

# Yearly Meeting 2024



## Continuing our work on Quaker structures – discerning the future for Yearly Meeting

The Group to Review Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Gathering & Meeting for Sufferings (GRYYM) has already talked through a lot of questions with Friends. The group thought it might help to share some of the answers that have come out of those conversations.

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## Before we go into the changes, what is Meeting for Sufferings and who goes to it at the moment?

You can read all about Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) in *Quaker faith & practice* [chapter 7. Paragraph 7.02](#) lists its 19 separate functions.

In a nutshell, MfS is the standing representative body that takes care of matters affecting Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) and that makes decisions and issues statements on behalf of BYM in between Yearly Meeting (YM) sessions.

We sometimes describe MfS as ‘YM between YMs’ but it doesn’t have all the powers of YM. MfS cannot make constitutional changes, it cannot define the position of Quakers in Britain on key issues, and it cannot instruct trustees or staff.

Only appointed representatives and certain named people can attend MfS. Every area meeting has a representative. Other bodies represented are Young Friends General Meeting, General Meeting for Scotland, Crynwr Cymru – Quakers in Wales, and our central & standing committees. All BYM trustees are also members. The Recording Clerk, Deputy Recording Clerk and the other senior employed staff attend *ex officio*. You can read more about membership of MfS and area meeting representatives in *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraphs 7.05-7.06](#).

## And what are the responsibilities of BYM trustees?

BYM trustees are responsible to the Yearly Meeting for the right stewardship of its work, assets and property. As charity trustees, they are also legally responsible for the general control and management of the administration of the affairs of Britain Yearly Meeting.

BYM trustees work for the yearly meeting in the same sort of way that area meeting trustees work for their area meeting. They have overall legal responsibility for employment, finance, land and buildings, safeguarding, health & safety, data protection and other aspects of legal compliance. Most of the detailed work on these issues is done by staff, but the responsibility for ensuring that the work is done well lies ultimately with the trustees.

BYM trustees are Quakers nominated by Central Nominations Committee and appointed by Yearly Meeting.

They are accountable to the whole Yearly Meeting and they give reports to YM in session.

The review group was not asked to review the role or remit of BYM trustees as they were last reviewed in 2021 (having previously been reviewed in 2011 and 2016).

## Is this the right time for change? It feels like there is far more important work for Quakers to be doing!

This review was requested some time ago. In 2023 Yearly Meeting (YM) asked for more detailed proposals for change; Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) endorsed these in March 2024.

We need our structures to work well to support our work and our community. Making changes to our structures that enable us to work better is time well spent.

Difficulties with our current structure are hampering our work. The current triangular structure (YM, BYM trustees, MfS) is complicated and there is duplication of effort without clear lines of accountability. The system only works thanks to much time and effort put in by staff and Quaker role holders.

MfS is different from YM and does not have all the powers of YM. Some issues come to MfS that will ultimately need a decision by YM in session. That can mean duplication of discernment with little positive impact on our work. A more streamlined process would leave more time and energy to work on important issues.

Very importantly, MfS cannot hold BYM trustees to account – it can ask questions and receive information, but it cannot direct their work.

MfS is asked to set the priorities for the centrally managed work. It has to work alongside BYM trustees to do this which can sometimes lead to frustration and/or uncertainty about who is making the final decision. Significant policy shifts will usually require a decision by YM and the day-to-day planning and programming of work is done by staff and committees closer to the work. If MfS asked for a new work priority it could be unclear how this could be translated into action. A decision would be needed about what work to suspend. YM, BYM trustees, committees and staff would all need to be involved before the change could be implemented.

Taking MfS out of the structure makes it much clearer that important discernment happens at YM, with BYM trustees and other committees turning that discernment into action.

Change is happening all the time & we can't choose to make that stop; we can only choose to make changes that will serve us best.

## Meeting for Sufferings is an important part of our history – should we really lay it down?

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) has existed since 1675. During that time it has changed a lot (see *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraph 7.01](#)). Does it still provide what we need from our central structures?

The original MfS concerned itself with working to change laws and otherwise resolve issues affecting Quakers. The members were wealthy London Friends (all men) who met weekly to coordinate their efforts. In the 18th & early 19th centuries some work was given to subcommittees, including work on slavery.

Over time, MfS became an appointed representative body of Friends from across the country. In the 20th century it took over responsibility for all work associated with the Yearly

Meeting. In 1974 all YM staff became employees of MfS, which thus became the trustee body for the Society.

In 2006, when we agreed to appoint trustees for the centrally managed work, the role of MfS mainly became developing a long-term vision for the Yearly Meeting, although it also kept many of its historic roles.

No other committees from the 17th century still exist. We should remember *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraph 8.23](#): “Each generation of Friends has been faced with a structure in some respects untidy... our continual task is to ensure that our structures are in harmony with the changing tides of life in Britain Yearly Meeting.”

We will continue to use the Prison & Court Register to record those who are subject to legal action for their faith. We will continue to lobby for legislative and other changes to society and to encourage Friends to take action on matters of faith. All the other important modern functions of MfS will also continue to be conducted by Yearly Meeting and other bodies like Agenda Committee and central or standing committees.

Friends who have served as representatives to MfS have spoken of this service as a privilege and they may feel sad that this is to end. The hope is that widening participation in decision making will offer more Friends that privilege.

### Could we stop being a charity and simplify our structures that way?

Some Friends are concerned that being a charity makes it more difficult for us to work in the way that is best for us. They sometimes ask whether we could stop being a charity to give us more freedom.

It isn't possible for Quakers in Britain to stop being a charity. The work that we do is fundamentally charitable. Whether we like it or not, legitimate religious organisations are charitable by definition in England, Wales and Scotland.

Some Friends think that Britain Yearly Meeting became a charity in 2006 but that isn't correct. We were already a charity and what changed were the rules around registration of charities. We registered as a charity in 2006 but we did not suddenly become a new kind of entity. All our area meetings are also charities, even though not all of them are registered.

The need for registration is determined by the income and assets a charity has. Very small charitable organisations can be informal, unincorporated associations and don't have to register with anyone – but the individual members are personally responsible for any debts and contractual obligations. Britain Yearly Meeting has a lot of money and property and it needs a way to hold these. It also needs to be able to do things like take out insurance, enter into contracts, and work in partnership with other organisations. For an organisation of our size, and generally for our area meetings, there are limited options for how to do this.

Although charity regulation can feel onerous at times, it is also an effective way to ensure charities remain accountable to their beneficiaries. As Quakers we may assume that we will conduct our affairs in a transparent and honourable way. Being a charity and filing the necessary reports helps to show those that we work with that we really are doing this.

Some Friends think that if we were willing to give up certain tax advantages then we could de-register as a charity and do things our own way. That isn't true. All our money and property has to be used for charitable purposes, so if we were trying to stop being a charity then we would have to give all of it away to another charity (one that we weren't in control of). But even then, we would still be a charity! We might be so small (in terms of income and wealth) that we would be exempt from registration, but we would still be a charitable organisation.

In any case, being a charity does not significantly limit Quaker activity. There are rules and regulations that constrain us, many of which are not specific to charities e.g. laws about employment, health & safety, and safeguarding. Generally, we recognise that the aims of these laws are to protect certain groups of people and we accept the need to comply with them. Charities cannot engage in party-political activity, but wider political engagement is allowed. Many campaigning charities exist and BYM works with many of them while maintaining its charitable status.

### Do we really need trustees?

We need a meeting of Friends to take responsibility for all the things that trustees are currently responsible for. Even if there were no external charity regulator, Quakers would want to know that their money was being used prudently, that their staff were being treated properly, that their buildings were being maintained etc. We need Friends to take responsibility for stewardship of the varied riches that have been granted to us.

Some Friends are unhappy because they feel we only started having named trustees because external state regulators told us to. They wonder if we should have resisted this pressure and done things our own way.

Before 2006, there were no named trustee bodies locally or for the Yearly Meeting. However, there were always Friends who were responsible for stewardship and for making the decisions necessary for ensuring good stewardship. At Yearly Meeting level those Friends were the members of MfS, which at the time was over 200 people. It was difficult for that body to exercise effective stewardship over the Yearly Meeting's resources. In practice, many important administrative decisions were made by a smaller committee or by staff.

In 2020-21, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, important decisions had to be made quickly and without wide consultation. If MfS had still been acting as a trustee body, it would have been very difficult for it to meet and make decisions within the constraints operating at the time. In all likelihood, the Recording Clerk and the clerk of MfS would have made most of those decisions with very limited reference to other Friends. Having a group of named trustees with clear responsibility for the consequences of decisions meant that there was more involvement of Friends and staff were kept more accountable.

## What options did the GRYYM group rule out before making its proposals?

GRYYM identified issues with the relationships between YM, MfS and BYM trustees. In our structural diagrams (e.g. in *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraph 8.05](#)) BYM trustees and MfS are located next to each other, below YM. When looking at that visual representation, GRYYM started to think about whether moving bodies around would help.

GRYYM felt there were three options:

- Keep MfS and BYM trustees next to each other, but clarify their respective responsibilities;
- Move BYM trustees to place them 'above' MfS (i.e. make MfS accountable to BYM trustees);
- Move MfS to place it 'above' BYM trustees by merging it with YM.

Clarification of responsibilities sounded like the easiest option, but this has been attempted before. In fact, clarification would not be enough since there are areas where the work overlaps. Responsibilities would need to change, meaning that the relative positions in the structure would also have to change.

Placing BYM trustees above MfS would mean MfS would act like a consultative body for trustees. That didn't feel like an attractive option. The costs (in time and money) of convening MfS are only justified if MfS is doing an important job. This change would also make it look like trustees were gaining more power, and that would be a concern to some Friends.

Placing MfS above BYM trustees made the most sense. Because trustees are appointed by the members, they have to be accountable to a body that is open to the whole membership (i.e. Yearly Meeting), so if we want to make this change it means that we will have to merge MfS and YM.

## Isn't some creative tension a good thing in a structure – doesn't it help to keep things in balance?

When GRYYM looked at the relationships between YM, MfS and BYM trustees, the group didn't find creative tension, but difficulties and duplication.

In everyday language, 'tension' implies pulling in different directions. That is not the case with our structures. More often there is friction when two different bodies feel they should each be doing a particular task – such as setting the strategic direction of the centrally managed work. Both BYM trustees and MfS have a role in this process, but it is not clear how they should work together. This friction can be managed, but that takes a lot of time and energy and doesn't improve the quality of discernment or the impact of work.

GRYYM also found duplication. Quaker discernment does not require that the same issues must be discerned and re-discerned by slightly different groups of Friends. At present, when MfS decides something important it may need to be discerned again by YM. It could be better for the discernment to happen once at YM, where all voices may be heard.

## Meeting for Sufferings representatives prepare well for meetings – if everything is left to Yearly Meeting, what if there are a lot of people there who don't know what's going on?

Friends attending Yearly Meeting are asked to prepare for the sessions and much time and thought goes into preparing papers and other materials to help with that.

We can't stop Friends from just turning up at YM without knowing much about the agenda. But we can trust the discipline and expect them not to minister without being sure it is a contribution that the whole meeting needs to hear.

We want to hear different perspectives, and that includes hearing from Friends who are not steeped in our history and institutions – if they are listening carefully their contributions will be as helpful as anyone's.

We shouldn't expect Friends to treat YM as a free for all and if we do have concerns about the discipline in the meeting we can work with our clerks and elders to support it better.

## Won't these changes mean we lose our national representative body?

Yearly Meeting is where our major national decisions are made and that is not changing.

There will no longer be one meeting primarily for area meeting & committee representatives. But there will still be representation. GRYYM recommends that area meetings send representatives to the continuing YM and ask them to report back – this would help ensure continuity for YM and help meetings feel connected to centrally managed work.

Some Friends worry that this won't be as good as having a MfS rep but that will be up to each area meeting. They could use similar criteria for nominating their rep and they could schedule reporting back from YM just as they do for MfS now.

Some Friends are worried about losing the 'voice of area meetings'. MfS is a voice for Quakers nationally, not solely area meetings. Most of its members are nominated by area meetings but the purpose of MfS is not to be a body that represents those area meetings – it is there to represent all Friends throughout the Yearly Meeting. We ask each area meeting to nominate someone as a mechanism to help provide a diverse set of voices from all areas of BYM. At a continuing YM we will have representatives from area meetings as well as other Friends.

With a continuing YM, area meetings will still be able to share their discernment with the wider body of Friends by sending in their minutes – these would go to YM (to be considered by Agenda Committee in the first instance) rather than to MfS.

Some Friends have expressed confusion about how things will work when there is a mix of appointed representatives and interested individuals attending these important business meetings. However, this is not new for Yearly Meeting. In the past, area meetings were required to appoint representatives to YM and their names were minuted in a YM session – YM was also open to all members and to attenders by request. Area meetings are no longer



required to appoint reps, but *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraph 6.12](#) reminds each area meeting to ensure that a sufficient number of Friends will undertake to be present.

Other Friends are worried about who will pay the costs of attending – this definitely needs sorting out. There will need to be a solution that ensures that area meetings and individual Friends aren't unable to attend because of lack of funds or penalised as they are further away from the venue. Creating this solution was not part of the GRYYM remit – GRYYM has recommended that work is done to resolve this issue.

## What is a concern? What if my meeting has one?

When Quakers say they have or hold a concern about something, we mean something more than being interested in or worried about it – we sometimes talk about this as being a 'concern with a capital C'. When we have a Quaker concern, it means that we feel we are being led by the spirit to do something.

To know if what is in our hearts is a Quaker concern or not, we have to spend time in contemplation or prayer. If personal discernment leads you to feel that you have a Quaker concern then you may want to share it with other Quakers – maybe because you want their support with personal action you will undertake, or because you think their active involvement is also needed. In that case you can ask your Quaker community to help discern whether your concern can and should go further.

You can read more about Quaker concerns in *Quaker faith & practice* [paragraphs 13.02 to 13.07](#).

If your Quaker community unites with your concern then it may be able to take the concern further by itself. However, if the concern is bigger than that community, it will need to go to a wider group of Quakers for more discernment. Local meetings can send minutes about their concerns to area meetings. Area meetings can then send their concerns to MfS or Yearly Meeting. If we lay down MfS then area meetings will still be able to send concerns to Yearly Meeting.

## And how can we get something onto the Yearly Meeting agenda?

The agenda for YM is discerned by YM Agenda Committee (YMAC). You can read more about YMAC and the planning of the YM agenda in *Quaker faith & practice* [chapter 6](#).

The agenda for YM will cover some or all of the following: nominations and appointments; reports (including from BYM trustees); constitutional decisions (e.g. to lay down a committee); discernment of YM positions (e.g. as recently in relation to gender diversity or anti-racism); consideration of wide topics (e.g. in 2023 truth & integrity). There will be time for worship throughout. As well as business sessions, there will be time for community building and for exploration of topics in other ways (e.g. via discussion or creative methods). YMAC has the job of balancing all these things to create an appropriate agenda for each YM session.

YMAC gets ideas for agenda items from a range of committees and groups. Area meetings can also send minutes to YMAC suggesting items for the YM agenda. In recent years very few suggestions have come from area meetings to YMAC.

If we move to a continuing YM there will still be a committee to discern the agenda and area meetings will still be able to send in their suggestions for that. Brand new ideas that have not been widely shared within other Quaker forums before will probably not go straight onto a YM agenda – business items need to be properly tested and prepared otherwise it is very difficult for a large meeting to make progress with discerning them. However, Agenda Committee might make suggestions about how those ideas could be shared and tested by the area meeting that has put them forward. During that sharing and testing process then the issue might be resolved in a different way, or it might become clear how it could best be taken in a business session.

### If we make these changes, will power end up concentrated in the hands of a smaller group of people?

GRYYM has made proposals that are designed so that more people can be involved. YM is an open meeting and if it meets more often there will be more chances for Friends to get involved. Friends learn a lot about Quaker business method by going to YM.

At the moment it can be difficult to engage Friends in the centrally managed work – it's hard to find Friends to serve & hard to get them interested. These changes are intended to help by enabling more people to be involved in a way that suits them.

If more people take part in our important decisions, they will see the centrally managed work less as something 'out there'. Friends who have not been appointed as representatives will be free to attend any or all of the four YM sessions each year. Not everyone will come, but Friends and meetings will still be able to engage with YM business and make it a regular topic of discussion and discernment.

Friends attending YM value the opportunity to spend time with other Quakers and to learn from the wider Quaker community. YM involves people of all ages, with specific programmes for children and young people. With more YM sessions in the year we will have more opportunities for sharing our different perspectives.

MfS effectively excludes some communities of Quakers. For example, MfS tried to encourage AMs to appoint younger Friends as representatives but there has been little change. The YFGM representative and younger BYM trustees can sometimes be the only people under 35 in the room. A wider range of Friends attend YM compared to MfS and that gives us access to different perspectives. Diversity is important for Quaker discernment because it gives us a better chance of hearing and heeding the messages that the spirit is sharing. It can be helpful to hear directly from Friends with particular experiences that have a bearing on decisions we need to make.

Some Friends worry that a small group of people with a set agenda could take over a continuing YM in a way that would be hard to do at MfS. In theory this could happen at YM now, but it doesn't seem to. We all have responsibility for ensuring that all our meetings

follow proper Quaker discipline. Our appointed elders and clerks have specific roles to support the right holding of the meeting.

Some Friends are concerned that the changes will increase the power of BYM trustees – GRYYM believes it will make them more integrated, responsive, and accountable as they will be reporting more frequently to the body that has the power to guide and challenge them. None of the functions currently done by MfS would be transferred to BYM trustees.

It's important to remember that in the structure we have now, BYM trustees aren't accountable to MfS and they never can be – they are accountable to the membership as a whole, which is YM. More frequent reporting to YM would increase accountability.

### What about children and young people?

Britain Yearly Meeting is an all-age community. When we come together for YM sessions there are programmes for children and young people of all ages. If we have a continuing YM then there will be children and young people's programmes at each session. Wherever possible, younger Friends will be able to explore similar issues to those on the agenda for the main sessions. Most business sessions will not be all-age, but there will be opportunities for all-age worship and exploration.

Quaker events for children and young people are very important for their spiritual development. These events provide an opportunity to build communities of peers across the whole yearly meeting. Holding these more often during the year will help to strengthen those communities.

BYM staff employed to work with children, young people and families are excited by the possibilities that offered by a continuing YM.

### Surely these changes will mean we will have less time available for discernment?

We will have four sessions of YM rather than one session of YM and four sessions MfS, so there may be less main session time across the year. However, we can make more time by ensuring good preparation and reducing duplication. We can also be flexible about planning agenda times to suit the business that needs to come to a particular session.

YM agendas will be planned so that important items for discernment can be taken across more than one YM session. An item could be introduced for threshing at one session, then considered in more detail at another session a few months later. In between Friends could continue their personal reflections and/or take it to their meetings for preparatory discernment.

The discernment that happens in session at YM and leads to a minute is not the only important discernment. When we decided to revise the Book of Discipline in 2018, some Friends felt that there was too much time on the agenda to consider something so obvious. But the answer to the question was only obvious because of the work in preceding years – in 2014 Friends did not feel the same way.

We should continue to experiment with ways of preparing for corporate discernment – we can use online meetings for discussion and threshing and we can produce more preparation materials that do not involve large amounts of text.

### How will a continuing YM improve communication?

Communication is more than just information exchange. It is about bringing us into a spiritual unity, a shared understanding of our community being led. The hope is to join our disparate worshipping communities together into one, collectively offering our lives as vehicles of transformation.

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) cannot easily do this. There is little time for exploration outside of formal business sessions. Representatives see minutes of concern brought forward from some area meetings but don't have much chance to share their local experiences of worship and witness. Friends have told us that YM does this better – there is more time for open and informal discussion and more time for worship. There is more chance that several people from the same meeting will be there together so that they can take experiences back to share locally.

In terms of communicating information, area meetings that find the current system works well for them can choose to work with their representatives to continuing YM in the same way. More Friends will be at YM sessions and can share important messages in ways that work well locally.

### What will this mean for me and for my meeting? Will we be able to do anything that we can't do now?

Every Quaker will be able to attend Yearly Meeting and YM sessions will be held four times per year instead of once. If you are not already a MfS representative then you will have more chances to attend a large meeting that is looking at the most important issues for Quakers.

Meetings may find it is easier to stay in touch with what is happening at a national level when everything is done in open sessions. With more Quakers attending these meetings it may be easier to find and talk to someone who has been present for particular sessions and they may be able to explain more about the decisions that were taken and the plans that are being made.

### Will these changes improve our discernment?

Greater openness, participation and diversity should lead to improvements in discernment. The spirit can speak with the voice of any person so if we are really listening to each other we will reach the right decisions, no matter who is in the room.

However, we all bring our own experiences to meeting for worship for business, and sometimes those experiences can be a block on hearing the guidance of the spirit. When we hear from people with different experiences it can help us to understand better what we are being led to do.

If important experiences are excluded from discernment, then we may miss something. It can sometimes be difficult to envisage the consequences of decisions if the people most affected by them aren't present.

We need to acknowledge that we don't know the answer to this unless we try.

## If YM 2024 agrees to these changes, how long will it take to bring them in?

YM dates have been set for 23–26 May 2025 and 1–4 May 2026 and these meetings will go ahead.

Subject to the changes being agreed by YM this July then:

- At the rise of the session on 4 May 2026 we would move into the new system and adjourn proceedings to the next continuing session (which would be later in 2026).
- Meeting for Sufferings would be asked to set dates for continuing sessions in 2026 and 2027 so that we can start making plans for the agenda and the practical arrangements.
- It is expected that in May 2025 YM will approve terms of reference for a new YM Agenda Committee. Hopefully that will be appointed and start work during 2025.
- Between July 2024 and May 2026 Meeting for Sufferings will continue to exist but there may be changes to how it operates so that we can have as smooth a transition as possible to the new arrangements.

## How do these proposed changes fit in with the review of Central Committees that is likely to come to YM next year?

At Yearly Meeting 2024 we will be asked to decide on whether we lay down Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) and start to hold a continuing Yearly Meeting.

We will not be looking at any major changes to our committees, although there will be some minor impact on them if we do change to a continuing YM:

- Quaker Life and Quaker Peace & Social Witness Central Committees are responsible to BYM trustees, but at the moment they also report to MfS for information. It would be sensible to look for more and varied ways to share information about our Quaker work, including time at continuing YM sessions.
- Quaker Committee on Christian & Interfaith Relations and Quaker World Relations Committee are currently responsible to MfS and they would become responsible directly to YM if we make the proposed changes.

The review of central committees is separate from the work of GRYYM. The committee review is looking specifically at how we can create a committee structure that best helps us translate the discernment of YM into effective Quaker work. Decisions at YM 2024 on the GRYYM proposals will help to guide the review of committees but the two processes are independent of one another.

The committee review is being done by the Group to Review Central Structures (GRCS). They have not yet formulated their final proposals and these are expected to come to YM in 2025. If you want to know how the work is going so far, look out for the special interest meeting they are holding ahead of YM 2024.

## If there is a continuing Yearly Meeting, will this change the relationship between Yearly Meeting and area meetings?

There is no intention to change the relationship between YM and area meetings. Rather than two-way communication being centred on Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), it would instead be centred on YM.

When area meetings want to share their discernment with Quakers at a national level they will be able to send minutes to YM. Continuing YM will be able (just as MfS is now) to consult area meetings on particular issues of concern, asking them to respond by minute.

Area meetings would hear about national-level discernment through the representative(s) that they appoint to attend continuing YM. A representative would be expected to attend the business sessions and report back to the area meeting on these and on any other aspects of YM that they have experienced, as they do with MfS at present. An area meeting would be able to appoint as many representatives as they want and could also choose to ask for reports from members who were not appointed as representatives but who would like to share their experiences of YM.

When we appoint a representative from area meeting to attend either MfS or YM we are not appointing a delegate to pass on the views of the area meeting they are representing. Any of us attending may feel called to minister from our own experience but we cannot speak on the basis that we are there to champion the viewpoint of another person or body of Friends. Quaker discernment doesn't work like that – when we enter a meeting for worship for business we listen for the spirit and join with others to discern the right way forward. It may be relevant to share the discernment of our area meeting in relation to an item on the agenda. When we do that, we don't present that discernment as though it is right for everyone. Instead, we offer the measure of light that was granted to our area meeting and trust that together the whole meeting will be rightly led. Neither MfS nor YM is a forum where area meetings 'have their say' because that is not how we make decisions together as Quakers.

## NEW (added 15.07.2024): If Meeting for Sufferings is laid down or merged with Yearly Meeting, how will its role of “discernment on priorities” (*Quaker faith & practice* paragraph 7.02) be taken forward?

At present, Yearly Meeting (YM), Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), BYM trustees and our central committees all have roles in setting priorities. It is not always easy to pick out which body should take the lead in which situation, and this may have contributed to the sense of overlap and lack of clarity that the review group has identified. Reducing the overlap and increasing the clarity is a key aim of the proposal to move to a continuing YM so it is helpful to look in more detail at what we mean by discernment of priorities.

Discernment of priorities in any organisation takes place at multiple levels. We may not always think of prioritisation as a spiritual exercise, but statements of principle can be seen as statements of priority. When we discern that we want to become a low carbon sustainable community or an anti-racist church then we are saying that

our community cares deeply about the importance of these transformations. In other words, they are priorities for us as a YM. These highest level priorities have always been and will continue to be set by YM as a whole.

Very often we make statements of principle in the hope and expectation that something will happen as a result. If we call for action then we need to make sure we have what we need in place to deliver that action. That could be money, staff time, Quaker energy, or something else. We also need to make sure that we take appropriate account of all our high-level priorities, balancing the longstanding and the newly articulated.

In 2015 MfS agreed the document '**Our Faith in the Future**', which is a broad statement of priorities for Quakers in Britain that is intended to guide the plans for our centrally managed work. It takes YM's statements of principle and intent and shapes them into a set of aspirations that offers a framework for action. This document has been very useful in the nearly ten years we have had it. It would have been difficult for YM to agree a document like this because of the very limited opportunity for consultation and discussion around an annual meeting. If we move forward with a continuing YM then in the future any similar document would be created and agreed by YM, probably over several sessions. This aspect of discerning priorities would therefore be transferred from MfS to YM.

Below this level of discernment of priorities we need systems for organising our resources effectively. We have finite financial and human resources and we need to exercise good stewardship over these. It is the role of BYM trustees to exercise that stewardship. Trustees maintain oversight of the YM budget, the majority of which is spent on staff costs. To do this, they look at the statements and frameworks agreed by YM and (at present) MfS and shape these into a strategic plan. Our staff, as well as our central committees, then turn this into a more detailed plan of work.

If we move to a continuing YM then this should offer a better way to have an ongoing conversation about how our highest level priorities should be reflected in our work plans. Where YM sets a new priority then it can ask BYM trustees to respond, explaining how they will translate YM concerns into work, and what they will change to make room for new priorities. It might take time to bring those changes about, so reporting could happen across several sessions. If BYM trustees have difficulty in balancing what feel like conflicting priorities then they can ask for guidance from YM before making final decisions. In this way the links between higher level and detailed prioritisation can be clearer and Friends can contribute to the ongoing discernment of priorities.

### **NEW (added 15.07.2024): Have area meetings been involved in the work that has led to these proposals being made?**

Many area meetings have engaged with this work. The main way in which they have been able to follow the progress of the work has been through their representatives on MfS. The review group was appointed by MfS in October 2020. Since then it has



reported back six times (five times in writing and once orally). Some area meetings have contacted the review group with questions, comments or minutes and some have sent minutes to Meeting for Sufferings (MfS).

The review of MfS started in March 2022 (after completion of a review of the purposes of Yearly Meeting (YM) and YM Gatherings). During the late spring/early summer of 2022 the review group undertook a consultation focusing on the role of MfS. The consultation was open to individual Friends and meetings. In September 2022 the review group held online workshops that any Friend could join. The work of the review group was considered at both sessions of YM in 2023. In January 2024 these proposals were the main topic for the Area Meeting Clerks online discussion. The dedicated email address for the review group has been shared widely.

When MfS received the final reports of the review group in March 2024 it was able to endorse the proposals and send them forward to YM for wider discernment and decision. MfS has sometimes specifically asked area meetings to consider an issue and to send their minutes back to MfS to aid its further discernment. However, that is not a requirement for Quaker decision making. Decisions about our structures need to be made by YM in session where all Friends can participate, as only Yearly Meeting has authority to make substantive changes to the structures laid down in *Quaker faith & practice*.

### **NEW (added 15.07.2024): Is there a useful example of how area meeting representatives to a continuing Yearly Meeting might work?**

Area meetings will have a lot of flexibility in how they appoint and how they work with their representatives to continuing Yearly Meeting (YM). The intention is that the representatives should form a clear link between area meetings (and their constituent local meetings) and the YM as a whole.

In the past it was very common for local meetings to appoint representatives to area meeting – that still happens in some places but not everywhere. There the aim is to make sure that every local meeting gets to hear about what happens at area meeting. Formal communication between local and area meetings happens by minute. A local meeting representative is not usually expected to put across the views of the local meeting or to inform the local meeting clerk what area meeting wants on the agenda at the next local meeting for worship for business. A system of representatives makes sure that there is always someone to give more background to local Friends, or to be a point of contact if they have informal questions about what has happened.

That might be a useful model for area meeting representatives to a continuing YM. Where area meetings as a body have something important to say to YM they would put that in a minute and send it in. The representative would be able to create links between Friends in meetings and YM as a whole.

The other important function of area meeting representatives to a continuing YM will be to provide continuity. This will be especially important where discernment on a topic takes place over a few sessions of YM. Although new people might join the discernment, it is always helpful if there are Friends present who have a good understanding of the whole journey.

**NEW (added 19.07.2024): If there are four Yearly Meeting sessions per year then won't that be a big added burden on Friends who already attend a lot of business meetings?**

Attendance at meeting for worship for business is an important part of our life as Quakers. [Quaker faith & practice paragraph 3.09](#) encourages Friends to attend local, area and Yearly Meeting (YM) sessions as regularly as they can, but acknowledges that no Friend is expected to attend every business meeting.

If YM meets four times per year then all Friends will have the opportunity to attend more business meetings. It is not expected that Friends who have not been appointed as representatives should have to attend every session unless they feel led to do so. Those Friends who see attendance at YM as an integral part of their discipline may feel pressure to attend all sessions and they will need to work out what is right for them. Friends who are not at sessions can still uphold the meeting from afar.

Those Friends appointed as representatives of area meetings or other bodies would be expected to attend all four sessions each year. This frequency of meetings is in line with what is currently expected of representatives to Meeting for Sufferings (MfS). A key role for representatives may be to communicate with those Friends who are not able to attend every YM session.