



Simpler Meetings Series

Simpler ways for Quaker roles

This talk is about ways that Quaker roles can become simpler to do, and simpler to fill.

When people have talked with me about difficulties with filling Quaker roles, there tend to be three main issues:

- Sometimes there's one particular role they can't fill – we can't find a clerk, or a treasurer, or trustees
- Sometimes it's the whole thing – we've not enough people to fill all these roles. We have to do something different.
- Sometimes it's the amount of work each is expected to do that's the problem.

(And sometimes it's all three!)

This isn't surprising, when we remember all the factors we considered in the fundamentals topic in this Series. We only have 2/3 of the number of members and attenders that we had 25 years ago - there's less people available - and they often have busier lives, and more are older. And some of the work has grown as our world is more regulated.

Fortunately, as I explained in the fundamentals topic, there are lots of possibilities, and a lot more permission to vary how things are done than some Quakers think.

Let's start with that role that you just can't find someone to fill.

One way is to share that role between more than one person. With co-clerks we can use people's different skills, and it's less lonely. You could have a clerk and assistant clerk, or two co-clerks – some area meetings now have four co-clerks, as a team.

Or you could divide up roles more formally. For example, for a treasurer, you could separate the bookkeeping aspect, the transactions, from looking at the overall financial position and making good use of our money. You might find someone can do the bookkeeping as their bit, but doesn't want to handle the decisions; and someone who does, but doesn't want to do the books.

Another good example is where a correspondence clerk deals with all the mail, and puts together the weekly notices, but doesn't become the clerk at the table for business meetings.

Often, things keep getting added to a role – perhaps a really helpful person kept taking on more tasks. It can help to go through the list of tasks for a role, and take out everything that could be done by someone else. For example:

- Does the clerk have to look after the website?
- Does the area meeting clerk really have to organise the programme of the learning session, or keep the contacts list?

Try and strip the list back to the essentials, and see who else can do the other tasks.

Sometimes, it's actually simpler to combine roles. Quite a few small meetings work well with three people holding most functions between them, working as a team.

Having a supporter or assistant can help – someone to call on when something needs doing. One area meeting clerk told me what a blessing it is to have someone she can ring to help her when she gets stuck with her IT.

Some meetings have a buddy system where you know you can ring up one or two people who've been there before, and understand how things are done. They might be in your own meeting, or another local or area meeting. A different perspective and experience can help.

Now a very important discovery I made is the role of cake! I surveyed area meeting treasurers and several of them said "We get together as a group of treasurers every six months over cake and coffee. We just talk through issues that people have got, in quite an informal way." So doing that with people from other meetings can be a very good way for informal support. And you get cake!

Quite a few area meetings are beginning to have a paid administrator. One near me is doing it on three hours a week – so not a big financial commitment. They cover things like membership matters, contacts lists, Gift Aid, or insurance - things that otherwise would land on the clerk, or the treasurer, or the clerk of trustees. One area meeting does this by adding some hours to a warden's role. There's also scope for paid support for treasurers and on property matters, which we'll cover in the topic on Simpler Ways for Trustees and Treasurers.

A bit of flexibility helps. One potential area meeting clerk said to me "There must be things we can do so I could take on this role, and make it more do-able. Do roles always need to be for three years? Perhaps if they were offered for one year with the potential to extend, people might be more prepared to take it on."

Then she said "It would make a real difference to me if I didn't have to be the clerk at every meeting - if I knew I could have a gap or step back". That is easier if you have co-clerks. Of course, if you hold fewer area meetings, then that's less of a

commitment for the clerk – some AMs hold business meetings four times a year, one has moved to three times a year.

Holding committees or business meetings online can cut out a great load of travelling time, and open up opportunities to include people who don't have space in their lives for a whole evening or whole days.

So, there are lots of possibilities for reducing the work, sharing the load, and being more flexible. Overall, people are more likely to say yes to taking on a role, and keep with it, and enjoy it, when it feels more do-able.

Now let's look at when your problem is "so many roles, so few people".

It can really help to get out the list of all the roles, and take a good look together.

Ask: do we need so many of a particular role? For example, there's an area meeting that was struggling to fill all of its 16 trustees - plenty of area meetings have 8, and some 6. Do we need to have quite as many elders etc? Do we need to have two representatives to this body - could we make do with one? We may have to reduce or lay down some roles altogether, and focus on things that are most important.

Could we share some role-holders with another area meeting? For example, we have 70 area meetings across Britain and they all need to have a registering officer, and most have an assistant registering officer, so that's about 140 people learning how the process works. In 2018 in Britain Yearly Meeting we had 27 marriages. Do we need 140 people preparing for 27 marriages? Could we share between areas? Maybe have a registering officer from one area meeting and an assistant registering officer from another? They could both be appointed by both area meetings. (It's allowed!).

For safeguarding, could some aspects be shared across two area meetings? Perhaps several AMs could pay someone to help them all with safeguarding?

Just talking to people in other meetings can be enlightening. Often one meeting has some particular way of doing things, or some roles that are a product of a special circumstance in the past (or one person). Discovering other meetings do things differently, can be quite liberating.

About a third of local meetings have some form of corporate or collective pastoral care or eldership system, rather than only named roles. That may well be worth considering.

Some meetings are reflecting on quite how much Quaker time and energy are taken up with having a meeting house: there's a premises committee, a warden's manager and support group; the treasurer has much less to do without a meeting house, same for trustees, and clerks. 30% of local meetings in Britain don't have a meeting house to look after, and are able to travel lightly as a result.

And on a bigger scale, ultimately some area meetings are now concluding that they just can't manage to continue in their current size, and are seeking to merge part or all of their structures – a later topic in this Series.

I want to finish up with a wholly different take on roles and tasks.

A lot of meetings fill roles in a very traditional way: “Here is a role. Here is the stack of tasks we expect this role to do. Here is another stack of tasks for another role. And another stack of tasks for another.” Then they try and find the person who can do all the tasks in one stack. That can be hard. It is rather like a jigsaw puzzle where we are trying to find a person of the special shape to fit into the particular space in the puzzle.

Instead, some meetings have been saying “Let's get the tasks out of their stacks and lay them out on the table. Let's see who we've got, who's interested in or could be good at various tasks. Can we match up the tasks with the people more flexibly?” That can work better than “All these 10 tasks have to be done by this non-existent person.”

Here's a real life example, from a meeting in the South East of England.

They had no Friend prepared to serve as local meeting clerk, nor any Friend prepared to clerk or be nominated for a premises committee. They have eight “active” people, some are members, some attenders. They listed out the essential tasks and responsibilities, and discussed them as a group. They produced a list of premises tasks and clerking tasks, with different people taking some of them.

So one person deals with housekeeping and kitchen supplies, the contents of the fridge, electrical testing, and gardening matters. Someone else deals with the noticeboards inside and out. Someone takes responsibility for health and safety and risk assessments. One person handles fire alarm testing and equipment maintenance. Another takes central heating and plumbing issues.

You see how they've gone “I could do that bit”.

For the clerk's responsibilities, they now have a rota of 6 people who clerk their two-monthly business meetings, and one of two people assists the clerk at the table, which gives continuity and confidence. The clerk for those two months covers correspondence, agendas and liaising with the area meeting clerk. Meanwhile, one person gathers information for the notices each week. One prepares reports asked for by area meeting. One manages the website, another is the safeguarding verifier. Nobody is doing the whole thing.

They've found a way that matches the people they have. They are all involved.

I hope this trot through the many ways we can do roles differently will be helpful.

In summary:

- share out the work
- be prepared to be flexible
- look for ways to support people, with volunteers and paid people,
- be prepared to stop doing some things
- or change how they are done, or structures
- consider the Quaker time spent on your meeting house
- and you might try sharing out the tasks, rather than fixed roles.

Jonathan Carmichael
March 2021