



George Fox 400 – Quakerism then and now

The year 2024 marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of George Fox, one of the founders of Quakerism. This series of peer-support sessions asks how the lives and spiritual discoveries of early Friends can inspire and challenge us today.

The resource is designed for group use. The materials should be accessible to those who are new to Quakerism and Friends who've been around for decades.

Together, you'll explore such questions as: What aspect of Quakerism inspires us most? Where might we expect to hear prophetic voices in our community today? What was it about early Quaker communities that empowered Friends to act as they did, and how might we support one another in our spiritual journeys and witness?

The sessions are flexible. You can work through the whole series over a set period of time, or focus on one session that resonates with the group. Every session, except the final reflection one, is stand-alone. Feel free to explore the material and questions in whatever way suits you. Suggestions for how to facilitate a session are provided at the end.

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Guidance for participants

This series explores a broad range of experiences and topics. Some may be unfamiliar to you. Some may make you uncomfortable. Whatever comes up for you in these sessions, there's probably someone else who feels something similar. Talking in a group is a good way to work through discomfort, confusion and other feelings that might not play a big part in our everyday lives. Staying present and sensitive during discussions will help everyone in the group get the most out of the session.

Tips on staying present and sensitive during discussions

- **Prepare:** Before the conversation, take time to centre yourself and prepare.
- **Be open-minded:** Go into the conversation with an open mind.
- **Listen actively:** Focus on listening to the other people's experiences and avoid interrupting or judging.
- **Use "I" statements:** Focus on your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- **Be respectful:** Show respect for yourself and the other people.
- **Notice your emotions:** If you find them starting to take over, have a break.
- **Take breaks:** If you need to, take a break, and return to the conversation when you are ready.

Trigger warning: session 4 contains references to the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people and racism, which some individuals may find distressing. For support with facilitating discussion on the transatlantic slave trade, reparations and racial justice, get in touch with your Local Development Worker or a member of the Faith in Action team: faithinaction@quaker.org.uk

Session 1: inspiration

Introduction: Quakerism was one of a number of non-conformist religious groups that arose in the aftermath of the English Civil War (1642-1651). At a time when more and more people were questioning the authority of the established church, Quakerism offered a radical, fresh form of Christianity. Inspired by the spiritual insights and teachings of George Fox (1624-1691), early Friends believed that it was possible to have a direct, unmediated encounter with the divine without the aid of ordained clergy, doctrines, or creeds. As Fox put it: 'the Lord God hath opened to me by his invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine light of Christ' (*The Journal of George Fox*, published posthumously in 1694). The belief that everyone possesses an Inner Light, or Inward Teacher, inspired early Friends to develop the distinctive form of worship that British Quakers continue to practise today.

Supporting materials



Read - 'Openings' chapter in *Quaker faith & practice*

<https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/19/>. See in particular 19.02-19.03, 19.11-19.13 and 19.20



Watch – *George Fox and the history of the early Quakers*, a video made by the Quaker Tapestry Museum www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PzQDj89t98 A conversation between Craig Barnett and Rex Ambler on the Experiment with Light practice <https://vimeo.com/265795633>



Listen – a podcast on George Fox and the *Birth of Quakerism from Thee* Quaker Podcast. Specifically the first half.

<https://quakerpodcast.com/george-fox-and-the-birth-of-quakerism/>

In this session we'll reflect together on the following questions:

- What was it that inspired the faith and practice of early Friends?
- What inspires your faith today?
- What aspect of Quakerism inspires you most (event, story, person, practice)?

Session 2: prophecy

Introduction: During the seventeenth century, most preaching in the established church was carried out by well-educated, ordained male clergy. Quakers, by contrast, professed the belief that everyone has the potential to offer ministry because each person possesses the Inward Light. Many of the early Friends who travelled in the ministry – the so-called ‘Valiant Sixty’ – were largely farmers, tradesmen, women and young people from northern parts of the country (a region that was at that time considered backward and socially inferior). Unlike those in the established church, Early Friends could expect to hear the word of God coming from any part of society, regardless of gender, race, age, or class. As an epistle of 1683 put it, ‘God who made all pours out of his spirit upon all men and women in the world...upon the Whites and Blacks, Moors and Turks and Indians, Christians, Jews and Gentiles, that all with the spirit of God, might know God’. However, despite the stated belief in all people’s having an Inward Light, Quaker communities did not treat Black, Indigenous and People of Colour as equals.

Supporting materials



Read – ‘Faithful Lives’ chapter in *Quaker faith & practice* <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/18/>, in particular 18.02 and ‘Openings’ chapter in *Quaker faith & practice* <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/19/>. See in particular 19.01, 19.17-19.19 and 19.25-19.26



Watch – a Quaker Speak video on George Fox and the beginnings of Quakerism www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJmPdKrLMx0



Listen – a podcast on The birth of Quakerism in Cumbria. Specifically 16-20 mins [Countrystride #119: The birth of QUAKERISM in CUMBRIA](#)

In this session we’ll reflect together on the following questions:

- Where might we expect to hear the prophetic voices in our community today?
- What gives people the confidence to speak and share their truth?
- What barriers might people face to ministering in our community?
- What barriers have Friends told us they face in ministering in our community?
- How do we recognize the truth being spoken in our midst?

Session 3: community

Introduction: Early Friends believed that the end times had arrived: they were living in the Kingdom of God on Earth. For them, the initial, urgent task was to bring as many people as possible to follow the Inward Light. It wasn't until a generation or so later, when many Friends from the early days of the movement were passing on, that the secondary task – the task of building community and connection – came to seem more important. Questions about how Quakerism might continue, and how it might remain a consistent and connected community, became more pressing.

In an era when travel was more difficult and less frequent than it is today, most of the early Quaker communities were organized geographically – in networks of neighbouring and reasonably localized communities. This is a community structure that has largely continued to the present day, in our Local and Area Meetings. But does this structure still serve us well? And what alternative forms of Quaker community and belonging might we imagine instead?

Supporting materials



Read – George Fox on the creation of monthly meetings, The Journal of George Fox p.249-252

https://archive.org/details/journalofgeorgef0000foxg_b4a6/page/248/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater&q=monthly



Watch - an overview of Britain Yearly Meeting's structures

<https://vimeo.com/810922960> Note: this video was made before 2024, when Yearly Meeting decided to move towards a continuing Yearly Meeting. See www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/our-structures/continuing-yearly-meeting for more information.



Listen – a talk on the history of Quakerism from Woodbrooke. Specifically the first 10 mins www.woodbrooke.org.uk/resource-library/the-history-of-quakerism/

In this session we'll reflect together on the following questions:

- How important are regional communities (particularly local and area meetings) in enabling Quakerism to flourish today?
- What alternative forms of community and belonging can we see emerging, or imagine becoming more significant?
- How does your own Quaker community support you in your spiritual journey, and/or in your witness and outreach? How do Quaker community structures enable you to support others?
- What was it about early Quaker communities that empowered those Friends to act as they did?

Session 4: action

Trigger warning: this session contains references to the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people and racism, which some individuals may find distressing. For support with facilitating discussion on the transatlantic chattel slave trade, reparations and racial justice, get in touch with your Local Development Worker or a member of the Faith in Action team: faithinaction@quaker.org.uk

Introduction: In the early years of Quakerism, disrupting the status quo in British society became a hallmark of Quaker action. When Friends started travelling to different countries and continents, they witnessed unfamiliar political systems, laws and customs. In 1671, George Fox spent time on plantations in Barbados. He met with Black African people who had been kidnapped, enslaved and forcibly taken to America across the Middle Passage. They were stripped of much of their identity and culture, separated from family, and forced to produce goods that were sold and traded by the white people (sometimes Quakers) who held them in bondage. The wealth created and systemic racism that developed from that time is still clear to see in the world today.

Faced with this exploitative and racist practice, George Fox and the Friends he travelled with did not outwardly condemn it. This allowed Quaker involvement in the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people to continue as an accepted practice. Owning and exploiting enslaved people was such a common and customary part of Quaker life that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting disowned Benjamin Lay when he spoke out against slavery 70 years after George Fox's visit to Barbados. The Yearly Meeting had already acknowledged that the transatlantic chattel slave trade was immoral*, but not acted against it.

George Fox and Benjamin Lay took opposing actions in response to slavery. George Fox urged enslaved Black Africans not to rebel against the white colonists who profited from their forced labour. Benjamin Lay spoke against Quakers profiting from that same forced labour, prompting Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to disown him. Were both men following the Spirit within? Did outward customs play a part in these actions?

*See www.nps.gov/articles/quakerpetition.htm for the 1688 Germantown Quaker petition against slavery.

Supporting materials



Read – Margaret Fell on faith in action, *Quaker faith & practice* 20.30 <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/20-30/> and declaration of peace to the King, *quaker faith & practice* 19.46 <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/19-46/>



Watch – an interview with Katherine Gerbner on slavery in the Quaker world www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ1o9m81IbE&t=1103s. Read the article here www.friendsjournal.org/slavery-in-the-quaker-world/



Listen – an interview on the 'Quakers Today' podcast with some members of the Quaker Coalition for Uprooting Racism (an American group), specifically 0-12 mins [Quaker Podcast - Podcast Exploring Quaker Life & Religious Beliefs](#)

In this session we'll reflect together on the following questions:

- What prompted early Friends to action?
- What leads you to action?
- What are some of the barriers to action?
- What might we need, as individuals and as communities, to help us overcome these barriers?

Session 5: reflection

Introduction: In this series of peer-support sessions, we considered how the lives and spiritual discoveries of early Friends can inspire and challenge us today. Looking to the examples of the early Quaker movement, we've explored questions around spiritual inspiration; the prophetic voice; Quaker community and social action. Some of these topics may have brought up new thoughts, ideas or questions that you wish to explore further. Quakers have a number of reflective practices that can help to make the way forward clear. This session provides guidance on how to use these practices as a means to reflect on what we've learned from this series - both as individuals and as a group.

Supporting materials



Read – an introduction to worship sharing from Reno Friends

www.renofriends.org/what-is-worship-sharing/



Watch – an introduction to labyrinths

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nbss93ILx2A A video guide to draw your own

finger labyrinth www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ug9diWb_fU



Listen – Experiment with Light meditation practice. Choose from 4 different versions on the Experiment with Light website

<https://experiment-with-light.org.uk/meditations/>

First as an individual and then as a group, reflect on the following questions:

- What have you learned from this series?
- What have you found thought-provoking? Challenging? Helpful?
- How have you found working as a group?
- How do you want to move forward, in light of what you have learned?

Use the additional resources at the end of this document to support you in exploring the themes covered in this series further or in taking action prompted by these sessions.

Guidance for facilitators

As some themes discussed in this series may be uncomfortable for participants, think about **pastoral support and spiritual upholding** during the sessions. You could work with **Elders** to help maintain spiritual discipline. It is important that everyone is supported to **behave in line with Quaker testimonies**, especially when feeling challenged by uncomfortable subject matter. Leave plenty of **silence** in the discussion part – it is not a debate but a time to reflect on the content of the session and personal experiences. Maintaining quiet gaps between contributions will better enable people to **stay in the conversation** and not get defensive.

Suggested structure for each session with ideas for facilitating **online in pink** and **in person in green**

Before session

- Participants are sent the introduction for the session so they know the context behind the theme
- Participants look at some / all of the supporting materials
 - **Send materials to all participants by email**
 - **Meet as a group to look at the materials**

Start of session

- Welcome and fellowship – spend some time connecting as a group through chat, a check-in, or worship.
- Introduce theme of session
- Open sharing of initial thoughts from introduction and supporting materials
 - **People could raise their hands (physical or virtual) to indicate they want to speak**
 - **People could pick up an object (stone, beanbag etc.) to indicate they want to speak**

Main part of session

- Explore each question in groups
 - **Create breakout rooms of 4-5 people for at least 20 minutes**
 - **Paste the questions into the chat so all can see them**
 - **Break into groups of 4-5 people to explore each question**
 - **Provide materials to aid exploration – flipchart paper and pens to write / draw, craft materials to create art, paper and pens to journal, space to move / dance**
- Come back as a whole group to feedback and share from small groups
 - **Leave enough time for groups to present any writing / art / dance etc.**
- Move into open discussion or worship sharing

End of session

- End with some silent worship, and/or confirmation of a point of action

Additional resources

Further resources to explore Quaker history

Woodbrooke courses – look out for courses exploring George Fox from different perspective and other aspects of Quaker history. These may include courses on the theological justifications for slavery and taking action on racial justice in meetings [Our Courses - Woodbrooke](#)

Friends interested in researching any links their Local Meeting or Area Meeting may have had to slavery or the slavery economy which supported it, e.g. the sugar and cotton industries, can join the Historical Research Workstream of the Reparations Working Group via this email: equity@quaker.org.uk

Further supporting resources for **Session 4: action**



Read

Slavery in the Quaker World, an article by Katherine Gerbner in Friends Journal www.friendsjournal.org/slavery-in-the-quaker-world/

Article on the life of Benjamin Lay www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-42640782



Watch

A presentation by Teresa Parker on Quakers and colonisation [Quakers and Colonisation on Vimeo](#)

Ann Morgan, of Lancaster Meeting, shares her research about Quaker involvement in the slave trade in the 18th century <https://vimeo.com/844194200/21a392a1f5?share=copy>

Reparations: a Quaker's Tool For Integrity from Quaker Speak <https://quakerspeak.com/video/reparations-a-quakers-tool-for-integrity>



Listen

The Amazing Life of Olaudah Equiano a radio programme on the life of one of the most famous and influential Black abolitionists. Kidnapped and enslaved as a child, he was bought and sold many times in his life, including to a Quaker. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0017kj4

Resources to support action for reparative justice:

Quakers in Britain Reparations and Resource pages

www.quaker.org.uk/resources/reparations;

www.quaker.org.uk/resources/reparations/resources-to-support-exploration

Blogs on reparations work

[Reparations reflections: truth and reconciliation | Quakers in Britain](#)

[Reparations reflections: reading into the silence | Quakers in Britain](#)

[Reparations: learning from Jamaican experience | Quakers in Britain](#)

[Reparations: addressing harm and restoring right relationships | Quakers in Britain](#)

Ros Martin's website: www.olawalearts.org.uk

The Black Quaker Project: www.theblackquakerproject.org

World Plenary weaving document and epistle: https://fwcc.world/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/WPM-2024-tapestry-and-prayer_KiSwahili-Espanol-English.pdf

<https://fwcc.world/epistle-of-world-plenary-meeting>

Racial Justice Dialogues: Enlarging the Tent – Doering and Njunga

https://bookshop.quaker.org.uk/Enlarging-the-Tent-Two-Quakers-in-Conversation-About-Racial-Justice_9781803412993

An example of corporate actions for restorative justice:

www.theguardian.com/news/series/cotton-capital