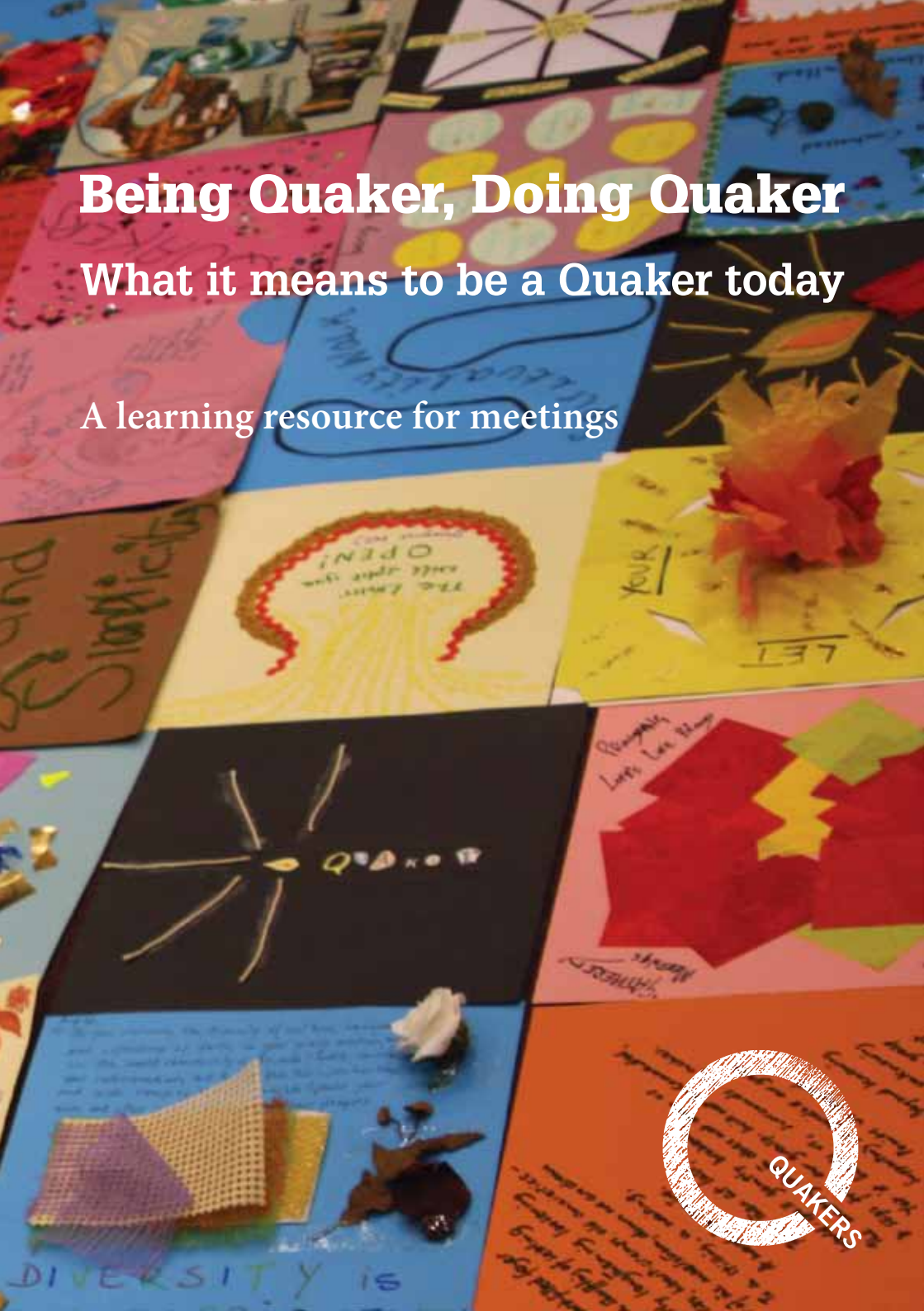


Being Quaker, Doing Quaker

What it means to be a Quaker today

A learning resource for meetings



What it means to be a Quaker today

“If you were approached by an enquirer asking ‘What do Quakers believe?’, how would you answer?”

What if the question were ‘What do you believe?’? Would the answer be more straightforward? We are a faith without creed: that is, there is no requirement to accept specific beliefs in becoming a Quaker. And yet there are those things that do bind and unite us, both in belief (that we all have access to the Inward Teacher, for example) and in the practice of our faith (the meeting for worship and our business method, to name but two). Within our religious community we recognise a wide range of seekers representing a considerable diversity of religious backgrounds and spiritual beliefs. Our willingness to embrace that diversity is part of what creates a strong spiritual community. Yet it also presents us with the challenge of discerning what it means to be a Quaker today.

How do we nurture those things that bind us while at the same time celebrating our differences? How well do we express the joys as well as the responsibilities of membership, so that the progress from enquirer to attender to member is nurtured rather than avoided? These questions have been raised in recent years by a number of Quaker groups and meetings, suggesting that the time has come for a deep consideration of what it means to be a Quaker today.”

From *Documents in advance* for Yearly Meeting 2012

A learning resource for meetings

drawing on the Quaker Life Faith and Practice Conference

This resource offers a flexible way for groups of people to engage in learning about, and from, and with one another through speaking about their Quaker experience.

The learning session described here is modelled on the structure and process of the Quaker Life Faith and Practice Conference 2010. In each session, one person speaks for a short time to a group, having prepared in advance their response to a given question. Following this opening presentation, everyone in the group responds to the same question from their own experience. This simple model provides a structure that can be repeated in further sessions in response to a new question with a different speaker each time, and by the group exploring the question together in a number of different ways.

Ideas and guidance on running sessions are provided for you to use and adapt in whatever way best suits your circumstances.

You can adapt the material electronically by downloading a copy from:
www.quaker.org.uk/being-doing

Questions

The questions suggested include a range of perspectives and angles on our faith and practice as Friends and can be taken in any order. They invite the speaker, and then all participants, to reflect on and speak about their personal experience of Quakerism. You might choose to frame questions of your own arising from the circumstances in your meeting, or perhaps with particular speakers in mind.

1. What has been your journey into being or feeling yourself to be a Quaker?
2. What has changed for you through being a Quaker; what does living a Quaker life mean to you as an individual?
3. What does 'witness' mean to you? How do your actions as an individual bear on corporate Quaker witness – in our meeting, our local community, or beyond?
4. What part does the wider and/or corporate Quaker experience play in your spiritual life?
5. What work/non-work activity or interest most engages your commitment, energy or passion? How does this feed and expand your spiritual life?
6. What would you wish people in our local community/the wider community to know about Friends? What is your experience of reaching out?
7. What makes your spirit fly?

Practicalities

Timings

The activity is for a session of between one and two hours, depending on the size of the group. Ninety minutes will feel about right for a group of six to eight people.

Group size

Your group can be any size – from four or five Friends in a living room to a whole local or area meeting. If your group is very large, you will need to make arrangements for breaking into smaller groups of between five and ten people for the second part of the session. Remember that some people will find hearing very difficult in a large space containing more than one group of people talking together.

Open or closed group

Consider whether your group will be open to whoever wants to come to a particular session, or whether you will form a stable group – there are pros and cons to both approaches.

Newcomers

Think about how to meet the needs of newcomers who may need to reframe questions in terms of their experience outside Quakerism.

Children and young people

You may want to adapt the timings and other elements if your group includes children and young people.

Planning a programme of sessions

Holding a preliminary meeting to plan the programme is one approach, or you might choose to ask particular Friends to speak, or to publicise the questions and invite offers. The availability of speakers and the questions they would like to address will help you arrive at a programme of sessions.

Speakers

It works best to have speakers who feel led to speak to one question rather than another. A speaker need not be experienced at doing this, but should have something they really want to say in response to a particular question.

Facilitation

It will help if the group has a facilitator. This shouldn't be the speaker and needn't be the same person each time – just someone willing to make sure a particular session runs to plan. This involves keeping an eye on timings, explaining ways of working and ensuring everyone has an opportunity to speak and to be heard.

Guidance for speakers

You are invited to respond to a question from your personal experience and to share this in a way of your choice with the group. Agree with the organiser(s) how long you will speak for – perhaps ten to 15 minutes, or less, depending on how the session is planned and what will work best for you too. Think of 20 minutes as the maximum time for this part of the session.

As there won't be time to tell your whole life story, you will need to be selective. Perhaps start by jotting thoughts down freely and then look through your notes for what is most interesting and particular to your experience – the things you can focus on.

A good 'story' can leave a lot unsaid; the important thing is to share something real of yourself, which in turn will serve as a stimulus to enabling others to respond to the question too.

Guidance for facilitators

Each of the following pages addresses aspects of the role of the facilitator in preparing for and running Being Quaker, Doing Quaker sessions. Sources of further information on facilitating Quaker groups are noted on page 7.

Your main task as facilitator is to enable people in the group to engage with the same question addressed by the speaker – but from their own experience.

One way of doing this is in worship sharing, which can encourage deep and real responses and is also quite easy to facilitate. But it will help participants to stay engaged with the programme if you can vary the approach to sharing from session to session, and perhaps use more than one approach in a session. See pages 7 and 8 for various other ways of working.

Enabling participants to engage with the questions also involves attending to various practical matters and being aware of needs and circumstances in the group.

Timing the session

To ensure sufficient time for group sharing, ask the speaker how long they would like and agree that you will indicate if they are nearing the 20 minute limit. Plan for a short period of worship at the start and two or three minutes more to introduce the question and the speaker. Allow for a few minutes after the talk to explain the sharing activity, and a short time at the end for closing worship. Remind people that time-keeping is a shared responsibility of the whole group.

Keeping the focus

To help people stay focused on the question during a session, provide participants with the question written on slips of paper, or have four focus sheets in large print to display N, S, E and W in the group circle.

Helping the group to be fully inclusive

- Are people bringing the same expectations to the group? Do you need to discuss the boundaries of confidentiality or agree other ground rules for your work together?
- Check everyone understands when introducing a way of working, and explain terms, e.g. 'thought shower', 'creative listening' (see pages 7 and 8). Ditto for acronyms.
- Think through your planned session from the perspective of any young people who are participating (best to consult them) and adjust if necessary.
- It might not be helpful to make an assumption about the best way to meet a particular need such as sight, hearing or mobility – invite people to say what works best for them.
- Be aware of people who say little in group settings. Varying the ways of sharing responses to the question can help reticent participants find a way that works for them.

Reminders about planning and running a session

Before

- Provide the speaker with a copy of this leaflet well in advance.
- Publicise the question for the session, or provide participants with a copy, sufficiently in advance for people to prepare beforehand.
- Plan the sharing activity that will follow the talk.

Beginning

Start with a few minutes of worship, then open the session with a reminder of the question and introduce the speaker. Explain that they will speak for about ... minutes, after which participants will address the same question.

During

Having planned how participants will share their responses to the question, introduce and run the activity after the talk.

Ending

Bring the activity to a close five or ten minutes before the end of the session for the group to spend a short period of quiet together.

Sharing our own experience

A number of different ways of sharing our thoughts and experience in a group are outlined very briefly on page 8. Full descriptions of these ways of working, with further guidance on facilitating, are given on pages 9–19 of the *Hearts & Minds Prepared* facilitator handbook.¹ See also pages 7–9 of Set 1 of *Creating Community, Creating Connections*.²

Ways of varying your use of facilitation techniques might include the following examples:

To give everyone the opportunity to speak expansively

Use 20 minutes for sharing and listening in pairs, suggest taking 5 minutes each at first and then let it turn into conversation – if that feels right. Spend the remaining time in group worship sharing: invite people to contribute significant reflections that have arisen from having shared in more detail with a partner.

To help people focus their contributions in group sharing

Provide a collection of random small objects or postcard images from which they choose one that speaks to them of some aspect of their experience in connection with the question. When everyone has chosen, move into creative listening, either taking turns or in any order.

To gather immediate responses to the question

Do a ten-minute thought shower, then group together contributions that are linked in some way. Divide into groups of three or four people interested in discussing a particular cluster of responses. Follow this with a whole-group go-round to share key reflections.

To bring collective reflections into view at the start

Facilitate a silent thought shower of personal responses to the question – thoughts that are uppermost in people's minds. When contributions cease, move into worship sharing.

1 Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, 2003. This is part of the *Hearts & Minds Prepared* pack, available in most local or area meetings.

2 Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009 study materials, available in meeting libraries or to download: www.quaker.org.uk/creating-connections

Ways of working in a group

Whatever method you choose, always explain that it is OK to pass or not contribute.

Creative listening

A way of speaking in a group without commenting on what others say. One person speaks at a time, either round the circle or in any order as led. Allow for a few minutes each, with pauses between contributions.

Worship-sharing

A more reflective, more Spirit-led version of creative listening. It needs a good amount of time with more opportunity for silence after each contribution.

Go-round

Like creative listening but shorter – a minute or so each at the most. Consider having a go-round before sharing through discussion.

Working with a partner

Partners take turns to speak and listen in response to the question. Five minutes each is the minimum needed for sharing in any depth; ten minutes each feels more spacious. Emphasise the role of the listener.

Discussion

In a group of more than six people, divide into two halves for the main discussion, then share key points in the group. Aim to keep a balance between those with a lot to say and those who find speaking in a group less easy.

Thought shower (or brain storm)

Encourage a free-flow of lots of thoughts and record everything offered on a flip chart. When ideas slow down, group similar contributions together, or prioritise, depending on your purpose.

Silent thought shower

Clear the floor space and display focus question sheets. Invite people to respond in silence by writing contributions large in marker pen on A5 sheets of paper – one thought per sheet, as many sheets as they like – and to place them on the floor for everyone to read at a glance. Encourage people to move around in silence at any time so they can read what others have written and add further thoughts that arise.

You can do a similar exercise with Post-it notes on a flip chart, but you lose the advantage of being able to read contributions at a glance.

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This edition produced in May 2012 by Quaker Life

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or email publications@quaker.org.uk

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