



Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers) in Britain

Book of Discipline Revision Committee

Fourth report to Meeting for Sufferings

December 2023

Introduction

1. Following Minute 31 of Yearly Meeting 2018, Meeting for Sufferings established the Book of Discipline Revision Committee with Terms of Reference approved in July 2018, to bring to Yearly Meeting draft text for adoption as BYM's book of discipline, together with proposals for its publication. The appointment of our initial membership of 24, including two co-clerks and an assistant clerk, was completed by February 2019 and we first met in May 2019. This is our fourth progress report, following those in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Who we are

2. We are a diverse committee reflecting the breadth of Britain Yearly Meeting, as required by our Terms of Reference. Since our last report in December 2022, one of our members has been released at his request, and one new member has been appointed. Of our current 24:

- geographically, about a quarter live in Scotland and Wales; and of the remaining three quarters living in England, broadly equal proportions are in northern, central and southern areas
- three-quarters are female
- our ages range from 20s to over 70
- the lengths and nature of our Quaker backgrounds vary just as widely, as do our life and employment experiences
- several of us face particular challenges, such as physical or mental health or disability, and this reminds us all of our role in enabling everyone to take part as fully as they can, while trying to ensure that no-one becomes burnt out or overburdened.

Our work so far

3. We have now met as a full committee 18 times. The first five were residential weekends face-to-face; then nine were held virtually by part-weekend zoom videoconferences during the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath; and then four residentially face-to-face again by special permission in 2022 and 2023 to enable us to work intensively together in reviewing where we have got to and planning the remaining phases of our task in detail. We have also continued to work hard individually and in various subgroups on specific topics, and held check-in zoom committee meetings to keep track of these. Some of us are struggling with this demanding work alongside other calls on our time and energy, and some have needed to step back from our work for a while for health or other reasons.

4. Our **previous reports** described our steps to

- learn **how best to work together** as a cohesive committee
- document a set of principles for our **committee processes** and **developing content**
- develop a working understanding of the **purpose of the book of discipline**
- identify a range of different **audiences** for it, their expectations of it and how they might use it
- articulate seven key **interlinked common themes** that will need to be reflected in it, and five **key insights describing the unity of our Quaker way** which will run as threads through it
- develop principles for our choice of **language to express spiritual concepts and experience**, and for the **use of quotations and extracts**
- clarify that the **“book” will need to appear in a variety of formats and platforms**
- test the distinction between **“core”** material in the book (what Quakers do and why – the spiritual basis) and **“supplementary”** (detail on how we do it – to be published separately)
- develop, with the help of an external consultant, a detailed **project plan and timescale** for completing our task by the end of this decade
- refine our **list of (now around 30) main topics** to be covered in the new book
- prepare substantive **first drafts on a number of these**
- continue over-arching work to **review all these drafts for consistency, coherence, accessibility, and choices of language and voice** to reflect inclusivity and Quaker spiritual experience; and **to compile a glossary**
- use a system for **tagging contributions and comments received from Friends** across the yearly meeting, so that these can be considered when drafting relevant text
- **engage with Friends generally** to encourage interest in our work, through activities with Woodbrooke; leading sessions at Yearly Meeting, area meetings and other

gatherings; setting up an online creative project; publishing “Frequently Asked Questions” and key messages; and having a presence on social media.

5. **By the end of 2023**, we will have

- taken on board the learning from our **sharing of sample texts on marriage and on nominations** with Meeting for Sufferings, and through MfS representatives with area meetings and other Friends. We were grateful for the 184 responses we received from meetings and individuals. The feedback generally indicated that the “voice of the book” is along the right lines, the text is accessible, and there is a fair balance between drafted text and a selection of quoted anthology extracts. But it has also encouraged us to do further work on defining more clearly what constitutes core material and what is supplementary; and ensuring that the language used is inclusive, makes people feel seen and heard, and deploys biblical quotations appropriately. The detailed and specific comments received – some of them contradictory - on the two sample texts are being taken into account in the editing process
- sent a minute to Meeting for Sufferings regarding changes to the **marriage declaration** suggested in the feedback that are beyond our Committee’s remit
- “**banked**”, as good enough for now, **substantive drafts on the following 11 topics: discernment; meeting for worship for church affairs; nominations; concern; community; sharing the Quaker experience (outreach); marriage; trusteeship & charitable status (incorporating elements of resources/stewardship); worship; conflict; testimony**
- have well-advanced **drafts nearly ready for “banking” on 3 more topics: service; witness; spiritual and pastoral care**
- identified content for a separate topic on **Quaker theology** (previously combined with the spiritual experience topic)
- prepared material on **faithful lives** which will now be divided amongst related topics
- reviewed our approach to interlinked topics (currently being worked on), including **personal journey; funerals; diversity and inclusion; close relationships; and spiritual experience**, aiming at completing content for these during 2024
- revised (in the light of comments from Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations) a requested paper on our understanding of the **Quaker theological underpinning of our constitutional structures**, which we have sent to the groups reviewing Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings and other aspects of our structures to help them with their work, and which will inform our future drafting of text on these topics
- started to develop our approach to **the overall structure of the book**.

Our immediate next steps

6. During the year or so ahead, we hope to

- ❖ start drafting **text on the remaining main topics** not yet covered, aiming at completion by the end of 2025
- ❖ consider when, how and which **further sample texts** might usefully be **shared with Friends more widely** for their and our benefit, in advance of completing the whole book
- ❖ continue to liaise with the **current reviews of key aspects of church government** – particularly the reviews of yearly meeting/yearly meeting gatherings and Meeting for Sufferings (including their relationships with BYM Trustees) and central committees, the simpler meetings project, and the exploration of membership initiated by Meeting for Sufferings – so that we can start drafting text at the earliest appropriate times on these topics, in the hope that the position may be clarified by decisions of Yearly Meeting on them in 2024 and 2025
- ❖ continue to **review drafts for consistency, coherence, accessibility, language and voice**
- ❖ bring together **the shape of the whole book**, how the topics fit together and flow while enabling the reader to find answers to questions.

Our longer-term timetable

7. Our project plan and timetable envisage presenting

- (a) to **YM in 2027** a **complete first draft text** of the new Book of Discipline, for the start of the process of familiarisation and initial discernment, engaging Friends with the text and our approach to the book – an extended “meeting for learning” – resulting in clear guidance to BDRC on the next steps; and
- (b) (after a period of further learning and consultation with Friends throughout Britain, any revision required, and further familiarisation), to **YM in 2030** a **complete finished text for adoption**.

This is a demanding, yet we believe achievable, timetable. When we have drafted all the 30 or so discrete topic texts, there will then be a substantial editing process. This will entail bringing the topic texts together as a coherent and consistent whole; writing introductions; editing and putting into BYM’s house style; cross-referencing and indexing; identifying the supplementary material needed and who should prepare and authorise it; and then printing and publishing in hard copy and electronically/online. We have started liaising with the BYM content and publications staff team on collaboration over these tasks.

We think that the complete first draft should ideally be made available to Friends at least 6 months before YM 2027 (ie by end-2026/start of 2027), to allow for thorough reading and discussion in preparation for YM.

The text itself should be accompanied by explanatory material on why the book is as it is, the processes for familiarisation and eventual decision, and proposed arrangements for the

separate preparation and authorisation of supplementary material. We envisage that the new book will eventually be made available not only in print and as an electronic document but also through multiple media, so as to be accessible to all Friends. We are considering how far it will be practicable for any parts of the first draft to be trialled in different formats.

We hope YM 2027 will give us clear guidance on the voice of the book, its accessibility, the balance between core and supplementary material, any gaps needing to be filled or unnecessary material to be removed. This would be followed by a further consultation and revision process, leading up to preparation of the finished text and its publication, preparatory consideration by Friends throughout Britain, and eventual presentation to YM 2030 for adoption.

All this activity means that over the next three years we may have less capacity than before to respond to invitations from meetings and groups to talk to them about our work. But we hope to collaborate with Meeting for Sufferings, YM Agenda Committee and Woodbrooke in helping Friends throughout the country to engage with the complete text from late 2026 onwards.

How can Friends get involved?

8. You can:

- pray for and uphold the Committee
- look at our webpage at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/resources/quaker-faith-and-practice/revising-quaker-faith-practice>
- contribute to our online creative project “Open to New Light” <https://padlet.com/bdrc/OpenToNewLight>
- share ideas for the new book, including telling us of inspirational and helpful pieces of writing. These can be offered using an online form (<https://forms.quaker.org.uk/qfp-idea/>) or by contacting the Committee Secretary by email (qfp@quaker.org.uk) or writing to Friends House
- engage with our social media accounts via Revising Quaker faith & practice pages on
 - facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/revisingqfp/>
 - instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/revisingqfp>
 - twitter – <https://www.twitter.com/revisingqfp>

Conclusion

9. As always, we are hugely grateful to our Secretary and other BYM staff for all their work and support for us. We ask Meeting for Sufferings and Friends generally to continue to uphold us.

Rosie Carnall, Catherine Brewer, Michael Phipps: Co-Clerks and Assistant Clerk
Michael S Booth: Committee Secretary

The spoken introduction to the report

(What was actually said may have differed slightly in places).

The spoken introduction was given by Catherine Brewer, one of the co-clerks, and Michael Phipps, Assistant Clerk.

Catherine Brewer

I am going to start with a short introduction to our work so far, and then Michael Phipps will tell you more about what is ahead for us.

When we set ourselves the deadline of YM 2027 to bring a first full draft of a new book of discipline, that timeline felt challenging, but achievable. Both of these things are still true. We have been making good progress on writing and identifying content for the different topics to be covered. The first topics we looked were those which will consist primarily of the 'voice of the book', i.e. content written specifically for the book of discipline on topics that come under the broad heading of 'church government'. Now, we are moving to those sections which will primarily be composed of extracts which reflect the varied perspectives and voices of our community. In doing this, we are starting to draw on more of the material which Friends have been suggesting to us through the submission tool.

We have also been continuing to develop our sense of the book as a whole: as we develop more content we start to see more clearly how the different topics interrelate, and we now have a group focussing on the overall structure. A member of the committee recently compared this work to a jigsaw: we have many of the pieces, we know that the picture we are working towards is one that conveys the life of the spirit in our community, and what it means to be Quaker in Britain Yearly Meeting. We now need to work out how the pieces should fit together to make that picture.

Last time we reported to you, we were about to share our draft texts on Marriage and Nominations. We are grateful for the feedback we received on these and want to express our thanks to Meeting for Sufferings, both for the feedback you gave us directly, and for encouraging your meetings to engage with the drafts. Our written report highlights some of the ways the feedback is informing our ongoing work. The feedback we received also gave rise to our minute to Meeting for Sufferings regarding the wording of the marriage declaration, and this matter is on your agenda after this report. Here, we heard a call to consider changes that were beyond the remit of our committee: our role is to reflect the Yearly Meeting's thinking and practice, not to make changes on the Yearly Meeting's behalf.

As our work progresses, we are finding that it is increasingly important to build links with Britain Yearly Meeting staff. We want to represent the voices of children within the book, and we have recently set up a group to look at how to do this. The Children and Young Peoples' team are advising us on this work. We are also starting to work more closely with the publications team and were glad to welcome Ben Robinson to our most recent meeting. It is likely that there will be further ways in which we need to draw on the expertise of our staff as we move through the different stages of our work.

I am now going to hand over to Michael Phipps to tell you more about the work we have coming up.

Michael Phipps:

Thank you, Catherine.

Turning to our work in the period ahead, I will highlight four key points:

- (1) We aim to bring to Yearly Meeting in 2027 a complete first draft text of the new Book of Discipline. We hope this will involve a process of familiarisation and initial discernment, leading to guidance to BDRC on any further work needed. After that further work and consultation with Friends throughout Britain, we plan to bring to YM in 2030 a complete finished text for approval and adoption.
- (2) To get to that point, we need to finish drafting text on all the topics, and to have decided the shape of the whole book, before the end of 2025. There will then be a substantial editing process to bring the topic texts together as a coherent and consistent whole, with appropriate introductions and linking passages. The complete first draft should ideally be made available to Friends in hard copy and electronically/online by late 2026 or thereabouts, to allow for thorough reading and discussion in preparation for YM 2027. This is a demanding, yet we believe achievable, timetable.
- (3) One potential complication arises from the current reviews of key aspects of church government – yearly meeting/yearly meeting gatherings and Meeting for Sufferings, their relationships with BYM Trustees, central committees, simpler meetings, and membership. If the outcomes of these are settled by Yearly Meeting in the next couple of years, we should be able to produce relevant text in time for the complete first draft of the book. If not, we may have to find creative ways to deal with this material.
- (4) We will be focussing hard on writing and editing during the next 2 - 3 years. We may have less capacity than before to respond to invitations from meetings and groups to talk to them about our work. But we are considering when, how and which further sample texts might usefully be shared with Friends more widely, for their and our benefit, during this period. No promises, but watch this space!

May I conclude by saying that we have no specific questions to ask Meeting for Sufferings today. But we invite you to uphold us as we move into the next phase of our work.

Meeting for Sufferings minute

Held at Friends House and by video conference on 2 December 2023

MfS/23/12/06 Revision of our book of discipline

We receive a report from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee (BDRC). Catherine Brewer, Co-clerk, and Michael Phipps, Assistant Clerk, have shared highlights of the committee's work for the past year and its immediate plans.

We are glad to see the emerging longer-term timetable and note the demands this will place on the committee. We uphold Friends in their service and hope we can support the committee in the ways outlined in the report as the final text comes together.

Robert Card, Clerk