

Thinking about Membership?



York Area Quaker Meeting
The Religious Society of Friends
2013

Introduction

This leaflet explains how to become a member of York Area Quaker Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. You can find more information in chapter 11 of *Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP)*. Area Meeting is explained in detail in Chapter 4 of QFP. If anything in the leaflet is unclear, please speak to your overseer.

Becoming an attender

‘Attender’ is the term Friends use for those who come regularly to Meeting for Worship but who are not members of the Society of Friends (Quakers). Some people remain as attenders for many years and contribute greatly to the life of their meeting.

What is membership?

Membership is an outward sign of an inward experience: a sense of belonging to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) as your spiritual home. It is a public way of acknowledging a private, spiritual commitment and of feeling more closely involved with and supported by your meeting. Membership does not change you overnight, nor bring sudden privileges. It may only be a stage on your journey. For a time, though, you are committed to a group where you can share your needs and gifts and respond to those of others.

What sort of religious group would you be joining? You will already be aware of the diversity among Friends, our wide range of beliefs. In the well known words of George Fox, “Christ says this, the apostles say that, but what canst thou say?” Some Friends respond with Christian language and imagery, and others by using more universal expressions such as Spirit, Truth, Love, Inward Light.

When to move into membership?

We warmly encourage you to consider this step in response to your inner promptings. We welcome those who:

- have found help and strength in the Meeting for Worship;
- are seeking a spiritual dimension in life;
- have enough experience of quaker worship, testimonies and decision making to be aware of the commitment you are making and the group to which you are committing yourself.

We would normally expect you to have been attending Meeting for Worship for several months; to have attended, if possible, at least one meeting other than your local meeting; to have attended a meeting for business; and to have read some of QFP.

It is helpful to understand the Quaker testimonies, not because you have to subscribe to them (they are not creeds), but so that you can appreciate the importance for other Friends of these principles of living. There is no official list of these testimonies, but you can find out more in chapters 20 and 22–25 of QFP. Best known is our peace testimony; others include the sacramental nature of all life, the equal worth of all people, and the need for integrity in business and personal life.

Most important is a spirit of openness and an honest and enquiring mind. Becoming a member is just one possible step in what we believe is a life-long search for Truth.

How to start the process of moving into membership?

You may feel at some point that you want to discuss the question of membership with an elder or overseer.

When you feel you want to start the more formal process write to the membership clerk of the Area Meeting, whose address is available from any elder or overseer. The letter simply needs to say that you wish to become a member, but it can also be helpful to explain a little more about yourself, your experience of the Society of Friends and why you would like to become a member.

The process centres on one or more meetings with two or three Friends ('visitors') appointed by the Area Meeting. You can, if you wish, nominate one of those Friends. Please check that they are happy to do this, and that they are a member. If you do nominate someone, please include their name with your letter to the Area Meeting.

The membership clerk will acknowledge your letter and contact the convenor of overseers at your local meeting to ask them to nominate one of the visitors.

When overseers have done this they will report back to the membership clerk and your letter will be read out at the next Area Meeting. This is when the Friends will be appointed to visit you to consider membership: one nominated by local overseers (or by you if you choose to) and one from the body of the Area Meeting. The latter will usually be from a meeting other than the one you normally attend.

Meetings for Worship to consider membership

These meetings are also referred to in QFP(11.13) as 'visits'. They are a time of mutual sharing, a chance to get to know each other better and be sure that the step of membership is right for you at this time – one for which you are ready. The visitors' intention is to help you discern this, by sharing their faith and spiritual journey and enquiring about yours, in an atmosphere of mutual exploration. The meeting may begin and end with a period of silence, and can be a very positive and enjoyable experience.

Some areas which you and your visitors may like to discuss:

Your spiritual journey and understanding of Friends' practice

- What first drew you to a Friends' Meeting?
- Why do you now want to become a member?
- What has your experience been of Meeting for Worship? Of ministry? Of silence?
- Have you attended other meetings for worship?
- What point do you feel you have reached on your own spiritual journey, and what joys and sorrows have you experienced on the way?
- What are your beliefs, or difficulties, about God, Jesus or the Spirit?
- What is your understanding of our testimonies?

The responsibilities of membership

- Have you attended a meeting for business and what is your understanding of our decision making process?
- Have you considered giving financially to the Society of Friends?
- Have you any idea about the kind of service you would like to offer to the meeting?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions: no creeds that have to be accepted nor tests of attitudes or lifestyle.

The decision about membership

Towards the end of the meeting with the visitors it may become clear that some more experience would be helpful before any decision is made. Dates may then be agreed for one or more further meetings. Only when all feel that the time is right will one of the visitors report back to Area Meeting. They do not make recommendations but simply give an account to the Area Meeting of their visit with you. They will share with you a draft of the report so that you can suggest corrections or amendments. You can also see the final version.

The Area Meeting will usually hear the report at its next meeting. The final decision on membership rests with the Area Meeting and the outcome is usually a warm welcome into the Society of Friends. If Area Meeting is not clear that membership is right, you will be informed immediately and given an explanation.

Please note that the whole process can take some time, so don't worry if this is the case...Quaker business moves very slowly!

Couples and membership

Membership and the processes surrounding it are considered primarily as a matter for the individual and the meeting, and guidance throughout QFP is expressed in terms of a single 'applicant'. However, if you wish to explore moving jointly into membership with your spouse or partner, this is entirely acceptable.

Children and membership

If you are under 16 your parent or guardian needs to support your request to move into membership (QFP 11.06).