



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

Book of Discipline Revision Committee

Book of Discipline Revision Committee: First report to Meeting for Sufferings

Introduction: Who we are

Following Minute 31 of Yearly Meeting 2018, Meeting for Sufferings established the Book of Discipline Revision Committee with Terms of Reference approved in July 2018, to bring to Yearly Meeting draft text for adoption as BYM's book of discipline, together with proposals for its publication. The appointment of our initial membership of 24, including two co-clerks and an assistant clerk, was completed by February 2019.

We are a diverse committee reflecting the breadth of Britain Yearly Meeting, as required by our Terms of Reference. Of the initial 24:

- geographically, 17% live in Scotland and Wales; 21% in northern areas of England; 29% in central areas; and 33% in southern areas
- more than half are female
- our ages range from teens to over 70
- the lengths and nature of our Quaker backgrounds vary just as widely, as do our life and employment experiences
- several of us face particular challenges, which reminds us all of our role in enabling everyone to take part fully.

Two of our members gave birth shortly before our first meeting, and we have welcomed their partners and three babies/toddlers to our residential gatherings. We hope we will complete our work before the babies become adults!

Two others of our initial membership have asked to be released, and we have now requested replacements.

Our work so far

We have met 6 times from May 2019 onwards, five of them as residential weekends face-to-face and the sixth – during the coronavirus pandemic – virtually by zoom videoconference. Between these meetings a number of subgroups have worked on specific tasks. Presently we plan to meet as a full committee some three times a year whether face-to-face or virtually, with other work continuing between times individually and in groups.

Coming together as people who had in many cases not met one another previously, our initial priority has been to **get to know each other** in the things that are eternal, and to learn **how best to work together** and to use our varied skills and experiences collaboratively. We have spent some time exploring this through a range of different activities in order to establish a secure, trusting and confident base for our joint working in full committee and in groups. This has led us to document a set of principles for our committee processes focussing on inclusivity, accessibility and good Quaker practice.

Our next priority has been to explore the **scope of the revision**, and how we might approach the task in terms of its overall structuring and sequencing. We set up a group to look at project management methods and IT and other system tools. We have developed a working understanding that the **purpose of the book of discipline** is to reflect who we are as a community and where we might be going; to share our Quaker story of where we have come from in order to explain why we have reached where we are; to give guidance on what it means to be Quakers in BYM, reflecting and expressing and nurturing our spiritual life and our Quaker way; and to act as a testimony to the grace of God as shown in the lived experience. We have also identified a range of different **audiences** for it, their expectations of it and how they might use it.

To take this forward we have agreed some principles for our work in developing **content** – including spiritual underpinnings; reflecting the diversity of our community; and the language, tone and voice of the “book” as a whole. We are clear that we are engaged in a major root-and-branch revision of the whole of the “book”, not just some minor amendment. We have identified seven key interlinked common themes that will need to be reflected in it, and five key insights describing the unity of our Quaker way which will run as threads through it. These principles, themes and insights have emerged from our experiments in writing, individually and in groups, some sample texts to illustrate the range of what might appear in a table of contents and in passages on, for instance, church affairs, meeting for worship, and caring for one another. We have been helped in all this by hearing of the deliberations of the Revision Preparation Group leading up to the YM 2018 decision to proceed with the revision, and the reflections of the previous Book of Discipline Revision Committee which worked from 1985 to 1994 to produce the present *Quaker faith & practice*. We have also been familiarising ourselves with books of discipline used by previous generations within BYM and by other yearly meetings.

We have referred in shorthand to a “**book**”, but we are clear that the material will need to appear in a variety of formats and platforms – printed, electronic, audio-visual and more, with different ways of accessing it. We have not yet decided whether there should be one or more printed volumes, nor how they should be titled, nor whether church government and anthology material should be integrated together or separated.

Our next steps

Following those preliminary ground-preparing activities, we are embarking on substantive work to develop text, starting as requested with **church government** core text and identifying supplementary material needed. We aim to create a clearer map of what content needs to be included, which topics have a church government element, what are the fundamental principles which will affect a range of other content, and a sift of areas needing discernment by yearly meeting structures before we can produce definitive content. One sub-group is working in detail on these mapping/sifting exercises, and two other sub-groups are exploring ways of drafting content on topics such as eldership/oversight and marriage, drawing on our earlier work on language, tone and voice. At our meeting later in October 2020 we will review the outcomes and plan our next actions.

We expect to consult central and other standing committees on **issues arising** as this work progresses. We will also come back to Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting as and when we identify matters of principle requiring further corporate discernment.

Another strand of our activity is **engaging with Friends generally**, on which we have a sub-group working. We contributed to the Woodbrooke conference for area meeting representatives and others in November 2019 on “Why have a Book of Discipline?”, and took away a number of useful learning points for our work. We ran an introductory special interest group at Yearly Meeting 2019, and had planned a series of activities for Yearly Meeting Gathering 2020 which we may be able to take forward at the re-scheduled YMG in 2021, with meanwhile some online activities during the rest of 2020. In collaboration with us, Woodbrooke ran a successful series of four online workshops on *“Prayerfully/Joyfully/Creatively/Boldly Revising Quaker faith & practice”*, each of which attracted some 70 Friends. We have also opened an online creative project which invites Friends to share visual, verbal and musical responses to passages in Quaker faith & practice. We hope to be able to accept other invitations to engage with Friends individually and in meetings. We use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as our current main communication channels, and issue key messages after each of our meetings. We have created a “Frequently Asked Questions” document which can be downloaded from the [BYM website](#). Our online collection tool remains open for Friends to suggest material for inclusion in the “book” which we welcome, and we will look at contributions in detail as we come to prepare relevant text.

We are hugely grateful to our secretary and other BYM staff for all their work and support for us.

We feel daunted and excited by the size and importance of our task. We welcome the support of Meeting for Sufferings and Friends generally in this.

Rosie Carnall, Catherine Brewer, Michael Phipps: Co-Clerks and Assistant Clerk
Michael Booth: Secretary

Meeting for Sufferings minute

Held online from 2-4 October by video conference

MfS/20/10/17 Report from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee

We have been joined by Catherine Brewer and Rosie Carnall, co-clerks, to introduce the committee's first report to Meeting for Sufferings.

We have heard that the group has identified seven key interlinked common themes that will need to be reflected in the book of discipline, and five key insights describing the unity of our Quaker way which will run as threads through it. Themes include:

- Spirituality, worship and discernment – individually and collectively with God;
- Quaker community – life in our meetings;
- Testimony and faith in action;
- Stages of personal life – journeys, and close relationships;
- Church government – how we organise ourselves;
- Our story – where we have come from and where we are going;
- Advices & Queries.

The insights have been articulated as:

- we can all have direct access to a transforming experience of the divine;
- we live under the guidance of the promptings of love and truth in our hearts;
- we recognise and seek to address that of God in each person;
- there is a dynamic spirit bringing continuing revelation;
- we hold the whole of life to be sacramental.

We have been excited to hear about this work and look forward to being involved as it develops.

Margaret Bryan, Clerk