

Follow up letter



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

8 December 2023

To members of Meeting for Sufferings

Meeting for Sufferings 2 December 2023

Dear Friends,

Our October meeting was always going to be a hard act to follow, but I certainly appreciated the tailored technical support for our blended meeting this time even if The Light can be a little chilly when not filled! (I can't help feeling that there's ministry somewhere in that latter clause...)

For those of us at Friends' House, I hope you were able to have some engagement with the parallel meeting for children and young people and with the Loving Earth exhibition. The young people had been considering the variety of Friends around the world and so it was good to welcome some of them for the second half of the afternoon session when we received the report of Quaker World Relations Committee, which reminded us of the world plenary meeting of Friends to be held in South Africa during August 2024. We also received the report of the Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, which represents us to other churches and faith groups. It is always good to be reminded of the movement of the Spirit beyond Britain Yearly Meeting.

At our October meeting, we agreed that nominations need not be dependent on formal membership and at this meeting we considered how that decision would work out in practice. We agreed that nominating bodies may bring the names of either members or attenders for appointment to Britain Yearly Meeting committees (other than the trustees) and we have asked Church Government Advisory Group to bring us material indicating how we might similarly open nominations at the local and area meeting levels, as well as the implications for roles, such as trustees and registering officers, with legal responsibilities beyond our community.

The Yearly Meeting Clerk introduced the agenda for Yearly Meeting in 2024, to be held in Friends' House and online from 26-30 July, and we also agreed the dates for Yearly Meeting in 2025 and 2026.

We heard an update on the work of our Book of Discipline Revision Committee covering its substantial work over the past twelve months, its plans for the year

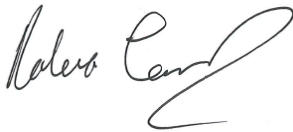
ahead and the challenging timetable it faces in aiming to have a completed revision in 2030.

The Committee noted the particular challenges associated with doing its work in this time when so much is subject to change. Two of the changes concerned the wording of the declaration at the centre of a marriage after the manner of Friends. We agreed the relatively minor change of explicitly permitting pronouns other than he/she and ask that Area Meetings consider whether we could permit Friends to make their declaration without either of the phrases "with God's help" or "through divine assistance". A briefing paper is included in this mailing, and I encourage you to bring the matter to your Area Meeting.

It may be worth reminding Friends that the earlier consultation where area meetings were asked to comment on proposed text on this topic specifically invited comments on the tone of the passage rather than on the specific matter of approved wording. I hope that Meeting for Sufferings can return to the matter in October next year.

Remaining faithful to our leadings can be challenging, and we may be tempted either to outrun or to lag behind our guide, but if we wait in the Light, the Word may dwell plentifully among us.

In Truth,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Card". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Robert Card
Clerk, Meeting for Sufferings

The following papers are included in this mailing:

- MfS minutes December 2023
- Functions checklist
- Marriage declaration briefing paper
- Imprisonment for public protection letter template



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

At a meeting of

Meeting for Sufferings

Held at Friends House and by video conference 2 December 2023

Minutes

MfS/23/12/01 Opening Worship and welcome

We have begun our Meeting in worship during which selections from *Quaker faith & practice* 28.01 were read.

MfS/23/12/02 Agenda

The Clerk has introduced the draft agenda, and we have agreed to this.

MfS/23/12/03 Membership of Meeting for Sufferings

Since our last meeting we have received the following nominations and requests for release for Meeting for Sufferings until the rise of Yearly Meeting 2024:

Release requests received:

Jenny Brand – North East Thames AM alternate
Tracey Martin – Quaker World Relations Committee representative
Jane Natai – North East Thames AM representative
Helen Rhodes – Lancashire Central and North AM alternate

Nominated:

Antony Froggett – Quaker World Relations Committee alternate
Ruth Homer – Quaker World Relations Committee representative
Liz Ingham – North East Thames AM representative
Jo Law – North East Thames AM alternate
Jane Vicary – Lancashire Central and North AM representative

We agree to these changes.

Visitors invited to represent area meetings/committees in the absence of the appointed representative or alternate:

Philip Branco – Cambridgeshire AM

Apologies:

North Somerset AM, Nottinghamshire & Derbyshire AM, West Weald AM, Wirral and Chester AM

Other visitors:

Judith Baker – BYM staff, Ecumenical & Interfaith Officer

Michael Booth – BYM staff, Church Government Adviser
Catherine Brewer – Book of Discipline Revision Committee co-clerk
Sarah Donaldson – Group to Review Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Gathering and Meeting for Sufferings convener
Cato Pedder – BYM staff, Media Officer
David Penn – Northumbria AM
Michael Phipps – Book of Discipline Revision Committee assistant clerk

MfS/23/12/04 Appointments

Central Nominations Committee brings forward the following names for service or release as indicated:

Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees

To serve from 1 January 2024 until 31 December 2026, nominate:
Jo Hills, West Weald AM
Kit King, Mid-Essex AM

Quaker Council for European Affairs

Release with immediate effect:
Rebecca Bellamy, Oxford & Swindon AM

Quaker Life Central Committee

To serve from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2026, renominate:
Helen Chambers, Bristol AM
Rachael Swancott-Boon, Pendle Hill AM
Zélie Gross, South Wales AM

To serve from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2026, nominate:
Gill Sewell, North London AM

Quaker Peace & Social Witness Central Committee

To serve from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2026, renominate:
Jonathan Lingham, London West AM

Quaker World Relations Committee

To serve from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2026, renominate:
Susan Seymour, North West London AM

Quaker United Nations Committee (Geneva)

Release with immediate effect:
Robert Gibson, Leeds AM

Yearly Meeting Nominating Group brings forward the following names for release:

Central Nominations Committee

Release with immediate effect:
David Jenkins, Northumbria AM
Ann Gimpel, Leicester AM

We appoint and release the Friends named accordingly, and thank them for their service.

MfS/23/12/05 Quaker Recognised Bodies

We agree to register the following two bodies as Quaker Recognised Bodies for a period of two years:

- Conflict Minerals Campaign
- Rookhow.

The following three Quaker Recognised Bodies have been reviewed and we agree to re-register them:

- Quaker Decriminalisation Network, for two years
- Quaker Campers, for five years
- Quaker Arts Network, for five years.

We agree to remove Post Yugoslav Peace Link (PYPL) from the list of Quaker Recognised Bodies at the request of the group.

MfS/23/12/06 Revision of our book of discipline

We receive a report from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee (BDRC). Catherine Brewer, Co-clerk, and Michael Phipps, Assistant Clerk, have shared highlights of the committee's work for the past year and its immediate plans.

We are glad to see the emerging longer-term timetable and note the demands this will place on the committee. We uphold Friends in their service and hope we can support the committee in the ways outlined in the report as the final text comes together.

MfS/23/12/07 Marriage declaration

Last year the Book of Discipline Revision Committee shared draft text on the topic of marriage and received feedback from Friends asking for consideration on the wording of the marriage declaration. Michael S Booth, BYM's Church Government Adviser, has provided a briefing paper.

We agree to both recommendations in the paper.

First, we agree that the text of the book of discipline approves the use of the pronoun 'them', or another pronoun as appropriate, as an option in the declaration.

Second, we have considered whether the terms 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help' in the declaration must be used and whether both members of the couple must say the same declaration. We note the decision on this second matter rests with Yearly Meeting on advice from Meeting for Sufferings.

We aim to give our recommendation to Yearly Meeting in 2025. To do so we will reconsider this at Meeting for Sufferings in October 2024. We invite minutes from area meetings, general meetings, and minutes from other Quaker bodies, and comments from individuals to be sent by end of August 2024 to sufferings@quaker.org.uk.

MfS/23/12/08 The future shape of Yearly Meeting

Sarah Donaldson, convener of the group to review Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Gathering and Meeting for Sufferings, has introduced the group's report to us (paper MfS 2023 12 09).

We are open to the proposals outlined in the paper, and the thinking on future developments.

We have heard of the value Friends place on the community building aspect of Yearly Meeting. We are aware that more thought needs to be given to the financial implications of the proposals in enabling participation. We have also heard that the name "Yearly Meeting" may need review.

We have heard some concern that these proposals could lead to a reduction in time available for spirit-led discernment at national level by the wider body of Friends. We have also heard questions about how representation of area meetings and the continuity of our community at national level can be maintained.

Our consideration today has made clear that there is more work to be done before we can reach unity on these constitutional arrangements. We encourage the group to keep working on this matter and look forward to hearing more about further thinking.

MfS/23/12/09 Appointment of non-members for Quaker service

In October we agreed nominations need not be dependent on formal membership and asked for this matter to return to us as a formal proposal. We receive a paper from the Recording Clerk and Church Government Adviser setting out possible steps for appointments.

a) Service on committees of BYM

We authorise Central Nominations Committee, and other nominating committees in the central structure, to bring names of members and attenders to all roles appointed by Meeting for Sufferings. This does not concern the appointment of attenders to serve as BYM Trustees.

b) Roles at local and area level and roles defined by legislation

We have not been able to reach unity on the way forward on these questions and expect to return to these matters in future. To guide our discernment, we ask Church Government Advisory Group, supported by staff, to prepare materials for a session of Meeting for Sufferings which would allow us to consider what changes to *Quaker faith & practice* enabling these appointments would look like in practice.

MfS/23/12/10 Appointment of Clerks to Meeting for Sufferings

Central Nominations Committee brings forward the following nominations to serve in 2024:

- Robert Card, Manchester and Warrington AM, to serve as Clerk
- Elizabeth Allen, South East Scotland AM, to serve as Assistant Clerk

We agree to these appointments.

MfS/23/12/11 Report from BYM trustees

We have heard from the Clerk of Trustees and Yearly Meeting Treasurer and we have received minutes from the meeting of trustees on 10 November.

We thank our trustees for their work and uphold them in their service.

MfS/23/12/12 Yearly Meeting

Adwoa Burnley, Clerk of Yearly Meeting, has introduced the agenda for Yearly Meeting to be held 26–30 July at Friends House next year.

We agree to the recommendation from Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee on the dates for 2025 and 2026 as follows:

- Friday 23 May to Monday 26 May 2025
- Friday 1 May to Monday 4 May 2026

MfS/23/12/13 Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations has given us a report of its work over the past 12 months and we have heard from its assistant clerk. Their written report (paper MfS 2023 12 13) also sets out a plan for its work over the next two years.

We have heard that the committee has appointed working groups on interfaith, inter-church, and theology. Friends are encouraged to make themselves known directly to the Committee if they are interested in contributing to these specific areas of work.

MfS/23/12/14 Quaker World Relations Committee

Quaker World Relations Committee (QWRC) working within and across the world family of Friends has provided a report of its recent work. Included in this, we have received reports from Belgium & Luxembourg YM (9–11 June 2023), Finland YM (3–5 March 2023), France YM (27–20 October 2023), Ireland YM (13–16 April 2023), Netherlands YM (12–14 May 2023), Norway YM (29 June–02 July 2023), Sweden YM (18–21 May 2023), Switzerland YM (26–29 May 2023).

We look forward with anticipation to Friends World Committee for Consultation's World Plenary in South Africa in 2024 and welcome QWRC's plans to help British Friends prepare for this and engage with interrelated work to its theme – on community, healing historical injustice, and care for creation. May we be open to the leadings that may arise from this opportunity.

MfS/23/12/15 Closing worship

We closed our time together in worship.

Robert Card
Clerk

Meeting for Sufferings: Functions Checklist (*Quaker faith & practice* Chapter 7.02)

	Requirement	December 23
A	To set the priorities for the centrally managed work	
B	To issue public statements in the name of BYM	
C	To receive regular interim reports from BYM trustees	11
D	To receive the BYM trustees' annual report & accounts for information	11
E	To make a report on its own activities to YM	
F	To determine the dates of YM	12
G	To deliberate on how best to support the spiritual life of the yearly meeting and to further the development of its visionary and prophetic role	6, 7, 13, 14
H	To keep under review and to test as appropriate the existing and new concerns referred to it by AMs and others	
I	To foster communication throughout the yearly meeting	
J	To receive minutes from area meetings	
K	To make appropriate entries in the prison and court register	
I	To appoint representatives to attend other Yearly Meetings	14
M	To receive information about changes in the composition or status of general meetings and gatherings	8
N	To make changes in the composition of area meetings	
O	To give assistance to area meetings in the amicable settlement of disputes	
P	To hear appeals against area meeting decisions	
Q	To give guidance on policy matters referred to it by the BYM trustees from time to time	
R	To authorise action and minute as required under other sections of <i>Quaker faith & practice</i>	
S	To set up an arrangements group and support and working groups to assist its own work as it sees fit	

Marriage declaration

Meeting for Sufferings has been asked by the Book of Discipline Revision Committee to consider the marriage declaration. Meeting for Sufferings agreed to invite minutes and comments from area meetings, other Quaker bodies and individuals so that it could reconsider this in October 2024 before making a recommendation to Yearly Meeting.

The paper considered at Meeting for Sufferings in December 2023 is attached as an appendix and gives additional information.

The question under consideration is as follows:

Current wording

The current declaration in English can be found in *Quaker faith & practice*, section 16.52, and in Welsh in 16.53.

The English section reads:

When the meeting for worship is gathered, the couple at a convenient time shall stand, if able, and, taking each other by the hand, declare in an audible and solemn manner, the one after the other in either order, each saying:

Friends, I take this my friend [full name] to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.

The declaration may be prefaced by 'In the presence of God' or 'In the fear of the Lord and in the presence of this assembly'. The word 'spouse' may be replaced by 'wife' or 'husband' as appropriate or by 'partner in marriage'. The phrase 'through divine assistance' may be replaced by the words 'with God's help'. The phrase 'so long as we both on earth shall live' may be replaced by the words 'until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us'. No other changes to the wording may be made. The choice of alternatives shall be agreed in advance by the couple and the registering officer. In any case, both must make their declarations in identical terms (or corresponding terms in the case of 'husband' and 'wife'); their promises must be equal and reciprocal.

This wording was agreed by Yearly Meeting in 2015.

Question for consideration:

In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases.

If this was accepted the options would therefore be:

Friends, I take this my friend [full name] to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance/with God's help/[neither of these two phrases], to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.

Please send minutes or comments to sufferings@quaker.org.uk by the end of August 2024.

Appendix for additional information: Paper to Meeting for Sufferings in December 2023

Marriage declarations

Introduction

Should the wording of the Quaker marriage be revised?

The current marriage declaration includes references to God or the divine, it is the only place within *Quaker faith & practice* that requires an individual to use one of those words.

In 2022, the Book of Discipline Revision Committee (BDRC) shared draft text for the new book of discipline on marriage. In reading the feedback received it became clear that many Friends would appreciate a consideration of the wording of the marriage declaration.

The BDRC discerned that this is an important issue and is referring it to Meeting for Sufferings to decide if this matter is one for further consideration.

The staff member with day-to-day responsibility for supporting registering officers and the Quaker marriage process is Michael Booth, Church Government Adviser.

Why refer it?

The terms of reference of BDRC (section 3.5) read:

When necessary, request new discernment and guidance from Meeting for Sufferings or the Yearly Meeting on matters of discipline, where the Committee judges it is not possible in good faith to produce new text without such consideration, for example because of profound differences between current written discipline and actual practice.

What is the current declaration?

The current declaration in English can be found in *Quaker faith & practice*, section 16.52, and in Welsh in 16.53.

The English section reads:

When the meeting for worship is gathered, the couple at a convenient time shall stand, if able, and, taking each other by the hand, declare in an audible and solemn manner, the one after the other in either order, each saying:

Friends, I take this my friend [full name] to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.

The declaration may be prefaced by 'In the presence of God' or 'In the fear of the Lord and in the presence of this assembly'. The word 'spouse' may be replaced by 'wife' or 'husband' as appropriate or by 'partner in marriage'.

The phrase ‘through divine assistance’ may be replaced by the words ‘with God’s help’. The phrase ‘so long as we both on earth shall live’ may be replaced by the words ‘until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us’. No other changes to the wording may be made. The choice of alternatives shall be agreed in advance by the couple and the registering officer. In any case, both must make their declarations in identical terms (or corresponding terms in the case of ‘husband’ and ‘wife’); their promises must be equal and reciprocal.

This wording was agreed by Yearly Meeting in 2015.

How and why have changes to this wording been agreed?

There have been occasions where variations of these words have been agreed after consultation between the Church Government Adviser and the Recording Clerk (as ‘keeper and interpreter’ of our Church Government, *Quaker faith & practice* 8.21).

These variations are generally small in nature and have included:

1. agreement to using wording agreed by a yearly meeting in North America, where one of the couple grew up in that yearly meeting
2. using a pronoun other than her or him
3. being more relaxed about the alternative to the word spouse, by allowing “marriage partner” the second time and one person using spouse and the other husband or wife.

We have been firm in insisting that either “divine assistance” or “with God’s help” be used, and that the same option is used by both of the couple getting married. We do not feel we have the authority of the Yearly Meeting to make a different decision, as this feels like a question about our yearly meeting’s theological understanding.

How might the wording be changed?

Questions that were raised in the feedback received that might need to be explored are:

Must couples say exactly equal declarations?

At present both must choose “with God’s help” or “divine assistance”. Is insisting on the same wording forcing a couple to share a theology? Should it be open for one of the couple to use one option and the other the other option, or even omit any reference to God/the divine?

Some couples have chosen not to have a Quaker wedding, even though they wished to marry within our community, because one or both of them could not honestly use either of the options.

Can “they” be specifically included as a pronoun?

Since 2015, when the third of the current options “him/her/[commonly used name]” was added, there has been considerable societal change on the use

of pronouns. The use of any pronoun is currently permitted by decision of the Recording Clerk. Feedback has suggested that “them” should be included as a definite option.

Who can change the wording?

The wording of the declaration is a Quaker matter, there is no legal reason for Quakers to keep to our current wording options for the marriage declarations.

As the wording is included in *Quaker faith & practice*, then currently Meeting for Sufferings has been authorised to make minor changes, while Yearly Meeting itself is the only place that major changes can be made.

Staff advise that the question of pronouns is a minor change that Meeting for Sufferings could accept, but that the question of omitting reference to God/the divine or of having greater freedom in the wording of the declarations are decisions for Yearly Meeting to take, on the advice of Meeting for Sufferings.

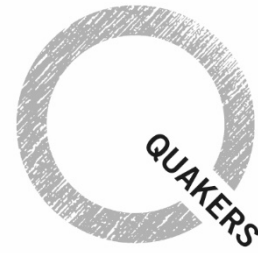
Recommendations

1. We recommend that Meeting for Sufferings consults area meetings and Friends generally on the question:

In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’, or to use neither of those phrases.

2. We recommend that Meeting for Sufferings accepts the recommendation that any pronoun can be used, and that “them” is offered as an alternative in text of *Quaker faith & practice* 16.52 and as appropriate in 16.53.

Michael S Booth
Church Government Adviser



Yearly Meeting of the
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Suggested letter to send to your MP which should include your postal address

Dear

Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP)

You will be aware that this sentence was abolished in 2012 and yet I understand there are still nearly 3,000 people subject to their original IPP sentences.

Quakers, back to the time of Elizabeth Fry, have always taken great interest in our penal system. Quakers in Britain (QiB) have urged the Government to re-sentence people who have been given indeterminate sentences. QiB is in communication with others at the highest level, including Alex Chalk, to establish how this could be achieved safely.

Prisons are full to capacity and yet these people suffer profound psychological harm and mental torture having no set date for release. The IPP sentence is aptly named "In Perpetual Purgatory".

I ask you as my MP to push the government to resolve this cruel issue in line with the recommendations made last September by Parliament's Justice Committee.

Kind regards

Note: Numbers involved as of June 2023: 8,185 IPP prisoners overall; of which 1,312 have never been released and 1,597 are back in prison following recall.