



Guide No. 1 The Role of the Meeting Librarian

This guide gives an overview of the Quaker meeting librarian's role. You will find a list of guides on specific tasks at the end.

The purpose of the meeting library

Meeting house libraries go back a long way. Their original purpose was to educate members in Quaker doctrine and the defence of Quakerism against attack and misrepresentation. By the beginning of the 20th century they were also providing materials for a better grounding in the fundamentals of Christian belief and religious knowledge generally.

Today, our current *Quaker faith & practice* describes local meeting libraries as “a powerful aid to the life of the meeting and its outreach”, whose purpose is to provide a resource for learning about Quakerism, Christianity and other world faiths, and the social issues of our day. The guidance in sections [13.41](#) and [13.42](#) sets out meetings' responsibilities and urges meeting librarians to be determined, encouraging and imaginative.

The meeting library should be accessible to all its users, so resources should include other formats beside traditional books – large print, braille, audio and video recordings, for instance.

What does it take to be a meeting librarian?

Meeting libraries vary in size and character, reflecting the interests and needs of their members. The librarian should be aware of those interests, and in touch with the life of the meeting.

You do not have to be a tremendous reader, but it is important to have an enquiring mind, to enjoy reading and encouraging others to read. Equally, a meeting librarian does not need to know much about librarianship, but should be able to approach the work in a systematic and accurate way.

Generally you will learn about the existing meeting library system from the outgoing librarian. Sometimes, though, the library may need overhauling, as the needs and expectations of users change. You may find yourself facing the challenge of revitalising a collection or creating new systems for accessing it.

Some meetings may have a job description or terms of reference for the meeting librarian, which will make your duties and responsibilities clear. In large local meetings, there may be a library committee to offer support and advice (and ideally practical help). In many meetings,

though, you may find yourself working solo: if that's so for your meeting, it may be helpful to set up *ad hoc* working parties (for spring cleaning or weeding, for instance).

There is an email discussion group for Quaker Meeting Librarians to share ideas and information on any aspect of the work (details at end of this guide). Some meeting librarians and committee members meet up with counterparts across their area meeting.

What does the meeting librarian do?

The three main areas of responsibility of the meeting librarian are:

- keeping the library up to date and relevant
- making the library available
- taking care of the library

The way these responsibilities are carried out will vary enormously, depending on whether the meeting is small, perhaps without its own premises, or a large, well-established meeting, with dedicated library space.

1. Keeping the library up to date and relevant

The library has to be relevant to the needs and interests of its users in order to fulfil its role properly. New items should be added and unused or superseded ones weeded out, while keeping proper record of stock, ideally with the help of a written collection policy.

Adding new books and other publications

It is fairly easy to identify new stock for the meeting library through reading reviews and browsing bookshops, as well as taking suggestions from members of the meeting. It is more difficult to reconcile competing claims on funds and space: having a written collection policy will help guide the selection process, within the funds available.

Most meetings provide money on a regular basis to buy new stock for the library, either occasionally or through an annual budget.

Most books of Quaker interest can be purchased from the Quaker Bookshop at Friends House. Larger meetings with substantial library budgets may be able to buy more general books on religious thought, peace, social problems, and so on.

Meeting librarians sometimes receive offers of books from members. While these are often welcome – especially in the case of new publications enjoyed and then passed to the library - the librarian needs to be able to decline gifts of books if they are out of date, irrelevant to the library's purpose as a meeting library, or simply unlikely to be read.

Weeding out superseded or unused stock

The library will usually be more attractive if most books are seen to be relatively recent and in good condition. Weeding does not necessarily need to be done at regular intervals. Books can be weeded whenever you notice that they have become dated or otherwise unwanted. Sometimes a review of the whole stock may become necessary because space is running out.

Keeping a proper inventory of library stock

The librarian needs to keep a record of books and other stock purchased, and a record of stock withdrawn from the library, which may be needed for auditing purposes.

[For further advice see guide 2, *Selection and acquisition*, and guide 5, *Disposing of unwanted books*.](#)

2. Making the library available

Basic necessities for any library are to maintain a list or catalogue of the contents, and to establish a principle for arranging the library stock on the shelves. Then comes encouraging use and having a system to record loans. You should always bear in mind the need for simplicity, for the sake of the library users and your own successors.

Catalogues

Every library should have at least a basic catalogue. It will enable users to find a book by author or by title, and tell them where to find it in the library. Being able to search by subject is a further enhancement of the catalogue.

Until recently, most Quaker meetings maintained a card catalogue. However, many meeting librarians are converting their card catalogues to computer based systems, whether lists, spreadsheets, or simple databases. Whatever the system, if the catalogue is stored on a computer or the web, the librarian should make sure it is backed up or downloaded periodically, to avoid the risk of loss.

Shelf arrangement

Most meeting libraries use a simple in-house subject scheme to arrange books on the shelves, with sections such as *Bible*, *History of Quakerism*, *Biography*, *Other religions* and so on. Stock will need to be labelled, and librarians may increasingly need to accommodate non-book material (for instance CDs and DVDs) into their shelving schemes, perhaps in separate sections.

Encouraging use

Promoting use of the collection is a challenging but enjoyable part of the librarian's job. Ideally, the meeting librarian should seek out opportunities, such as announcing new acquisitions, or helping with reading recommendations. Some meeting librarians might ask a Friend to read and talk about a particular new book; set up reading groups; encourage involvement in book selection; or provide displays of new or topical titles. Attention should be paid to the look of the library – tidy shelves with up-to-date stock in good condition will look attractive and tempt Friends to browse and borrow.

Lending books

An issue system is needed to keep track of who has what book, and when they borrowed it. Most meetings simply use an exercise book in which the borrower writes their name, the details of the book, and the date of borrowing (and eventual date of return). As a rule, meeting libraries do not charge fines for late return, but the librarian should remind Friends if they have not returned a loan after several weeks.

[For further advice, see guide 3, *Cataloguing and arranging*, and guide 7, *Promoting the meeting library*.](#)

3. Taking care of the library

Taking care of the library includes properly storing the books and other items where Friends can easily access them. If the meeting house is used by others, it is advisable to keep them somewhere safe and secure when Friends are not present, particularly if you have a collection of older books.

Books should be kept on suitable shelving, and, regardless of whether they are old or modern, in an environment that is stable, clean, and free from damp and direct sunlight. Keeping shelves tidy is also a good way of checking if any books need repair.

If there are old books in the collection - say pre-1900 - they may also need some physical attention. Basic remedies, such as tying damaged books with cotton tape can be done by the librarian, but other repairs should be left to a specialist conservator, if the meeting can afford it and the book is worth it. If you have very old and valuable items, it may be preferable to keep them separate from the general collection but still available for use by Friends.

[For further advice see guide 4, *Equipment for a meeting library*, and guide 6, *Caring for your books*.](#)

Further advice

For further advice please contact the Library at Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ. Phone 020 7663 1135. Email library@quaker.org.uk.

Join the Quaker Meeting Librarians Cluster for email discussion with other meeting librarians. Email library@quaker.org.uk to register.

Other leaflets in this series to download from
<https://www.quaker.org.uk/meeting-librarians>

1. The Role of the Meeting Librarian
2. Selection and acquisition of stock
3. Cataloguing and arranging the meeting library
4. Equipment for a meeting library
5. Disposing of unwanted books
6. Caring for your books
7. Promoting the meeting library
8. Online resources for meeting librarians

Disaster preparedness: guidance for meeting librarians, clerks and custodians of records (Guides for custodians of records, no. 10)

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