

Simpler meetings – fundamentals, possibilities and permission

Introduction

This document is about possibilities. It shares many ideas collected from Quakers around Britain about how we can simplify the way we organise ourselves. You can find more topics here: www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. For each topic there is a document and a short video. All the topics are collected in “*Simpler Meetings – what is possible*”, which also explains ways you can approach the topics.

What is the Simpler Meetings project for?

It is trying to answer the questions:

- How can we reduce the burden of administration landing on a small number of Friends?
- How can we do things differently to release time for spiritual matters, for witness in the world, for outreach, for building community and generally ‘having a life’?

People all round the Society of Friends have been recognising we do face some problems. But there are also many possibilities being used already or being worked on. The project aims to find some of those and share them with other Quakers. We know some Quaker ways of doing things are very simple. Other Quaker ways are not so simple!

The project started with a strong focus on area meeting level roles, particularly area meeting clerks, treasurers and trustees. That is because the pressure can be greatest there. If that layer of the Quaker structure crumbles, we face a big problem as a Society. But in talking with Quakers up and down Britain, it has become clear that many of the possibilities for an area meeting are very transferable to local meetings too. There is a section at the end specifically focused on small local meetings.

Can you sum up the situation in a nutshell?

The burden of administration is lying on the shoulders of a small number of Quakers, often in their 70s and 80s. At the same time there is another group of Quakers who find difficulty connecting with the ways in which we do some things. So they tend to stand back. That means the system is at times creaking and sometimes may snap. And if we continue just with the ways we currently do things, things are likely to get worse.

Is there any hope?

Yes, there is lots of hope. There are lots of possible ways of doing things that are already being used in different ways around the country. Many Quakers are involved in thinking through how that can be done well. One of the great strengths of the Society of Friends is that over the centuries we have been good at questioning things. We are good at finding new ways and new light. We need to do this now, because we are a different people from how we were several centuries ago.

How are we different now?

Compared with only one generation ago, or two generations ago, a lot more of us are the only Quaker in our families. Many of us are also older than we used to be! People are joining as adults and particularly in older adulthood. So perhaps they don't come with the depth of understanding and the familiarity that we used to assume. As a group we are smaller than we were. Over the last ten years the number of members and attenders has fallen by 14 percent. Around us, society is now more secular. It is much more regulated than it has been. Lives are much busier. We have new technologies. Many more women are in the paid workforce than two generations ago. People are retiring later and so are less available. And many grandparents have more childcare commitments than two generations ago. So we need to think about new ways of doing things, to liberate us from some of our burdens, to release the joy of being a Quaker.

What have you found, talking to Friends around Britain?

It has been absolutely fascinating. I have been discovering there is a great deal of variety. This might be about our geography, or the size of our area meeting or local meetings. It could be our meeting houses, their age or location, or whether there's a meeting house at all – over a quarter of local meetings in Britain do not have a meeting house. There are also new expressions of Quakerism, people whose Quakerism is more about informal connections, with gatherings or online connections or special interest groups rather than the local meeting being the only way they relate to Quakerism.

There is also great variety in the way that area meetings are organised. I have been a Quaker most of my life and in four different area meetings. I had no idea until I started this project that you could hold area meetings on a Saturday! It just had not been in my experience. They were always on a Sunday, or perhaps on a Tuesday night.

I mention that because I keep finding there are Quakers who are very sure that *this* is the right way to do things and *this* is the way it's *always* been done, and this is the way it *should* be done. Yet in the next area along or the next meeting along, people are also sure *that* is the way to do things and *that's* the way it's *always* been done. Yet this one's way is not the same as the other one's way! So there's a paradox there, I think.

How can we respond to this variety?

Somebody helpfully put it recently that there is not one Quaker way, but there are many Quaker principles, and we should focus on those. This is not about finding one-size-fits-all solutions, but multiple possibilities. We are creating a menu which people can look at, consider for their own circumstances, then choose from the menu, as you would do in a restaurant – sometimes a little, sometimes more.

Are we allowed to do things differently?

We are. There is a lot more permission around than you might have thought - certainly more than I thought when I started. In '*Quaker faith & practice*' we have a lot of permission to find the right way for our circumstances. The lists there very rarely say "You must do this in this way". It is more about how you might consider approaching things.

I sat down with the people who are the "guardians" of our Church government, Paul Parker as Recording Clerk and Michael Booth as Church Government Advisor. I asked them "Is it really possible to do this? Can people do it like that? How come this is being done in this way?" Their repeated response has been: go back to the principles. Is this in line with our general way of approaching things, rather than the specific fine detail?

We also have the opportunity in the revision of the Book of Discipline to record afresh the variety of ways in which things are being done, which work in people's experience.

There are many possibilities, and a lot more permission than we often think.

Is this just about organising?

There are other sides to this too. It is worth investing time in developing our spiritual lives, learning together about the depth of Quaker ways, and building our Quaker communities.

Often there is much to be gained from reminding ourselves (or learning more) about the spiritual roots of the ways that Quakers do things.

Getting to know one another as a community is also key to working well together, especially when things are changing.

Focusing only on processes and structures is unlikely to be fruitful without these other elements.

Finally, change takes time, needs plenty of communication, and requires careful discernment.

Questions to consider:

- What burdens are we carrying?
- What would I do if I could spend less time on Quaker administration?
- Do we see a need to change?
- How do I feel about there being many possibilities, not just one (my) way?
- If I think some new idea is impossible, should I say “It cannot work because of this”, or can I be more constructive with “We need to consider how to take account of this factor”?
- Do we have permission to change?
- Where should we start? What should we prioritise?

Can you help?

The Simpler Meetings project is gathering and sharing ways that Quakers find work well for them. The aim is to liberate the joy of being a Quaker. You can learn more at www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. Please send your ideas and suggestions to Jonathan Carmichael, Simpler Meetings Project Manager at JonathanC@Quaker.org.uk.

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