. They are talking about an accounting system and insurance and they're going to approach the utility companies and see if they can get a joint quote, as well.

There's a policies group, and a property group, trying to get all their ducks in a row at the point where they approach the Charity Commission. And there's a documentation group: developing a constitution, and a need memorandums of understanding, at least initially as to how all the various bits are going to click into place.

And the aim is to have all this ready in time for 2024 – the next triennium.

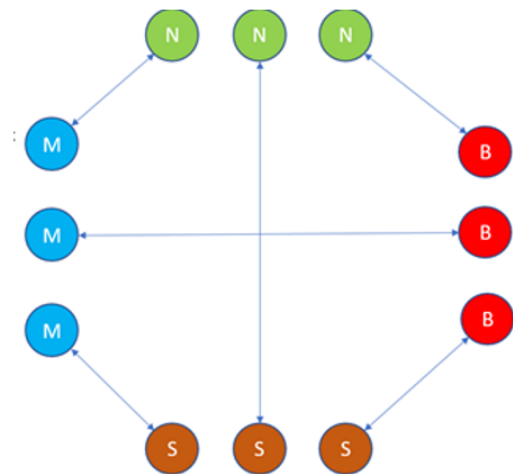
How did this happen?

Well, the various area meetings, the four of them, all found that they had problems, particularly the nominations committees having problems finding people to serve.

And because it's Wales, there's Meeting of Friends in Wales, where they do already talk to each other. So Meeting of Friends in Wales facilitated bringing together the Symud Ymlaen group.

Symud Ymlaen has two members from each of the five charities. And they asked Leslie Richards, who lives outside all four, as an outsider, to be clerk of the group. This meant all the charities were of the same sort of standing within the group.

Shared trustees diagram



They've already concluded that what they end up with won't be quite as few roles as perhaps they thought at the beginning. But those roles will have changed, and they'll be easier, and they'll be more about people keeping people in communication with one another, rather than doing a lot of stuff.

Leslie explained that she gets a sense that Friends are coming together across Wales and the Marches, more than they did, even with Meeting of Friends in Wales. Symud Ymlaen means moving forward.

If you want to find documents about this, they are on the BYM Simpler Meetings webpage – quaker.org.uk/simpler. There are also two fun videos explaining the origins and how the sharing of trustees will work in the interim.

Meanwhile, there are developments happening in London too, proposing a single charity encompassing all 7 AMs in London, which continue, replacing the 7 AM charities. With London Quakers Property Trust continuing to hold the properties across London, pooling the property funds as has been the case for hundreds of years in London.

I'm going to read you a description from their document:

We envisage a Pan London charity governed by a trustee body of 12-16 people, with 2 or 3 trustees appointed or nominated by each AM. The Pan London charity would also have regular meetings open to all members and attenders. The Pan London charity would be responsible for all standard trustee matters, such as preparation of consolidated accounts and the Trustees' annual report, staff employment, policies such as safeguarding, health and safety, and data protection, and Charity Commission compliance. To keep the burden on trustees manageable, professional administrative help would be employed to support key functions e.g. accountancy and bookkeeping, policy advice. AMs would continue to be responsible for activities directly related to the life of their meetings such as eldership and oversight, and applications for membership. LQPT would continue as a separate charity for the time being, responsible for property matters for all AMs in London. It is expected that most London AMs would become part of this charity, but an individual AM could decide to continue to operate as a separate charity with their own trustees.

I'm speaking now at the beginning of May 2021, and these proposals are undergoing a consultation with the 7 area meetings, and we will see how things develop. You can find their document on the Simpler Meetings webpage too.

So there you are, two examples of structural changes which people are hoping will enable their area meetings to work together more effectively,

I'll remind you that I started this talk with a whole range of other ways of working together – the most basic of which is talking with people from other areas about how they do things, through working on particular topics together, sharing some roles, and some other options for structural change – like a straight merger, or some local meetings moving to a different area.

As has been the theme of this Simpler Meetings Series – there are lots of possibilities, and lots of permission, to release time and energy for other aspects of Quakers' life together, and for the Spirit to be heard and acted upon in new ways. I hope you'll take these possibilities and discuss them with Friends in your meetings.

Thank you Friends.

Jonathan Carmichael

May 2021

