

Follow up letter



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

15 December 2025

To members of Meeting for Sufferings

Meeting for Sufferings 6 December 2025

Dear Friends,

It was, as always, a joy to be with you at our December Meeting for Sufferings and I am grateful for the care and attention you gave to some challenging business.

Meeting for Sufferings approved its agenda, recorded changes in membership, and agreed a large number of committee appointments and releases. It added Andrew Dames to the Court and Prison Register following his sentencing for climate protest action. We noted major governance updates: with the exception of South East Scotland Area Meeting, Quaker bodies area meetings in Scotland have formally laid themselves down, transferring responsibilities to Quakers in Scotland, and Yorkshire Friends are creating a new single charity with shared trustees, Yorkshire Quakers, while the seven area meetings continue as worshipping communities. Quaker Life Central Committee reported improved governance compliance overall, though 11 charities failed to complete annual returns. The use of the EcoChurch criteria improved sustainability reporting. After Meeting for Sufferings is laid down, Quaker Life Central Committee will have responsibility for monitoring compliance on behalf of the Yearly Meeting.

The group appointed to review the registration of Quaker Recognised Bodies recommended clearer criteria and simpler processes, which we accepted with a request that Agenda Planning Committee consider how this might be handled once Meeting for Sufferings is laid down. Peace Works Zimbabwe was re-registered, but the application from Sex Matters to Quakers was not approved.

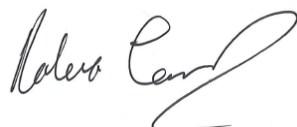
Meeting for Sufferings endorsed the paper from Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations affirming gender diversity, the final version of which is part of this meeting and Friends and meetings are encouraged to reflect on it. We heard updates from Trustees on deficit reduction plans and ethical investment changes. The Book of Discipline Revision Committee reported significant progress toward the new book, *Our Quaker Way*. A full draft is expected in 2027, with widespread community participation anticipated. In the meantime, on the advice of Church

Government Advisory Group, we approved minor amendments to *Quaker faith & practice* and sent proposals for amendments to the Quaker marriage declaration and a rewritten Chapter 6 to Yearly Meeting with our blessing.

Our last ever Meeting for Sufferings will be on 7th March 2026 at Friends House and online from 10:00 to 16:00. Arrangements Group has not yet considered the business in detail but we plan to include some extra opportunities to worship together and to give thanks for the work of Meeting for Sufferings through the years.

"There is no justification for wasting precious time in our meetings for church affairs under the excuse or delusion that we may safely do so because it is God's work. But they should be times of enjoyment as well as of hard work, times when we can see old friends and make new ones over tea, when we can be stimulated by other people's ideas and insights as we deliberate together, when we can discover our own gifts and those of other members as we work together. It was said of Gilpin Gregory that 'when his health failed and he was daily seen by his doctor, he would frequently appear at monthly meeting against his doctor's orders and contrary to the advice of his friends, and if remonstrated with he would say, "It does me good; I shall be none the worse for it, and it may be for the last time".' All our meetings for church affairs should be used imaginatively so that they are not 'business' meetings to be attended from duty or neglected with a sense of guilt but real meetings for church affairs which build us up in Christian love – and do us good."
Quaker faith & practice, 3.30.

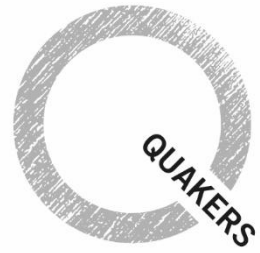
In Truth,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robert Card', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robert Card
Clerk, Meeting for Sufferings

The following papers are included in this mailing:

- MfS minutes December 2025
- Functions checklist
- Final updated version of the QCCIR paper (MfS 2025 12 11); Towards a faith-based understanding of gender diversity



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 6 December 2025

Minutes

MfS/25/12/01 Opening Worship and welcome

We have begun our Meeting in worship during which paragraph 17 of section 1.02 of *Quaker faith & practice* was read.

MfS/25/12/02 Agenda

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

MfS/25/12/03 Membership of Meeting for Sufferings

Since our last meeting we have received the following request for release:
Eleanor Tew – York AM alternate. We release this Friend.

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

Jean Scott-Barr – Mid-Thames AM

Apologies:

Thaxted AM

Other visitors:

Judith Baker – BYM staff, Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer

Michael Booth – BYM staff, Church Government Adviser

Catherine Brewer – Book of Discipline Revision Committee Co-clerk

Martin Burnell – Church Government Advisory Group Convener

Rosie Carnall – Book of Discipline Revision Committee Co-clerk

Ceridwen Jenkins – Young Friends General Meeting

Erin Letbe-Holder – BYM staff, Volunteers & Committees Coordinator

Orlane Martinez – BYM staff, Administration and Support Officer (Volunteers & Committees)

Alison Mitchell – Agenda Planning Committee Assistant Clerk

Michael Phipps – Book of Discipline Revision Committee Assistant Clerk

MfS/25/12/04 Appointments

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

Yearly Meeting Elders

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2028:

Simon Nash, Hampshire and Islands AM

Gerry Winnall, Devon AM

To extend the term of service from the original end date of 31 December 2027 until 31 December 2028:

Gill Grimshaw, Banbury & Evesham AM

Paul Hodgkin, Ipswich & Diss AM

Cathy Khurana, Central England AM

John Miles, Gloucestershire AM

David Simpson, Teesdale and Cleveland AM

Lee Taylor, Luton and Leighton AM

Dic Williams, North Wales AM / CCR Gogledd Cymru

Quaker Council for European Affairs

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2028:

Gordon Benson, Pendle Hill AM

Quaker Life Central Committee

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2028:

Ann Kerr, Quakers in Scotland

Sarah Martin, Quakers in Scotland

Agenda Planning Committee

Nominate to serve from 1st January 2026 until 31 May 2026 and from 1 September 2026 until 31 December 2027. This Friend will be unavailable for APC work from June-September 2026; for the purposes of the APC terms of reference this appointment is to a single 2-year term.

Eleanor Harding, Central England AM

Quaker Peace and Social Witness Central Committee

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 until 31 December 2028:

Nikki Jeffcote, North West London AM

Re-nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 until 31 December 2028:

Colin Holliday, Sussex West AM

Diana Jeater, Hardshaw and Mann AM

Sue Curd, Sussex West AM

Ruth Harvey, Cumberland AM

Church Government Advisory Group

Renominate to serve from 1 January 2026 until 31 December 2026:

Kate Green, North East Thames AM

To extend the term of service from the original end date of 31 December 2026 until 31 December 2027:

Pennie Quinton, London West AM

Jackie Fowler, Worcestershire & Shropshire AM

Lesley Thomson, York AM

Simon Best, Central England AM

Quaker Housing Trust

Renominate to serve from the Annual Retirement Meeting 2026 until the Annual Retirement Meeting 2028:

Jenny Brierley, York AM

Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees

Release from service with immediate effect:

John Lewis, South Wales AM / CCR De Cymru

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 until 4 May 2026, pending renomination at Yearly Meeting in May 2026, for a term lasting until 31 December 2028:

Teresa Murray, South Wales AM / CCR De Cymru

Book of Discipline Revision Committee

Nominate to serve from 1 May 2026 until the work is done:

Andrew O'Hanlon, Hampshire and Islands AM

Quaker World Relations Committee

Nominate to serve from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2028:

Saskia Stenson, Southern Marches AM / CCR y Gororau Deheuol

Yearly Meeting Pastoral Care Group

To nominate to serve with immediate effect until the end of 31 December 2027:

Dilys Candler, Sheffield & Balby AM

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations

Release from service with immediate effect:

Roy Stephenson, Lancashire Central and North AM

Quaker United Nations Office Geneva Committee

Renominate to serve from 1 January 2026 until 31 December 2028:

Kate Graham, Leeds AM

We agree to these appointments and requests for release.

MfS/25/12/05 Court and Prison Register

Meeting for Sufferings records in the Court and Prison Register the names of Friends who have appeared in court or been imprisoned as a result of their faith and acting under concern.

We receive minute 25.11.72 from Cambridgeshire Area Meeting, held on 22 November 2025. The minute records that Andrew Dames of Cambridgeshire Area Meeting will be sentenced on 5th December for his action in Just Oil protests in 2022. News has reached us that Andrew has been sentenced to 26 months, 40% of which to be served in prison, plus a requirement to pay costs of £2480. We are deeply saddened by this and will consider giving practical support as needed.

We agree to include these details in the Register and hold our Friend in the Light.

MfS/25/12/06 Governance in Scotland

We receive and note the following minutes:

- General Meeting for Scotland 25/09/16
- East Scotland Area Meeting minute 25.10.12
- North Scotland Area Meeting minute 51/25
- West Scotland Area Meeting minutes 086/25, 087/25, 088/25

Further to our minute MfS/25/10/09, we record the fact that General Meeting for Scotland, East Scotland Area Meeting, North Scotland Area Meeting and West Scotland Area Meeting have all now laid themselves down as Quaker bodies. All the Quaker responsibilities of these bodies have now been transferred to Quakers in Scotland. General Meeting for Scotland, the charity, is now closed and these area meetings are in the process of formally closing their charities.

We give thanks for the past work of these Quaker bodies and we uphold Quakers in Scotland as they continue to take that work forward.

MfS/25/12/07 Governance in Yorkshire

We have received a paper setting out plans to simplify Quaker governance for Quakers in the Yorkshire region (MfS 2025 12 08).

Across the Yorkshire region there are seven area meetings and a regional gathering (Quakers in Yorkshire). These eight bodies are all independent charities. Yorkshire Friends are in the process of creating a new single charity, Yorkshire Quakers. The new charity will provide a shared trustee body for the current eight charities. The seven area meetings will not be laid down and will continue to exist as Quaker communities, focusing on worship and witness.

We uphold our Friends in Yorkshire as they work through the steps needed to register the new charity.

MfS/25/12/08 Annual reporting by area meetings

Britain Yearly Meeting requests information every year from area and general meetings about compliance with various charity responsibilities. Staff send out an annual return to meetings and then report on the data in detail to Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC). A summary report is provided to Meeting for Sufferings.

There has been some progress in relation to most of the key governance metrics that QLCC is tracking. However, 11 charities did not complete the annual return. Seven of those 11 did not complete the return last year either.

This year QLCC trialled the use of EcoChurch criteria for reporting on sustainability and this has improved the quality of reporting received.

When Meeting for Sufferings is laid down QLCC will have responsibility on behalf of BYM for monitoring compliance by the charitable bodies in the formal Quaker structure and it will report key issues and findings to Yearly Meeting as needed.

MfS/25/12/09 Update on memorandum of understanding between trustees

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the constituent charitable bodies of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain was agreed by Meeting for Sufferings in October 2023. Its purpose was to clarify existing relationships and duties.

We ask all area meetings that have not yet signed the MoU to contact the secretary to Meeting for Sufferings to discuss what support they need. We ask the other charitable bodies that have not yet signed to work with the Deputy Recording Clerk to progress this matter.

We note that there will be a need to amend the MoU once Meeting for Sufferings is laid down and we ask Quaker Life Central Committee to work with staff to take the necessary steps.

MfS/25/12/10 Review of the process for registration and re-registration of Quaker Recognised Bodies

In December 2024 we agreed to set up a group to review the process for registering and re-registering Quaker Recognised Bodies (QRBs) (minute MfS/24/12/08 refers) and the group was appointed in March 2025 (minute MfS/25/03/04). We now receive the group's written report (paper MfS 2025 12 10), which has been introduced by Magnus Ramage, a member of the review group, and he has answered our questions.

We have considered the recommendations. In relation to the registration and re-registration process we agree that:

- The application form for registration as a QRB should be revised so that applicants are asked for additional information such as: how the group seeks

to express and realise Quaker values as they see them; what led to the initial formation of the group; how the group has evolved over time.

- All necessary information, including safeguarding arrangements, should be collected within the application form, this should reduce the need for clarifying conversations and so streamline the process.
- Some further work should be done to clarify 'Quaker values' for the purpose of the application and the form should make it easy for applicants to communicate how such values are reflected in their work.
- There should be a clear single set of criteria for acceptance as a QRB, including the capability of the applicant.
- The process by which QRB applications can be challenged should be stated on the application form, and new applicants should be asked to agree to it. It should include the requirement for any challenge to be factually substantiated by those who make the challenge.
- The question has been asked if there should be a time gap before it would be appropriate to reapply after rejection. We ask Agenda Planning Committee to consider this.
- A renewal form should be created so that the groups themselves provide the necessary information to show whether their registration should continue. The Quaker community should be given early notice of the intention to renew QRB status.

When Meeting for Sufferings is laid down, we will need a new way to decide on applications and renewals. Our review group has offered some suggestions for how this might happen. We agree that the ultimate decision should lie with Yearly Meeting, but we hope that opportunities can be found for Friends to engage with applications. That might involve using preparation sessions as well as formal business sessions of Yearly Meeting. We offer these thoughts to Agenda Planning Committee, which will take this matter forward.

We celebrate the growing points that QRBS bring.

We lay down this review group, thanking its members for their work.

We send this minute and a copy of the report to Agenda Planning Committee.

MfS/25/12/11 Towards a faith-based understanding of gender diversity

We receive minute QCCIR/25/11/17 from Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, which introduces their discussion paper "Towards a paper on gender diversity in our church: Our differences are a blessing" (paper MfS 2025 12 11). We thank the Committee for its work.

Elaine Green, clerk of QCCIR, has spoken to the paper, which sets out the spiritual basis for Quakers in Britain to affirm and respect gender diversity, drawing on

Christian scripture, early Quaker writings, and the Yearly Meeting's testimony of equality. It calls on Quaker communities to welcome all by fostering safety, authenticity, compassion, and deep listening. It urges Friends to practice radical inclusion, repair harm with grace, and build unity grounded in love and faith.

QCCIR has spent nearly a year discerning how to support the spirit of Minute 31 of YM 2021, producing guidance grounded in Quaker faith, integrity, and the diversity of spiritual experience within Britain Yearly Meeting. They have reflected on the challenges of practising a peaceful, hopeful spirituality amid social turmoil, misinformation, and moral anxiety, and encourage Friends to remain rooted in their heritage while expressing an ethic accessible beyond Christian Quakerism. Ultimately, the guidance encourages staying in relationship even amid disagreement and living out a love-led Quaker testimony in personal and communal life.

We endorse this document, ask that it be made available, subject to some further editorial work and in consultation with our communications staff, as an articulation of our position as expressed in minute 31 of YM 2021, providing us with a language and framework for further conversations, and commend it to Friends and Meetings for careful consideration.

We ask that a version of the spoken introduction be distributed with the paper.

MfS/25/12/12 Report from Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees

Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees met at the end of November and their most recent minutes were circulated shortly before this meeting.

Marisa Johnson, clerk of BYM Trustees, has indicated the main points of their last meeting.

Paul Whitehouse, Yearly Meeting Treasurer, has reported to us on the approved budget for 2026 and changes to our investments. Trustees plan to reduce the yearly meeting's deficit each year to reach a balanced budget by 2028, despite rising costs, declining fundraising income, and reliance on legacies. Trustees have updated the Society's investment policy to be more transparent about the complexities of ethical investing, committing to clear exclusions, active engagement, and full visibility of holdings. After concerns about policy compliance, trustees are switching all equity investments to the Royal London Sustainable Investment Fund and will soon choose a new manager for fixed-income assets.

We thank Trustees for their continuing service.

MfS/25/12/13 Book of Discipline Revision Committee

We receive a report from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee (BDRC) on its activity for the past year, and the clerks of the committee have spoken to it.

We have heard how the developing book of discipline, now with the working title of *Our Quaker Way: the spiritual discipline of the Religious Society of Friends*

(Quakers) in Britain, has been shaped by wide community engagement, including a moment of ministry from a child that helped inspire its framing. They have outlined the evolving structure of the book – imagined as a tree with roots, trunk and branches – and explain the ongoing work of drafting, editing and preparing supporting materials for Friends to read, reflect and respond to the first draft in 2027. We are invited to prepare for this communal discernment process, emphasising open-hearted listening, shared responsibility, and the insight that “our love frequently creates unity.”

We are excited to hear about the progress the committee has made with this work. We look forward to seeing a full draft of the new book next year. When Meeting for Sufferings is laid down BDRC will report directly to Yearly Meeting. That will allow every Friend to share explicitly in the responsibility and the joy of supporting this work.

MfS/25/12/14 Quaker Recognised Bodies

a. Application for re-registration

We agree to re-register Peace Works Zimbabwe as a Quaker Recognised Body for a period of five years (to be reviewed in 2030).

b. Application for registration

We have received an application for registration as a Quaker Recognised Body from the group Sex Matters to Quakers.

We have received minute BYMT/25/11/22 from Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees expressing significant concerns with this application, in particular behaviours which are not in keeping with our corporate discipline. We are not in unity and cannot approve this application at this time. Our corporate position as a yearly meeting is clear and it is not clear that it can be reconciled with the Group's approach.

MfS/25/12/15 Quaker marriage declaration

In December 2023 Meeting for Sufferings received a minute from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee asking us to consider the wording of the marriage declaration (minute MfS/23/12/07 refers). We invited and received contributions from individual Friends, area meetings, central committees and other bodies. In October 2024 we asked for a working group to be formed under the auspices of Quaker Life Central Committee to continue working on this matter (minute MfS/24/10/11). We now receive minute QLCC 25.55 of Quaker Life Central Committee, which encloses the report of the working group. Klaus Huber, a member of the working group, has introduced this.

It is our discernment that a change should be made to the Quaker marriage declaration. We have considered the new words brought to us by the Quaker Life Central Committee working group and we endorse them. We agree that it is acceptable that the two spouses need not use the same phrase in their declarations.

We ask Yearly Meeting to consider the proposed changes to the Quaker marriage declaration.

We ask our Church Government Advisory Group to draft suitable text for *Quaker faith & practice* so that Yearly Meeting can see how the change might work in practice.

We thank Quaker Life Central Committee and the working group for their work.

We send this minute to Agenda Planning Committee.

MfS/25/12/16 Changes to *Quaker faith & practice*

We have received proposed changes to *Quaker faith & practice* (*Qf&p*) from our Church Government Advisory Group (CGAG), with an explanatory paper. Martin Burnell has introduced these changes. It is proposed these will be made to the current online version of *Qf&p* and take effect on 1st May 2026.

Qf&p requires continuous updating as decisions are taken by Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting, and CGAG was asked to produce new wording following the decision to lay down Meeting for Sufferings. As well as making these required amendments to the relevant text, the group has drafted new text for chapter 6 to bring the history of Yearly Meeting up to date, and in keeping with the approach being taken in the new Book of Discipline, much of the detail in chapter 6 has been moved to supplementary material, which can be more readily updated. In chapter 7, the history of Meeting for Sufferings has been retained. This is ongoing work, and further amendments will be suggested in due course. Given that there will be a new Book of Discipline in about five years time, CGAG is focusing on the essential changes to *Qf&p* needed to provide workable guidance for our church government, in the meantime.

We have considered the proposed changes. Yearly Meeting has given Meeting for Sufferings the power to agree minor changes to *Qf&p*. Proposed changes to chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 13, apart from 13.28, are minor amendments and we agree to them, noting that there are further changes to come. The change proposed to chapter 13.28 is to remove the obsolete term 'Minutes of Liberation'. We consider this to be a minor change, and we agree to it. We send the changes we have made to Yearly Meeting for information.

We consider the proposed changes to chapter 6 are major changes that only Yearly Meeting can agree. We endorse these proposed changes, including the proposed approach to supplementary material, and send them to Yearly Meeting with the recommendation it adopts them. We ask CGAG to work with Agenda Committee to prepare any material for Documents in Advance.

We note that Church Government Advisory Group has further work to do on paragraph 4.25 (appeals against termination of membership) and ask it to bring a proposal to our March meeting.

We thank Church Government Advisory Group for its work.

We send this minute to Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee, noting that it has already reserved some time on the agenda of Yearly Meeting in May 2026 for consideration of these matters.

MfS/25/12/17 Closing worship

There being no further business to conduct, we part, looking to meet again on 7th March 2026, nothing occurring to prevent.

Robert Card
Clerk

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

	Requirement	December 25 (minute #)
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	12
D	To receive the BYM trustees' annual report & accounts for information	
E	To make a report on its own activities to YM	
F	To determine the dates of YM	
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	11
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	12 & 13
J	To receive minutes from area meetings	
K	To make appropriate entries in the prison and court register	5
L	To appoint representatives to attend other Yearly Meetings	
M	To receive information about changes in the composition or status of general meetings and gatherings	6 & 7
N	To make changes in the composition of area meetings	6
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>	8, 9, 10, 15 & 16
S	To set up an arrangements group and support and working groups to assist its own work as it sees fit	



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

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations: Towards a faith-based understanding of gender diversity

Spoken introduction given to Meeting for Sufferings, 6 December 2025

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

John Woolman, 1762.Qf&p, 26.61

The standing committee of BYM that is the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, was asked nearly a year ago to discern how the Quaker way that is embodied in Minute 31 of YM 2021 could be supported and realised. What you have before you is about 10 months' work amongst Friends to arrive at a draft guidance, based on our faith witness, that reflects, we hope, our Quaker integrity (in both senses of that word, i.e. cohesion and fidelity.)

Religious faith does not always lead to right action, but it is used by all of us to justify opinions of right and wrong, as informed by our lived experience.

Yet human experience is subject to the social context of our times, including the barrage of news and unbridled media trends that raise sensitivities, fear, anger and anxiety across many age groups, especially the under 30's who are most exposed to relentless exploitation and abuse. In what some social commentators describe as an age of moral decay, our ambition as a spiritual people to build a fairer world, justice for all, is a high-minded ideal that is rightly located in a faith that inspires social action.

QCCIR had to consider what contribution liberal Quaker faith and practice can make to the progressive life experience of its own adherents. Whilst we discerned that we needed to remain anchored in the dissenting Christian heritage that spawned our practices and testimony, we acknowledged fully that, as a YM, we now need to

express our faith and practice in terms of an ethic that is not confined to Christian Quaker experience.

We are conscious of the diversity of religious beliefs and spiritual experiences amongst us that is itself a product of our Quaker heritage. There is a richness in the kaleidoscope of our faith perspectives that, through our shared discipline, can hold us together in extraordinary, spirit-led, gathered unity. This precious gift is not exclusive to this or that faction but is the source of a shared refuge of peace and community available to everyone.

The quality of any lived spirituality is that it can lift us out of the mundane and give us a different, one might say 'higher' vision of hope, kindness and well-being. There is much to be angry about in the world around us and we can allow a destructive rage to be fed by uncontrolled sources of complex facts and misinformation. Frustration and fear are part of our human condition and it is not easy to find the courage to contain our anger and live according to our faith testimony as a people of peace. As a YM, we may need to be radically counter-cultural in our own faith witness against a corrupted expression of religious faith and indeed a supposed righteous Christian heritage that lures so many into an ugly rhetoric of prejudice, injustice and oppression.

It is almost existential and of the essence of Quakerism, that we express our faith in terms of the spiritual experience it offers to everyone to rise above the trauma, noise and anger of the human condition – an offer of something richer, sustainable and more wholesome, that is reflected in the Advice "Seek to know one another in the things which are eternal...."

QCCIR engages constantly, as central to its role, in exchanges and narratives of faith identity with those with whom we often disagree, sometimes personally and often corporately as one faith body amongst many. We do not preach that we should be all the same, nor that one's own identity be swallowed up by that of another, but we recognise that our spiritual health lies in relationship. We remain in the room in relational belonging, so that the potential for love is not lost.

So, we asked ourselves what can we say, in faithful upholding of our YM Minute on subject matter that is, out there in the world, socially, culturally and politically deeply controversial, and shown to be divisive and harmful?

Throughout our history as a church movement, there have been divergent opinions on elements of our practices that have come close to threatening our identity. We are human first, but we can aspire towards higher ideals that sometimes seem beyond us in the moment, but which we can hold on to as leading into a sense of community fulfilment and reassuring peace in our own hearts.

In this sense, the guidance before you talks about the leadings of the Spirit in the search for kinder ground. It is all we can ask of each other. The guidance concludes

with some ways in which we can mine our hearts for how we put our long-held Quaker testimony into action in our own lives and meetings.

Through *Sufferings*, QCCIR offers Quakers in Britain a faith-grounded guide on love as the first motion, that is confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from anywhere the heart stands in perfect sincerity.

Elaine Green

Towards a paper on gender diversity in our church: *Our differences are a blessing*

Our work benefits when it is carried on by people who bring with them a range of lived experiences and spiritual insights. (Epistle of Britain Yearly Meeting 2024)

Preamble

This document is for all Quakers in Britain who are exhorted, through our church government, to respect and take account in the way they live of the discerned conclusions of our Yearly Meeting in session. Minute BYM/2021/31, reproduced in the body of the guidance, is a declared commitment to love and respect each other across our community, irrespective of our diversity of theology and belief.

The Yearly Meeting will recognise that this document, offered for guidance and continued discussion amongst Friends, is unlikely to remain confidential to the Quaker community in Britain. It is most likely to reach the public square, where people of all faiths and none communicate. In particular, it may be shared with our partner churches. In such a context, it needs to carry authority on behalf of Quakers in Britain in its exposition of a subject of faith commitment that is not yet universally socially settled or uncontroversial.

In setting out any faith position that reflects more than opinion, there is strength in referencing our faith tradition that is deeply rooted in western Christianity. We explain our faith conviction to ourselves and others more fluently when we reflect the source of our words and liturgy. This guidance necessarily draws heavily on our Christian heritage, as the origination of our form of worship, church government and testimony. It is hoped that the spiritual and moral insights anchored in the Christian scriptural citations that support this guidance speak authentically to all Quakers, howsoever they understand the foundation of their personal faith.

Section 1 Our Yearly Meeting Commitment

1. The Religious Society of Friends in Britain is the chosen or home faith community for many people who are LGBTQIA+¹. As a result of societal and systemic oppression, the life experiences of LGBTQIA+ people can be complex and stressful. All queer and trans people are welcome to find a faith home within the community of Quakers in Britain, whose discipline requires that we,

“Respect the wide diversity among us in our lives and relationships. Refrain from making prejudiced judgments about the life journeys of others. Do you

¹ LGBTQIA+ is generally explained as *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual*. The “plus” represents other sexual identities.

foster the spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness which our discipleship asks of us? Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God." (Britain Yearly Meeting, *Advices and Queries* 22)

2. In gathered worship, our Yearly Meeting has acknowledged that, in becoming a more inclusive faith body, Friends were still striving fully to respect gender diversity. Minute 31 of Britain Yearly Meeting 2021 reads:

"Our testimony of equality stems from the religious conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth, that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God. In 2003, Meeting for Sufferings responded to the Gender Recognition Bill, based on our testimony of equality, and encouraged Quaker Life Central Committee to promote the pastoral care of transgender people, their families, spouses and children, their friends and meetings. In 2015 the Tabular Statement started to record 'Other' as well as men and women as one step to acknowledging the diversity among us. More recently, following consideration of trans and nonbinary inclusion in a number of meetings, Quaker Life drafted an initial statement in 2018, inviting all Quakers in Britain to discuss and reflect together on gender diversity. These discussions and reflections have not always been easy. Our consideration has coincided with wider consideration of legislation reform in Britain, and the associated conflict has been reflected among Friends in our yearly meeting. We recognise that we need to keep listening and searching together.

In an atmosphere of trust, we need to listen, to share our journeys, in silent worship, and in prayer. We all have human gifts and friendship to offer. We need to rejoice in the things that make us different, not be ashamed or excluded. Our differences are a blessing, and we must all work to ensure that the support is there in each meeting to allow this blessing to bear fruit. We seek to provide places of worship and community that are welcoming and supportive to trans and nonbinary people who want to be among us. Belonging is more than fitting in. With glad hearts we acknowledge and affirm the trans and gender diverse Friends in our Quaker communities, and express appreciation for the contribution and gifts that they bring to our meetings, which are communities made up of people with a diverse range of gender expressions. The end of our travelling is for differences not to divide us. We rejoice in recognising God's creation in one another. This is what love requires of us."

3. For some, the implications of this discerned leading remains confusing and troubling; our faithful discernment process, however patient and disciplined, demands more prayerful support from and for us all in order to fulfil the Yearly Meeting's commitment.

4. This paper is an endorsement of the requirement placed upon us to keep listening and searching for God's truth and unity together. It may serve as a guide, to support Friends in building our peaceable relationships within our community that, through faith and love, bridge the differences that we may experience between us. It is available for Friends to share with other churches and faith groups as a way of explaining to others the religious grounding of our discerned position to respect gender diversity within our faith community as a moral imperative.
5. Quakers in Britain aspire to be able, without hesitation, to welcome difference across the range of personal characteristics, including gender, sexuality, race, disability, age, and so on. There are nonetheless some worshippers who find it difficult, even impossible, to engage readily in effective, generous and inclusive discourse around gender and sexuality that goes to the heart of human identity and security. Some are shy in the face of deeply personal experiences they do not understand and may reject the alternative experiences of other Friends. Some may be shielding themselves from hurtful experiences in their own lives, which remain private and hidden. They too seek respect and love within our community. We must all listen to each other, so that we might feel safe enough to share and support our faith journeys together.
6. Jesus's insistence on loving one another as an overriding rule of faith was recorded repeatedly:

"³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35, New Revised Standard Version [Anglicised], NVRSA),

7. The rule that we should care for one another appears in our Quaker heritage as fundamental to all that we strive to achieve as a faith body and overrides all personal interest and opinion. *Quaker Faith & practice* 12.01 reads [in part]:

"All of us in the meeting have needs. Sometimes the need will be for patient understanding, sometimes for practical help, sometimes for challenge and encouragement; but we cannot be aware of each other's needs unless we know each other. [...] Loving is not something that those sound in mind and body 'do' for others but a process that binds us together. God has made us loving and the imparting of love to another satisfies something deep within us."

Paul, in his letter to the Christian community in Rome, wrote: "¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law", (Romans

13:10, NRSVA, UK). To the Greeks of Corinth, he directed on how to build a faith community:

"²⁵there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it." (1 Corinthians 12:25-26, NRSVA)

8. Only by allowing ourselves to be led by grace can we really know how to live up to our Quaker testimony of equality that stems from the religious conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth, each one of us a precious child, loved by God.
9. In this guidance we seek to illuminate the decision we reached together in 2021, so that Friends in Britain can find a way to live fully in that experience. We do not seek to address the legal or biological arguments around the concepts of sex and gender, nor to propose any political or social view on these matters.

Section 2 Seeking the leadings of the Spirit

- 10 Within our tradition there are threads that point beyond the hard gender boundaries we may construct. We are mindful of Paul's words that, when we are unified in Christ, "there is no longer male and female." [Galations 3.28, NRSVA].
11. Early Quaker leader Margaret Fell said, in her argument for the legitimacy of women as ministers of God's word, that "God joyns them [man and woman] together in his own Image, and makes no such distinctions and differences as men do; for though they be weak, he is strong." ² In continuity with Fell, we are guided to perceive humanity as created both male and female in the image of a God who is beyond gender. Indeed, the very form and essence of Quaker worship that is rooted in silent waiting embodies a radical equality of all humans before God. Our worship together should be our focus.
12. In our fractured existence, we allow stereotyped perceptions of difference and expectations of each other to lead to flashpoints of conflict. Through our human fear, we can be drawn in by dark spirits of oppression, such as racism, misogyny or queerphobia. We witness the pain and anguish that flows from our disagreements and disappointments.

² Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures. By Margaret Fell, 1614-1702. London: Printed in the Year, 1666

13. Yet we are told that our differences constitute the Body of Christ:
- 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (1 Corinthians 12:17-19, NRSVA)
- 14 We recognise that we should rejoice in the things that make us different, and not be ashamed, fearful, nor judgmental. From our Christian heritage, we take forward the principle that, made in the image of God, our human differences are a blessing. We must all work to ensure that the support is there in every one of our Quaker Meetings and communities to allow this blessing to nourish us. We bear witness to the experience that belonging to a faith body is, for each and all of us, more than "fitting in".
15. We may disagree over our immediate responses to social concerns that we perceive and understand through our human sensibilities. Yet, as a faith community, we remain united in our search for the things that are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18), such as the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSVA)
16. We profess our faith testimony to guide our temporal and spiritual lives, including the equality of all before God, and we try to live up to our highest values in our dealings one with another in community. We are called to be reconciled and to reconcile.

Section 3 Living out our commitment

17. Our witness is to be a faith body that is radically inclusive. The Light that is within everyone illuminates and brings new revelation to all seekers, such that our diversity makes us a stronger, richer, more vibrant and authentic faith community. Regardless of issues of gender, many younger Friends recognise an acute need to be transparent in living out their own truth, without imposing it carelessly on their neighbour. We are in unity in testifying that none of us is called to be something that we are not.
- "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." (Psalm 51:6 , NRSVA)
- 18 We are called to heed the advice that, in living authentically, we must allow each of us to present our whole selves, sure that we are received in love. Love and respect mean that we can safely nurture and challenge each other on the things that matter. Through openness and humility, we may offer up much more towards the unity we seek.

“We have heard in ministry that the strength of a church lies in how it is able to disagree with itself. In Quaker discernment, unity is not the same as unanimity. Minority views may well continue to exist. Among ourselves, we need to find kinder ground for our disagreements. Can we find joy? Can we bring joy?” (Epistle of Britain Yearly Meeting, 2024)

- 19 In striving to build the peaceable kingdom on earth, we long to establish Quaker Meetings in worship and community where each of us can be authentically ourselves, without being rejected by our Friends for doing so. We should choose our words carefully, so as to nurture our sense of togetherness. This calls us to be brave as well as kind, as we share our stories and experiences with each other in a faith community that feels safe for each of us. In 1987, Friend Rose Ketterer wrote,

“Articulating my faith is hard enough; living it is often beyond me. But we are all connected. Strength seeps in from everywhere and amazing things happen. The sense of participation and communion sweeps over me like ocean waves.” (Quaker faith & practice, 26.35)

- 20 We should not seek to deny another Friend this companionship and we are reminded of our primary duty towards one another by Edward H Milligan from 1951,

“I can think with thankfulness of Friends who have brought light to my darkness – perhaps a single sentence, a friendly letter, a walk on the downs: their help was perhaps given unconsciously, but it was because they were sensitive to God’s leadings that they were able to do it. Do we seek to be the channels of God’s love and caring? Caring matters most.” (Quaker faith & practice, 21.20)

- 21 As a people of faith, we can turn our minds towards how we might behave towards any person presenting a difference that we individually cannot understand, to whom we cannot immediately warm, or towards whom we feel defensive, wary, even aggressive. According to our discerned testimonies and faith precepts, it is not permissible for us to reject or harm any Friend or visitor to our Quaker Meetings, in worship or community, because of how, most intricately and wonderfully, each of us has been made. These differences are part of the richness of the unconditional love the Inner Light offers and by which we seek to be guided.

- 22 We can listen deeply to one another, yet we must guard against weaponising that dialogue by coercing the person of difference constantly or repeatedly to justify their own lived reality. If we are truly willing to learn about each other, we are all better able to engage in genuine discussion that can heal relationships between those who endure living in pain and fear.

"²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.^[a]"
(Ephesians 4:29, 31-32, NRSVA)

- 23 None of us should use hurtful language that is prompted by human frustration or aggression against a Friend whose experience and history has brought them to a point of disagreement with the positions we may have reached through our own. We need the courage to learn and accept that something we said has hurt another, and the wisdom to be generous and gracious, seeking kinder ground for our exchanges in the spirit of the ministry of reconciliation that we have been given.
- 24 **Local meetings**, where worship happens and community is fostered, might consider how they can be a vehicle for restoration and repair amongst Friends and offer gifts of love to the stranger. The process of rupture and repair is not easy for anyone, and, where harm has been done, relationships may not be immediately recovered. Yet, with good intentions and prayerful generosity to one another, Friends may be able to repair and deepen relationships. We might ask together:
 - a. Do we offer, through love for one another, truly safe communities for open exchanges of personal faith experience and how the Truth prospers with each of us? Do we listen deeply and generously to one another, thinking it possible that we may be mistaken, hurtful or careless?
 - b. Do we invite the sharing of pronouns and gender self-identification amongst our worshippers? Do we enquire with kindness and sincerity how a person wishes to be named and recorded, without making any conventional assumptions of which gender that may suggest?
 - c. There is a difference between not understanding trans identities and actively disrespecting them. Our places of worship need to be welcoming environments. If we allow groups to use our buildings when their actions or words intend to hurt or exclude, then we risk becoming complicit in hurt and exclusion. We have a testimony of equality, and we can use it to guide our discernment on how to use our meeting houses.
 - d. Do we check back sincerely and lovingly through our pastoral care and eldership service on how newer Attenders and Friends are beginning to feel they belong?
 - e. How do we build our understanding of what can be hurtful ministry in our worship and community? How do we build trust enough to address the conflict that can result from misunderstandings of gender and queerness?
 - f. Do we check back sincerely and lovingly through our pastoral care and eldership service on how some Friends feel unsettled by others in our meeting

community? Do we offer a loving hand in accompanying others to walk their faith journey at their own pace?

- g. Are we open to change in the light of new revelation? Are we willing to make the extra effort this change requires of us? Are we able, as a people of faith, to grow in the Spirit ?

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand. Isaac Penington in 1667 (*Quaker faith & practice*, 10.01)

Drafted by QCCIR, in consultation with QLCC and BYM Trustees
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