



Simpler Meetings Series

Moving Forwards Together

As we come to the end of the Simpler Meetings Series, we are going to spend a little time thinking about ways of moving forwards, together.

We've been focusing on the essentials of being Quaker worshipping communities, simplifying things by not giving so much weight to some of the additions and fixed ways.

Some of you may be thinking of a few smallish changes, perhaps adjustments to roles, that can make meetings simpler to run. Others may be thinking of more transformational changes, like working with other area meetings, or with neighbouring local meetings, or changes to buildings or structures, or using technology to come together – things that can bring quite a few wider benefits. These are all about doing things a little differently, laying down some things that can get in the way, to make more space for the spirit.

First I'm going to talk about using some Quaker processes, a bit about some obstacles you might meet, and then some practicalities that can help along the way.

Quaker Processes

Quaker values and ways recognise:

- We have different experiences of the Light
- We are valuing different perspectives
- Listening – to one another, & for the Spirit
- and trusting

So we are seeking ways of hearing the light, and being open to it. What will help with that?

One thing, which Quakers are keen on, is to take your time. I love that phrase: "Don't just do something – sit there!". You can also be active too.

Have spaces to reflect, share, imagine and create.

We want to be Spirit led, and we can be led by the spirit to act, to change.

Spending time exploring together is important. You could use some of these ways:

- Meetings for learning – learning together, so more people are on the same page, or have heard the same ideas
- Listening, by worship sharing on a theme
- Creative listening eg art, or responses to pictures or words or questions
- Informal discussions
- Discernment in Meeting for Worship for Business – likely several times, to find the right way

Before that stage:

- It can be very helpful to have a spiritual review as a meeting. This has been described as “thinking through together how we fulfil our purpose as a Quaker meeting”. Here’s a useful booklet about spiritual reviews:

Spiritual Review – in the eldership and oversight handbook series <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/spiritual-reviews-v3-eo-handbook-2012-edition>

You can also find it on the Eldership and Pastoral Care page of the BYM website.

It contains some really useful advice about questions you can consider together, like “What’s the ministry of our meeting?”, and how you can construct useful questions that help move you forwards.

- Threshing meetings are very well established methods. These are not for reaching decisions, but a form of preparation. People come together, and consider questions, share ideas and experiences, and can share strong feelings, while using Quaker discipline, with gentleness and love.

There’s a useful leaflet on threshing meetings on the BYM website, on the eldership and pastoral care page, and here:

<https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/threshing-meeting-guidance-2011>

- You might find raising something as a concern would be a Quaker way that can help too, to help test ideas and see whether they are ones that your meeting can unite in support of.

Throughout these processes, the role of eldership is important – making it visible, so people know and understand who is holding this, and being supportive, and not relying on the clerk to hold the discipline of the meeting.

Some more aspects of a process, that can help:

- Break the process into stages, not trying to do it all at once: perhaps “Now we’re exploring; now listening; now refining; now listening again, etc”
- Clarity about the process being used
- Clarity about the purpose – so everyone is together in knowing why you are undertaking this exploration: what is the purpose and the origins.
- Communicate – that it’s happening, share documents, help people know the routes for how they can be involved.

Opening discussions about change

- It can really help to be deliberately exploring ideas, rather than proposing fixed solutions. People can overly focus on one proposal. You may discover better ideas.
- Get agreement to explore, perhaps setting up a group tasked with finding possibilities, with permission to try and explore.
- Communicate that exploration is happening – avoid surprising people.
- Avoid an early proposal.
- Ask people for their ideas and views.
- Encourage people to read, watch, hear the same materials, or find different ones – could use these Simpler Meetings videos or transcripts, at www.quaker.org.uk/simpler
- Hear stories of how something has worked.
- Find out what other meetings do, or are considering – visit together, or do the exploring together as several meetings.

Who else to involve?

- People in your meeting
- As someone put it in one of our discussions: “Think about who your current ways may be excluding, and including. Who needs to be involved in the decision – just those who are currently included? Consult those excluded, and include them in decisions.”
- Think also about who needs to be included because they have a role, or will have things to say later on (!)
- Who would it be good to include from other meetings – nearby, in your area, or several areas, or afar

- You can use role-holder networks and email groups – AM clerks, elders, treasurers, trustees, etc
- You could explore as an area meeting. Or several areas together – that can help de-personalise things, and help people see they are not the only ones with similar issues, and you may find new possibilities.
- It can be helpful to have a small group to do some advance thinking.
- You can get help from local development workers, if you have one already – they can be especially helpful with Quaker practices.
- You can ask for help from BYM staff, by emailing supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk
- You may find Woodbrooke courses, or you could ask for a ‘Woodbrooke Where You Are’ session – something tailored to your situation, with a tutor who is used to helping meetings think things through together.
- You could have another friend from outside to clerk a meeting or a group, or facilitate the Quaker processes I covered earlier.
- These are all ways of involving other people – so we can follow a pathway together, not be an individual on a mission!

Now let's think about some **‘Obstacles on the path’**

- Absence of ideas / possibilities / permission:
 - You could use ideas and videos from this Series
 - Talking with other Quakers locally and all across Britain
- The belief that Quakerism has not been changing:
 - The Society of Friends has changed many times in its 360 plus years. Many of our ways of doing things are not the same as 100 years ago, or 50 years ago: it's in our tradition to gradually adjust some aspects, while staying true to a core.
- The ‘pillar of the meeting’ who resists all change (!)
 - Think about our approach to equality, and light coming from many places. As someone put it in one of these sessions: “We all need to uphold the process of discernment, which is where we are all heard equally and we do not listen more intently to one person over the other.”
- Things can get stuck when people use phrases like “That’s not Quakerly” or “That’s not in right ordering”. It can help to ask questions:
 - Tell me why? Tell me why you think that?

- Can you show me?
- Find out:
 - Is it something with the process?
 - Or don't you like the suggestion itself?

Untangling the process and the suggestion can be really helpful.

- Fear of losing something precious to us:
 - Is this about familiarity? Does it suit me? But what about other people – does it suit them?
 - You could ask “What’s the worst that could happen?” “What are you most worried about?” – and then address those.
 - More positively: ask “What is it most important that we keep?” Or “What is the underlying thing we want to keep, rather than the specifics?” This can bring us together, and help us see we want the same things, even if by slightly different means.
- See if people really have the views you think: someone in this series said: “I started thinking about the meeting house and I rang and spoke to people who I thought would be absolutely unhappy about talking about the meeting house and I was surprised at their responses.”
- Someone else reminded us:
 - “Think it possible that you or the other person might be mistaken. “
 - “Go away and think about it - again”
 - And a very good one: “Have food available.”

Now some more **practical tips and encouragements**

- A classic Quaker approach appears to be:
 - ‘Wait until they die’ ☺

And here’s another one:

 - ‘Wait until we are so few that change is forced upon us, outside our control’ ☺

(I don’t suggest those!)
- Gather and involve people – it’s a collective exploration, not an individual mission. Also, who are the influencers?

- Develop a vision of how it could be – get people thinking positively and imaginatively
- As someone contributed about meeting without a meeting house: “Focus on what you will gain, rather than what you might lose”
- Be clear why doing this differently is needed. Does everyone see it that way?
 - The Negatives, the Pushes: What’s not working? What’s causing this problem? What lies behind that?
 - The Positives, the Pulls: What could improve? What is the purpose of this change? What is the ministry of our meeting, or our buildings, etc?

Develop common ideas about the pushes and the pulls

- When you hit a problem, look for the assumptions people are making, and examine those (Examples like “We’re not supposed to change” or “The only way people can know we exist is by seeing our buildings”)
- Stay open, explore

It can help to have Options

- several, rather than 1
- Narrow down the options
- Address why you are not pursuing some options
- Be open to exploring more options
- Be clear: Is the status quo viable? Or not really an option?

Finding agreement

- Prioritise – what is most important here?
- Compromise can be wonderful in helping move forwards
- Find win:wins, where everyone gains
- Offer extra help to overcome a barrier – it can be worth the effort.

Not all in one go, and it’s not forever

- Pilot - Try something for a fixed time and review and learn
- Try an existing way and a new way in parallel
- Try a bit at a time (eg for *these* roles first)
- Let’s try it and see! (It can be better to try it out than spend a long time depending whether to)
- Take opportunities when they arise by accident, and learn from them – we are discovering so much during the pandemic

Or... You could always wait until they die, or until we are so few that change is forced upon us, which we cannot influence. ☺

In summary

- Possibilities, Permission, learning from the Pandemic,
- Potential: we are seeking new ways and new light
- Use Quaker processes well
- Communicate, Involve, Stay flexible, Experiment
- Keep listening for the promptings of the Spirit
- Remember, when searching for simpler meetings, we are seeking ways to make space for the Spirit

Videos and transcripts of the eight talks, and some more, are on the simpler meetings webpage of BYM's website:

www.quaker.org.uk/simpler

So you can show these to other people, and prompt discussions.

I hope you have found the Simpler Meetings Series useful, and you will be able to put into practice some of the ideas you have encountered here.

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