

## Small Quaker meetings – what could be simpler?!

We have a lot more permission to do things differently than some Quakers think. A lot of what is contained in *Quaker faith & practice* is advisory, rather than being a set of firm rules. There are lots of **possibilities**, and plenty of **permission**.

One person said this in a discussion about simpler meetings: *“I am often told that this or that is the Quaker way, but other than what is in Quaker Faith & Practice, it mostly this turns out to be just the preference of the person I am talking to, and often contradicts what the last person said. I think there is loads of scope for us to try different approaches, and every time I have a good idea someone tells me either that it is recommended in Qf&p or that it is something lots of other meetings are doing.”*

So for example 4.33 begins *“Local meetings differ greatly in size. Thus the scope of work undertaken will vary but every local meeting will give due respect to Quaker values, testimonies and practice and will provide regular opportunities for public worship.”*

As another Friend said recently: *“There is not one Quaker way but many, while there are underlying Quaker principles”*.

Many of the sections in *Quaker Faith & Practice* give quite a lot of scope for variation. 4.33 goes on *“The following responsibilities need to be considered by every local meeting although some of them may best be fulfilled in conjunction with another local meeting, or through the area meeting”*.

Here are four key things to remember, particularly for small meetings:

- You don't have to do everything.
- You don't have to do everything yourselves, on your own.
- You don't have to do things the way a larger meeting or your last meeting does things.
- You don't have to have lots of roles – many things can be worked out by talking together to sort out the essentials.

So what is **essential**, to be a local meeting? There seem to be six key things:

- Meeting for Worship that is open to the public,
- Being known and found – publicised, visible and easily found on the ground,
- Being a community – welcoming, doing, learning and caring together,
- Being connected to other Quakers – through area and neighbouring meetings, and wider ways,
- Having a clerk or a convenor – a clerk is not essential, though business meetings do need to be clerked,

- Holding business meetings with the Quaker method, to make corporate decisions – though this does not have to be every month, or even three months.

Everything else can be worked out, locally and with your area meeting and neighbouring local meetings. Other appointments “*may be found helpful*” (4.36), and there can be “*Friends to share these responsibilities*” (4.35).

Notice that you do not always have to have a treasurer. Some small meetings do not use money themselves at all. Perhaps they have their rent paid by another meeting or area meeting, or they use a free venue. Friends can make their contributions direct to area meeting. Some meetings have their few transactions recorded within the accounts of another meeting (area or local) and avoid needing a treasurer. Perhaps you could share a treasurer, or have someone do the bookkeeping aspect.

Another surprising possibility is to have one business meeting which covers two or three small public meetings for worship. Technically, this makes them a single local meeting, with two or three venues. This is rather like a larger meeting which has a meeting on Sunday and one on Wednesday - all part of the one local meeting. The Recording Clerk’s Office has confirmed that yes, this is possible!

Perhaps the biggest way in which small meetings can simplify things is to meet without a meeting house. Over a quarter of our local meetings in Britain Yearly Meeting do this, in a whole variety of buildings, and many are thriving. They do not need to have people focusing on maintenance or lettings; there are fewer decisions to be made; nobody manages or supports a warden; and the treasurer’s load is dramatically reduced. Of course, using someone else’s space does sometimes bring constraints. The meeting may also need to pay more attention to being known, and building a sense of identity. Since 126 local meetings in Britain meet without a meeting house, maybe you could find a meeting space that works well for you.

There are lots of ***possibilities*** that small meetings could consider, and ways that area meeting and neighbouring meetings can help. Take a look at the questions on the next few pages. To help us think about this, there is also a list of challenges that may face local meetings.

### **Can you help?**

The Simpler Meetings Project is gathering and sharing ways that small meetings find work well for them. This is alongside the project’s main focus on how to relieve the burdens on area meetings and their role-holders. The aim is to liberate the joy of being a Quaker.

Do send your ideas and suggestions to Jonathan Carmichael: [JonathanC@Quaker.org.uk](mailto:JonathanC@Quaker.org.uk).

## **Possibilities for small meetings**

Which of these might be valuable for your meeting?

### **Overall**

- Can we accept that small meetings don't have to do everything the way a large or medium sized meeting does? Or the way my last meeting did things?
- Shall we focus on the essentials?
  - Public meeting for worship
  - Being known and found
  - Being a community
  - Being connected to other Quakers
  - Having a clerk or a convenor
  - Taking decisions using the Quaker business method
- Are we caring for the spiritual life of our meeting, along with the practical side?
- Would it help if we had a shared piece of witness, to give us a common purpose?
- Shall we re-frame the situation with positives (instead of doom and gloom)?
- Are there some things we cannot do ourselves or alone? Eg running special events or providing representatives on other groups. There may be alternatives.

### **When and where we meet**

- Could we try experimenting with meeting at a different time or place?
- Should we hold fewer Meetings for Worship eg twice a month? Or more often?
- How about holding house meetings? eg once a month, or two months. These could be combined with eating meetings and business meetings.

### **With other meetings**

- Can we handle some topics jointly with another local meeting, or two?  
Eg learning, discussions, socials, some roles, buddies, suppliers?
- Could we pair up with a small meeting, and meet on alternate Sundays?
- Could we pair up with a larger meeting, and do some things together?
- Would it help to have Friends come from other meetings, as inter-visitations?
- Could we ask for and accept help from other meetings and area meeting?
- Could we undertake our witness in the world with other faith groups?

### **Roles**

- Could we match tasks to people's skills and availability, instead of fitting people into fixed roles which each have a long list of set tasks?
- Can we reduce the number of roles to be filled? Do they all need doing? Do they need doing this way? Are there some tasks where people would pitch in where needed, less formally?
- Could a role be shared? Or rotated?
- Could we have a convenor not clerk, and rotate the clerking of business meetings.
- Could we ask a team of three to cover the main functions between them?
- Might we move to a more collective approach to eldership and oversight? Variations include joining roles, corporate E&O, corporate oversight, loops, circles or groups.
- Could we appoint people for one year?
- Could we re-appoint people to roles after they have had a triennium break?

- Is there an element that could be done by someone who is paid? eg some property matters, or lettings.

### **Communicating**

- Could we use a telephone tree or an email tree, to help connectivity? Or an email newsletter or a round-robin email?
- Could we have printing buddies, to help people who don't use emails?
- Shall we sometimes use video calls? Or telephone conference calls? They often save time, travel costs, carbon emissions, and include people who cannot travel.
- Can we use online methods for learning and building community?
- Could we use video calls to enable joining worship at a distance or when unwell?

### **Making decisions**

- Are there some discussions or small decisions that could happen informally, outside the business meeting?
- Could we trust individuals, or pairs, to make small decisions and take actions on some things, instead of bringing everything to a business meeting?
- Could we hold meeting for worship for business less frequently – perhaps every three months, adding ones when needed? Some schedule just one per year.

### **Scaling down our organising**

- Can we scale down some aspects, to match our numbers?
- Would a few key books and leaflets be read more than a library that is a burden?
- Do we really need lots of rotas? Will people step in for what is really necessary?
- Could one person cover several duties on Sunday week?

### **Doing money differently**

- Would it help to have a paid bookkeeper, locally or for the area?
- Could we place a meeting's finances within a larger meeting's accounts, or the area meeting's, avoiding the need for a treasurer and separate accounting?
- Can we reduce or avoid using cash, using online banking and direct debits?
- Can we avoid using money at all? Eg another meeting pays a few bills; contributions go direct to AM; charity collections go direct to the charity?

### **Buildings**

- Where would be a good place for us to meet?
- Could we meet without a meeting house - like over ¼ of local meetings in Britain? No maintenance, no lettings, fewer decisions, no-one to manage, and much less work for a treasurer. Can we find out how others manage it and yet thrive?
- Can we use our meeting house for another main purpose, and use the rent?
- Could we pay an organisation for some property management and maintenance?

### **Joining another meeting**

- Could we join two or three small meetings into one local meeting, with a single business meeting, while holding meetings for worship in different places?
- Should we consider whether it is right to lay down (close) our meeting here, and join up with others?

## **What can area meetings and other local meetings do to help?**

### **Overall**

- Can we accept that small meetings don't have to do everything the way a large or medium sized meeting does?
- Can we help small meetings to focus on the essentials?
- Do we recognise the strengths and joys of small meetings?

### **Doing things together**

- Can we handle some topics jointly? Eg learning, discussions, socials, some roles, buddies, suppliers.
- Would it help to have clusters of local meetings & worshipping groups for these?
- Could meetings pair up? Small with small; or small with larger.
- Could we appoint shared roles between meetings? Eg making appointments from larger meetings, who include the smaller meeting in their considerations.
- Could we arrange inter-visitations? Eg Once a year other local meetings send Friends to attend MfW at the small local meeting. Eg Arrange inter-visitation between several meetings monthly, with a small presence left in each meeting.
- Could several small meetings become one local meeting with a single business meeting, while holding several meetings for worship in different places.
- Could we organise premises maintenance across several meeting houses, with the same approaches and finding tradespeople from the same source?
- Would it help to have a paid bookkeeper for some meetings or the area?
- Could we place a meeting's finances within a larger meeting's accounts, or the area meeting's, avoiding the need for a treasurer and separate accounting?
- Can we help a meeting avoid using money at all? Eg another meeting pays a few bills; contributions go direct to AM; charity collections go direct to the charity.
- How do we respond when asked for help?

### **Adjusting expectations**

- Are we open to different ways of filling roles, or doing tasks?
- Shall we excuse small meetings from hosting area events?
- Could we have a representative at area meeting covering two small local meetings?
- Should we hold meetings like elders & overseers at the same event as area meeting, reducing travel and events?
- Can we make greater use of video calls and telephone conference calls? They often save time, travel costs, carbon emissions, and include people more easily.
- Could we help meetings to use video calls to include people in meeting for worship?
- Do our models of eldership or oversight work well for small meetings?
- Can we reduce what must be done by each local meeting, by sharing, grouping, agreeing and deleting?
- Shall we clarify expectations between area and local meetings, with a memorandum of understanding, which reflects different circumstances?

## **Some particular challenges for small meetings**

- Maintaining and growing a strong shared spiritual life outside meetings for worship and business.
- Keeping good communications between ourselves; some do not drive or have computers, or live a long way away.
- Passing on Quaker ethos and methods when there are few members acting as role models and patterns, in both meetings for worship and business.
- Filling roles within local meeting e.g. treasurer or clerk, and fulfilling the responsibility for eldership and oversight, also for such things as funerals, safeguarding, data protection, possibly children attending, dealing with postal communications from Britain Yearly Meeting and email from within area meeting.
- Straightforward but important responsibilities like opening premises and preparing the room for Meeting.
- Practical tasks like cleaning, maintenance, upkeep of grounds.
- Keeping good links with area meeting and trustees so as to be kept up to date with activities and responsibilities.
- Preparing reports for trustees and area meeting.
- Maintaining a presence at area groups such as nominations, conflict resolution, contributing time and skills to the area.
- Travelling long distances to area meetings, to Quaker events and to support other meetings.
- Travelling on Sundays: poor public transport and few able to give lifts.
- Holding area meeting, and annual events such as Quaker Week.
- Caring for people who are unwell or going through a crisis: a small meeting can be affected more by peaks and troughs.
- Losing a key role-holder, perhaps moving away or to ill-health, can leave a bigger gap.