



## Simpler Meetings Series

### Fundamentals - possibilities and permission

How can we release the joy of being a Quaker, by simplifying how we do things?

How can we reduce the burden of administration landing on a small number of Friends?

How can we do things differently to free up time from running Quakers for being Quakers - for our spiritual life, for building our community, for witness in the world, outreach, and generally 'having a bit of a life'?

Hello Friends, I'm Jonathan, I'm a Quaker from Watford meeting in Hertfordshire in the east of England. For the last two and a half years I've been working for Britain Yearly Meeting in a project to find and share answers to questions like these.

In this Simpler Meetings Series, we're going to be looking at ways we can do things differently, to make it simpler to be a thriving worshipping community. The topics in the Series cover roles, ways for small meetings, meeting without a meeting house, ways of spreading the load for trustees and treasurers, how area meetings can work together or merge parts of their structures, and we'll do some imagining of new things we could do with Zoom.

Today's session is all about fundamentals, possibilities and permission.

Let's start with a reminder of why we might need to simplify. We all know some Quaker ways of doing things are very simple. And some other Quaker ways are not so simple!

The burden of administration is lying on the shoulders of a small group 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.

Fortunately, there are lots of reasons to be hopeful.

There are lots of possible ways of doing things that are already being used in different ways around Britain. 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, or sixty years ago.

The main chapters in *Quaker faith and practice* about church government - how we are organised - haven't been revised much since the 1960s. What's changed?

Compared with only a generation ago, or two generations ago, a lot more of us are the only Quaker in our families. Quakers are generally older. People are joining as adults, 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: in the last 25 years the number of members and attenders in Britain has fallen by 34%, over a third. And in the last 10 years by 17%. That's a big change.

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 then may have more childcare commitments. Fewer people are available.

So it is hardly surprising that ways that worked well 60 years ago don't fit so well now. We need to think about new ways of doing things, to liberate us from some of our burdens: less time running Quakers, and more time for being Quakers.

I've had the chance to talk with Friends right across Britain, and 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 our local meetings. It could be the way we organise our pastoral care, or nurture the spiritual life of our meetings. Or how we handle membership.

It could be the place where we worship – did you know that 30% of local meetings in Britain don't have a meeting house? 30%. Lots meet in a community centre, some in church buildings, but there's huge variety: several use arts centres or museums, two St John Ambulance Halls, day centres, schools, therapy centres, people's homes, the library, a theatre. One meeting worships in the robing room of a courthouse. And one meets for worship in the Sweet Surprise Café.

This can be really quite a surprise if you've always known your Quakerism to be in a meeting house. And to jump ahead slightly to a later topic in this series, meeting without a meeting house is probably the biggest thing you can do to simplify a whole lot of things about the running of your meeting.

And by-the-by, of all the meetings that have grown their numbers by 50% in the last 10 years, three quarters of them don't have a meeting house – that could point us towards our future.

There are also many people whose Quakerism is focused on a special interest, or on events, rather than the local meeting being the only way to relate to Quakerism. And we have the new phenomenon of online meetings that fit different times of day or are not limited by geography – about a dozen are running across their whole area meeting.

Then there is a great variety in the way that area meetings are organised. Here's a very basic example: 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! They were always on a Sunday, or perhaps on a Tuesday night. It just had not been in my experience.

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
- and *should* be done.

But this one's way is not the same as that one! Surely they can't both be the only way?

I used to find this rather puzzling. Then somebody helpfully put it to me 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, *do it like this*, but multiple possibilities. It's like having a menu to choose from, to suit your needs and circumstances.

As I was discovering these possibilities, I began to wonder if all this variation was "allowed". It turns out there is a lot more permission for variations around than you might have thought - certainly much more than I thought. 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?

This matches the approach of the revision of our Book of Discipline.

Quakers have been doing things differently for centuries – differently from other people, differently within Quakerism, and changing over time.

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

Then along came another “p”: the pandemic. That’s making us think differently.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we can expect some people to have changed their life priorities. And some meetings will change how they want to be, and be in the world.

One final thing.

You know how when you describe Quaker worship to other people, you might say

We sit quietly together in a circle in a big room, we listen, and people speak if they are moved to, and after an hour we all shake hands.

We learned, by experience in 2020, that almost all of the things we thought were essential parts of Quaker worship actually aren’t.

We don’t shake hands any more.

We don’t need to be in a room – we can worship outside,

Many of us have experienced deep worship when we are not physically in the same place at all – we can worship together online, or blended

We’ve found that our worship doesn’t have to be for an hour, and it doesn’t have to be on Sunday morning!

If we can do all these things differently in our worship, and still be being Quakers, filled with the spirit, together, then can we now imagine doing some of our other Quaker things differently too?

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