



Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers) in Britain

Background note for simplification of central governance workshops – autumn 2021

Quakers love committees. Britain Yearly Meeting is governed by 500 committee roles drawn from a membership of around 13,000 (with some roles are also being open to attenders.) It's a burden on Central Nominations to find so many people and often the same names are recycled into different roles. Additionally, supporting these committees takes up a significant amount of staff time from organising papers, logistics and attending meetings – often at weekends. And many Friends, who would like to contribute, find the time commitment daunting or simply don't enjoy committee work.

However, there are reasons that this committee-heavy structure has continued. Friends serving on committees talk of the joy of fellowship, working with Friends across the country, of being involved in important decisions, and the importance of Quaker discernment processes and experience permeating all decision making.

So we two Trustees have been asked to find ways to simplify governance structures as one of the Trustees' three strategic priorities for this period. We are clear that we need to do it in a way that enables more participation not less, but in ways that are more inclusive, more sustainable, and simpler to understand. Our vision reflects this:

Our vision is of a Religious Society of Friends whose discernment, work and witness are all invigorated by the joyful participation of many Friends according to their leadings, gifts, time and interests.

In this respect, the pandemic has been a game changer. We have seen Friends getting together on zoom for all sorts of purposes, and learning the skills of organising meetings and getting groups together. We are aware that not everyone has been able to participate equally, but overall it has opened our eyes to the possibilities and realities of working in different ways.

These workshops are the next stage in exploring how Quakers across Britain participate in the central life of the Society, and what new ways to participate would be welcomed.

Our work so far

We started a year ago by forming a Simplification Working Group with the Clerks of the main central committees. All were very open to thinking radically, as we had been empowered to do by Meeting for Sufferings.

(We have heard a call to take a more coordinated approach to our review process, considering the interrelationships between bodies and to take a radical approach to our structures not being constrained by the historical development

of different bodies. We look forward to playing our part in achieving this change. and all could see both strengths and weaknesses in the way we currently operate. MfS20/12/08)

Meeting for Sufferings agreed a definition of simplification as:

The necessary minimum allocation of time and resources to enable Friends to discern how their church should provide spiritual nurture and impact on the world, and make that a reality. Each part of the governance system is understandable to any Friend, and the responsibilities of different parts of the system connect but do not overlap.

We decided to think – from a blank sheet of paper – about what functions we need to fulfil for the central governance of Britain Yearly Meeting, and we came up with three:

- 1. Discerning spiritual positions and ways of working of the Quaker faith community*
- 2. Establishing strategic priorities and allocating resources for centrally managed work, to support the spiritual direction and ways of working of the Quaker faith community*
- 3. Ensuring that the work that is prioritised is carried out effectively.*

You could see these functions as, respectively, the conscience, the planners and the stewards.

There is a fourth governance function – our diplomats if you like. Quaker Council for Christian and Interfaith Relations enables us to work with other faith communities and Quaker World Relations Committee keeps us in touch with Quakers worldwide. Their work is quite clearly defined within the ambit of Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting, so we have not included them in this piece of work.

What's working and what are the limitations?

- 1. Setting the spiritual direction and ways of working of the Quaker faith community*

This function maps onto the role of Meeting for Sufferings, which brings together representatives from all the Area Meetings for a day or more, throughout the year. Many Friends find it a moving experience to be together, trying to discern a Quaker position on a spiritual topic such as assisted dying. But there are serious limitations:

- It is a representative body that is not representative – members are drawn from the minority of Friends who regularly attend Area Meeting, so many voices are not heard, particularly younger Friends
- The agendas are full of reports from different committees, so there is not enough room for deep discernment
- Reporting back to Area Meetings and taking guidance from them doesn't always work effectively.

2. *Establishing strategic priorities and allocating resources for centrally managed work, to support the spiritual direction and ways of working of the Quaker faith community*

This is done by Trustees (setting the overall budget for centrally managed work) and by the two Central Committees for Quaker Peace and Social Witness (which has 8 subcommittees) and Quaker Life developing plans for their respective areas. These committees draw on considerable expertise. But they also have limitations:

- The separation into 'witness' and 'worship' means it can be difficult to integrate oversight for work that contains elements of both
- The subcommittee structure makes it difficult to shift priorities, particularly in response to new challenges
- The split of responsibilities, with the Trustees setting the budget, means that accountability for decisions is not clear
- A relatively small group of people are tasked with making a wide range of decisions, which other Friends might like to contribute to
- The Central Committees both do a lot of things that are not directly to do with this second function, blurring their roles by the agreed definition.

3. *Ensuring that the work that is prioritised is carried out effectively.*

This is one of the roles of Trustees. But again there are some concerns:

- The two Central Committees also have a role in overseeing the work of staff, leading to possible confusion
- Because Trustees, as a small body of 14 people, are better equipped for certain decision making than Meeting for Sufferings, with over 100, there is a concern that Trustees are overstepping their stewardship remit, and playing a wider leadership role.

How might things be changed?

In discussions in the Simplification Working Group and in workshops already held with members of Meeting for Sufferings and at the BYM Annual Gathering a number of suggestions have been made. We hope that others may come out of this series of road shows. At the moment they are only ideas, but many hold the possibility of wider participation – **in the forthcoming workshops we'll be testing the appetite for these.**

Setting the spiritual direction and ways of working of the Quaker faith community

- Separate 'task and finish' threshing groups could be set up to discern the way forward on specific topics – these could bring in Friends who aren't Meeting for Sufferings representatives
- Reporting back to Meeting for Sufferings could be done in separate evening zoom meetings, open to all Friends, as has already been done in the last year. This would free time in the agenda for deeper discernment

- Meeting for Sufferings could be viewed as Yearly Meeting in session, so that any Friend could attend – this could increase the diversity of attendance and engage more people in different items
- Concerns could be brought to Meeting for Sufferings from groups that are not Area Meetings, for example, young Friends' worshipping groups.

Establishing strategic priorities and allocating resources for centrally managed work, to support the spiritual direction and ways of working of the Quaker faith community

- Regular presentations to the whole body of Friends on particular areas of work, as was done with the QPSW Summer Series, would mean wider group of informed and engaged Friends, who might then take up central roles
- Decisions on priorities could be shaped by a much wider process of consultation, looking also at where Friends put their energies in witness, particularly younger Friends, and taking the views of Local Development Workers on the support needs of LMs and AMs
- A single committee could find it easier to move resources between witness and worship, as needed

Ensuring that the work that is prioritised is carried out effectively

- A better system of reporting to and from Meeting for Sufferings could reduce the feeling that Trustees are taking decisions without adequate consultation and engagement
- Short report backs from Trustees to all Friends could provide a better understanding of what Trustees do, and how we work.

What happens next?

We are running the roadshows in the period up to Christmas 2021, and then reflecting on the results, and considering what options for new structures we could ask Friends to comment on at the 2022 Yearly Meeting, with a view to bringing proposals for decision to the 2023 Yearly Meeting, to be implemented in 2024. At every step we will be working with Meeting for Sufferings, and aligning with other ongoing reviews such as the review of Yearly Meeting, and with the Book of Discipline Revision Committee.

It may seem like a very long process. But we are trying to build a governance system for the next 20 years (and hopefully beyond!). If you think you'll still be a Quaker in 2044, we need to hear from you. (Of course we also want to hear from older Quakers with experience of the current system!) Thank you for signing up, we promise it will be entertaining and fruitful.

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