

Chapter 9

Membership

And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning, and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account, and not quarrel with one another about their different practices.

Isaac Penington, 1659

The test for membership should not be doctrinal agreement, nor adherence to certain testimonies, but evidence of sincere seeking and striving for Truth, together with an understanding of the lines along which Friends are seeking that Truth.

Friends World Conference, 1952

Our membership of this, or any other Christian fellowship, is never based on worthiness.... We none of us are members because we have attained a certain standard of goodness, but rather because, in this matter, we still are all humble learners in the school of Christ. Our membership is of no importance whatever unless it signifies that we are committed to something of far greater and more lasting significance than can adequately be conveyed by the closest association with any movement or organization. Our membership of the Society of Friends should commit us to the discipleship of the living Christ. When we have made that choice and come under that high compulsion, our membership will have endorsed it.

Edgar Dunstan, 1956

Membership in a Quaker meeting is a spirit-led journey of coming to know ourselves as individual-in-community, a journey on which we experience meeting as a place of acceptance, a place of shared values, a place of transformation, and a place of obedience. These stages represent not so much a specific way toward membership, but rather the four points of the compass, a way to locate ourselves and describe our progress. By necessity, each individual's actual journey remains unique, but each will in some way be bounded and defined by these four cardinal points. As Quakers we have no creed to recite, no confession to confess, no rituals to undergo that will reliably bring us into the fullness of membership. But we do have a rich and inspiring tradition; we have each other; and we have the Spirit of God which, we are promised, will "lead into all things."

Thomas Gates, 2004

The Religious Society of Friends is a community of faith based on a shared experience of the "Inward Light," "the Spirit of Christ by which we are guided" (in George Fox's words). Together Friends worship and grow in the Spirit, remaining ever open and obedient to the Power within and holding the life and teachings of Jesus as an example. Becoming a member is a milestone in the process of seeking Truth, whereby the individual and the community are drawn together in mutual search and understanding. Membership is the outward recognition of an inner experience of the Living God and of unity with other members of the Society. In harkening to that of God within themselves, Friends have come to recognize "that of God in everyone."

Although regularly enrolled membership, as we know it, was not a feature of the early Society of Friends, a recognized membership did exist. In its first years the Society was a radical and charismatic movement, very much at odds with the civil and religious institutions of its day. Joining with Friends involved rejection by society, as well as the risk of imprisonment, physical abuse, and economic ruin. Only those deeply convinced and committed were willing to face such consequences and be considered Friends and members of the fellowship. Early problems with fanaticism and spiritual irresponsibility led to the practice of disownment. If reconciliation was not successful, those who misrepresented the Society in word or deed were disowned. That is, Friends made

a public declaration that the disowned person did not represent them. Such persons were still welcome to worship and fellowship, but were not allowed to participate in the meeting for business. Disownment later became greatly abused in enforcing a strict code of Quaker conduct.

Formal membership was not established until the eighteenth century. However, early Friends used the word “member” in their correspondence and drew up lists of those suffering for Truth’s sake. When the Religious Society of Friends had become respectable and some persons came to it solely for material support, lists of members were drawn up to identify those committed to Truth and entitled to such support by the meeting. At the same time the practice of enrolling children of Friends as “birthright members” was also begun. Our yearly meeting does not employ birthright membership: we encourage our children to make their own decisions about membership upon reaching adulthood.

A member is recorded by a monthly meeting as an adherent of the Religious Society of Friends. There are those who may be faithful in attendance at worship and diligent in their service to Friends and yet choose not to be recognized as members; they are commonly called “attenders.” The choice to become a member is a motion of the heart and leading of the Spirit.

Membership in the Religious Society of Friends involves a continuing commitment. It implies a readiness and desire to join in the common effort of the Society to seek and follow the Inward Light, as well as some experience and understanding of that Spirit as it is known by Friends – a reality which guides and directs, which gives strength to act upon this guidance and which brings unity with the spirit of God. Decision making by Friends depends upon a common understanding of the guidance of the Spirit as we unite in worship for meeting for business. Membership implies a desire to attend meetings for worship and business regularly, to give service through committees and otherwise as way opens, and to share in financial responsibilities. Membership is an outward sign of commitment to the monthly meeting and to the larger Society.

The Religious Society of Friends desires to include in its membership all persons who find themselves in unity with its faith and practices or are committed to growing toward that unity. Since the admission of members is the responsibility of the monthly meeting, membership, in practice, means that the applicant comes to know the aspirations and ways of a particular meeting and is prepared to share in the responsibilities, difficulties, and joys of its fellowship. Those who are able to help the meeting and be helped by it are likely to thrive as members. Usually Friends become members of monthly meetings nearby. Under appropriate circumstances, an application for membership may be considered from an applicant living at a distance from the meeting. Membership in a monthly meeting also includes membership in the quarterly meeting and the yearly meeting of which the monthly meeting is a part, and in the larger Religious Society of Friends.

Our fellowship with all seekers, and our relationship to a particular meeting, does not cause us to overlook our identity as Friends. The meeting ensures that a prospective member has some knowledge of the wider body of Friends, as there is great diversity in the practices and beliefs of the various branches of the Society. It is everyone's responsibility to be aware that differences do exist and, more importantly, to understand the common faith and experience that unites all Friends, everywhere. A Friend will be open to sensing the presence of God in any meeting visited, and a meeting will be comfortable welcoming Friends of all persuasions.

Religious experience is profoundly important to Friends, who allow considerable freedom in describing their common religious life and experience. The Religious Society of Friends has, however, continually been part of the Christian fellowship, as Friends understand Christianity. Friends are aware that religious truth, the encounter with the ground of our being, or the experience of Christ, comes to different persons in different ways. Seekers find themselves in various stages of growth in their experience of Truth and in the words they use to express this. An open heart and mind and an earnest desire for ever-increasing Light is the chief concern. While readiness for membership implies a degree of religious insight, it does not assume attainment of perfection or an

end to development. Participation in the life of the meeting and living daily by the Spirit results in continuing religious growth.

Attenders

The Society values the presence and participation of everyone drawn to Friends. Attenders are welcome to take part in all aspects of the life of the meeting. The degree to which attenders share in the responsibility for the meeting gives weight to their discernment during meeting for business. Customarily, regular attenders are listed in the meeting's directory. Many Friends groups in NPYM draw little distinction between members and attenders.

The monthly meeting encourages faithful attenders to seek membership as a part of the further development of their religious lives. The Pastoral Care Committee¹ notices when attenders are approaching readiness for membership as shown by their regular attendance at worship and business meetings, participation in discussions, understanding of the testimonies, and willingness to assist with meeting tasks. The committee offers to discuss the possibility of membership with attenders and encourages attenders considering membership to talk with a member of the committee and then to write a letter to the clerk of monthly meeting applying for membership.

Admission to Membership

A person who is considering joining the Religious Society of Friends develops a sympathetic understanding of its faith by consistent attendance and study, becoming familiar with its way of worship, its manner of conducting business, and the responsibilities of membership. Children and young adults are welcome to apply for membership as they feel led. It is important for the applicant to become familiar with the yearly meeting's *Faith and Practice*, and with Friends history, principles, and testimonies.

1. "The Oversight Committee" is a traditional Quaker name for the committee that organizes memorials, handles requests for membership

Queries for Cleanness about Membership

Is the application for membership procedure clear to you?

What brings you to apply for membership now?

Are you familiar with Friends testimonies on simplicity, peace, integrity, community, and equality? In what ways do you find the testimonies helpful? Not helpful? How closely are you in harmony with Friends testimonies?

What attracted you to Friends beliefs and practices? Are there some that you find puzzling or disturbing?

How would you describe the spiritual journey which has led you to seek membership in the Society of Friends?

What do you see as the responsibilities of membership?

Are you aware of the responsibilities of members in a community without hierarchy? What gifts do you bring to enrich the life of the meeting?

Do you understand the relationship among the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings? Are you aware of the programs, services, and facilities at these three levels of our organizational structure?

Are you comfortable with our spiritual and theological diversity? Where might it be a source of strength for you and the Society of Friends? Where might it cause problems?

Are you comfortable with a meeting for worship based on expectant silence? Are you familiar with the source of vocal ministry? Are you able to discern between messages that are intended for yourself and messages that are meant for the meeting as a whole?

What are some milestones in your spiritual journey? How do you expect membership in the meeting to help you on this journey?

Are you familiar with the way in which Friends conduct our meetings for business? What has been your experience with meeting for business?

Are there problems that you would like to share, or should share, that might be of concern to the meeting as they pertain to our resources and our ability to help you?

How will your membership affect your family relationships?

How are you prepared to support the meeting's nurturing and religious education of its children?

Do you have any questions?

The monthly meeting makes a decision to admit a person into membership in the Society in a meeting for business.

An applicant for membership first writes a letter to the monthly meeting expressing a desire to become a member, including reasons for wanting to join. The letter is given to the clerk of the meeting who promptly acknowledges receipt of the letter and forwards it to the clerk of the Pastoral Care Committee. The letter is read to the meeting for business either at the first meeting following its receipt or at the time the committee reports on its recommendation.

The Pastoral Care Committee appoints a Clearness Committee of two or three Friends, at least one of whom is a member of the Pastoral Care Committee, to meet with the applicant. (Practice varies from meeting to meeting whether the Clearness Committee members are members of the meeting.) This Clearness Committee, after making sure that the applicant has a copy of *Faith and Practice* and has become familiar with it, arranges for a time and place for one or more visits with the applicant. (See also “Clearness Committees” in Chapter 5, “The Monthly Meeting.”)

These visits serve to determine the readiness of the applicant and the meeting for this membership by providing an opportunity (1) for the visiting Friends to become acquainted with the applicant on a deeper level, (2) for the applicant to ask questions, and (3) for the visiting Friends to provide any help needed to prepare the applicant and the meeting for this new membership. The topics below, many of which will arise naturally in the course

or marriage under the care of the meeting, and coordinates help and comfort for Friends in need. In many meetings this function is combined with care for the community’s spiritual life, hence the common name “Ministry & Oversight Committee” —the name used by NPYM and its quarterly meetings. However, “oversight” has connotations of slavery for many Friends, and they may use some other name in their meetings, such as Ministry & Counsel for a combined committee. Each Friends’ group names its committees in its own way. Reflecting the concern about “oversight,” this *Faith and Practice* uses “Pastoral Care Committee” for the committee in a local Friends group that has responsibility for memorials, memberships, etc.

of conversation, may serve as guidelines for the committee. The questions are not meant as an examination nor is it expected that there are “right” or “wrong” answers. Their value lies in what they may reveal of the experience of both the counseling Friends and the applicant in seeking and discovering Truth. Sufficient time is allowed to ensure mutual understanding and trust. The visits take place in the spirit of a common search.

This chapter gives an extensive list of topics that the applicant and Clearness Committee may wish to discuss. Some topics may be covered in more depth, others in less. The discussion can be adapted for different circumstances, as appropriate: for example, for a young person who has grown up in the meeting. In most cases, the applicant’s developing relationship to the meeting and the Religious Society of Friends will warrant the most attention.

1. *Motive for applying:* The applicant is naturally interested in this subject and may wish to speak at length about it. Pursuing its implications may take some time, and this is taken into consideration as plans are made for the visit(s). It is helpful to look both at the long-range and more immediate reasons for the application.
2. *Responsibilities of membership:* Membership is a mutual relationship that involves both spiritual and practical considerations. The applicant is brought to understand the importance to the member and to the meeting of regular and prompt attendance at meetings for worship and business. It is essential to discuss the applicant’s potential contributions to the quality of the silence, the spoken ministry, and the work of the meeting. The applicant will also understand that a member is expected to support the meeting financially when possible.
3. *Membership of children:* Older children may apply for full membership. The committee encourages questions from children who wonder about the Religious Society of Friends, offers information, and assures them of the meeting’s love and concern. Some meetings record junior memberships, and an applicant with children under 16 may request

junior membership for them. (See “Children, Youth, and Membership,” below.)

4. *Spiritual and theological matters:* The applicant is reminded of Friends emphasis on personal experience, rather than on formal creeds. This concept may become clear after discussion of the prospective member’s own spiritual experience. The applicant needs to be aware that Friends meeting for worship is more than a collection of people independently meditating and seeking their own “light within.” The Light – whether spoken of as the Inner or Inward Light or as the Light of Christ – is a mystical experience of direct communion with God, available to each person – not possessed by them but rather shared by them. The Light may inwardly illuminate each person so that they are led in spiritual ways and are seen by others as faithfully following that Guide. Since this experience is hard to describe, it may be expressed differently by different Friends, yet it is ultimately the same. Discussion during the visits will reveal the applicant’s degree of comfort with the varied theological perceptions among Friends.
5. *Friends practices:* The committee ensures that the applicant is familiar with Friends literature, such as Howard Brinton’s *A Guide to Quaker Practice* and *Friends for 350 Years* and the writings of other Friends (see Bibliography). These will help the applicant understand the spirit behind the practice of unprogrammed worship, the absence of a paid ministry, the conduct of marriage and memorial services, and the absence of outward sacraments. Special attention is given to the decision-making process and the importance of the Spirit in meetings for business.
6. *Friends testimonies:* The committee discusses with the applicant the role of the Quaker testimonies in his life. “For Friends the most important consideration is not the right action in itself but a right inward state out of which right action will arise. Given the right inward state, right action is inevitable. Inward state and outward action are component parts of a single whole” (Howard Brinton, 1943). (See Chapter 4, “Friends Testimonies”.)

7. *Relationship to other friends:* Becoming a member of a monthly meeting means becoming a member of the whole Religious Society of Friends. The committee clarifies the relationships among monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings and describes the other Quaker meetings in the area and elsewhere, and how North Pacific Yearly Meeting relates to them. Such consideration might lead to a discussion of Friends organizations, study centers, schools, publications, and internet resources.
8. *Relationship to Christianity and other religions:* The applicant will recognize the historic basis of the Religious Society of Friends in Christianity, as well as the significant place of Jesus and the Bible in the spiritual life of many Friends. Likewise it is important to understand that there are Friends who sometimes find traditional Christian language difficult and those who find spiritual meaning and inspiration from non-Christian sources. The committee and the applicant discuss attitudes toward other Christians and other religions.
9. *Membership and personal problems:* The applicant may bring up past or present actions, involvements, or obligations which may make particular demands upon the meeting. The Clearness Committee encourages frank discussion of any burdens the applicant may be carrying, pointing out the meeting's resources and the limitations in helping with these problems.
10. *Education:* The committee asks what aspects of Quaker faith and practice the applicant is led to learn more about, and describes the meeting's resources for the lifelong spiritual growth of members of all ages, with particular care and responsibility for the nurture of children.
11. *Membership procedure:* The committee makes certain that the applicant understands the procedure the meeting will follow in acting on the application for membership.

Clearness Committee discernment is not easy. It is sometimes the committee's work to discern whether delaying or declining membership will be necessary. If the Clearness Committee feels the applicant is not yet ready for membership, it encourages a

wider exposure to Friends beliefs and practices. It may recommend a further period of regular attendance, suggest that the applicant discuss Quakerism with more members of the meeting, and arrange additional visits with the applicant. The Pastoral Care Committee is kept informed and does not forward the application to the meeting for business until this is recommended by the Clearness Committee. There may be times when, during this further exploration, it becomes clear to either the applicant or the Clearness Committee that membership is not advisable. In this case, the applicant can withdraw the request for membership or the Clearness Committee can recommend to the Pastoral Care Committee that the request be set aside.

The Clearness Committee reports to the Pastoral Care Committee about its meetings with the applicant. If the Clearness Committee recommends going forward and the Pastoral Care Committee is satisfied with the applicant's sincerity and readiness to become a Friend, it recommends to the meeting for business that the applicant be accepted into membership. Final action on the recommendation is delayed until the next meeting for business to allow Friends and the prospective member to become better acquainted with each other and to give Friends who have questions or reservations about the applicant an opportunity to explore these with the Pastoral Care Committee.

In some meetings, it is customary for an applicant to withdraw from the meeting for business during deliberations about their membership. A member of the Pastoral Care Committee who did not serve on the Clearness Committee accompanies the applicant out of the room at this time.

At the time when the Pastoral Care Committee takes an application to the monthly meeting, if there are Friends with reservations and the meeting does not feel able to accept the recommendation of the Pastoral Care Committee, the application is returned to that committee. The Pastoral Care Committee contacts the applicant about the delay, consults with the Friends who have reservations, and explores ways of resolving the situation. It may then decide to recommend that the monthly meeting accept the application or that the applicant withdraw the request for membership.

Upon approval of the application, the meeting minutes its acceptance of the new member, appoints a committee of two or more to provide a warm welcome into the meeting fellowship, and arranges for the completion and filing of the membership record (see Appendix of Forms). The welcoming visit also gives the new member an opportunity to ask questions which may have occurred to him after he met with the Clearness Committee. The Welcoming Committee is often responsible for arranging for a Quaker book or periodical as the meeting's welcoming gift; it reports to the meeting when its assignment has been completed.

Applicants from Preparative Meetings and Worship Groups

To the extent possible, the usual procedure for applications for membership is followed when the application is from an attender of a preparative meeting or a worship group under the care of a monthly or quarterly meeting. This process may be modified when the local group is a considerable distance from the sponsoring meeting. The application can be an occasion for fellowship between the two groups.

In the early development of a local group, most of the responsibility for membership applications lies with the sponsoring meeting. As the group grows and when it has several attenders who are members of the Religious Society of Friends, the degree of its responsibility will increase in all matters. (See Chapter 6, "New Gatherings of Friends.") Communication and consultation between the two groups is vital. The application process is as follows.

1. The attender of the local group sends a letter of application to the clerk of the sponsoring meeting, also informing the appropriate person in the local group. The clerk of the sponsoring meeting acknowledges the letter promptly and gives it to the Pastoral Care Committee.
2. The Pastoral Care Committee appoints a Clearness Committee of two or more members of the sponsoring meeting and one or more members from the local group. It

is important that this committee arrange sufficient time for a satisfactory visit with the applicant, even though it may not be immediately possible. The Clearness Committee keeps in mind the several possibilities for meeting with an applicant other than a visit arranged solely for that purpose: at the Annual Session of yearly meeting, at a quarterly meeting, during a visit of the committee sponsoring the local group, or when the applicant is in the area of the sponsoring meeting. Correspondence and telecommunications can also have a role in the process. The committee consults with the local group as well as with the applicant in determining the readiness of both for this membership, before reporting back to the Pastoral Care Committee.

3. When a membership is accepted, in the manner described above, a monthly meeting records it; the new member then bears some responsibility to that meeting. Since only a few members within the monthly meeting may know the new member, it is important for it to have faith in the wisdom of the Clearness Committee and the local group for their part in the process.
4. The clerk of the monthly meeting promptly notifies the new member and the appropriate clerk or convener of the local group regarding the action of the meeting. Cooperation of the local group may be solicited in providing a suitable welcome to the new member.

As a preparative meeting grows and approaches monthly meeting status, the Pastoral Care Committee of the sponsoring meeting may ask the Pastoral Care Committee of the preparative meeting to deal with membership applications (appointing the Clearness Committee, etc.) and to report to it when the time comes to bring the application to the monthly meeting for acceptance.

Children, Youth, and Membership

Monthly meetings are committed to nurturing all the children in our fellowship, who from birth are considered our responsibility and under our care. Children and youth have a particular claim

upon the meeting, which earnestly seeks their spiritual well-being and development. Our yearly meeting does not have “birthright membership,” since we affirm that children and youth are able to make personal choices about their religious life upon reaching maturity.

Junior Membership. In some monthly meetings, youth under 16 may be recorded as “junior members” upon written request from their parents or guardians, if one or both are members of the Religious Society of Friends. The meeting records its acceptance in the minutes. The monthly meeting determines the duration of junior membership. A junior member may apply for regular membership at any time. (Junior members should not be confused with Junior Friends, who are young people of high-school age. See Chapter 8, “The Yearly Meeting,” for the age-group definitions NPYM uses.)

Membership. Any young person approaching maturity may request membership at any time. Friends in the meeting welcome these applications for membership. As young people mature, the question of membership in the monthly meeting may become difficult. Some young people might be offended if asked to apply for membership in a meeting they have always attended, others might be offended if the meeting does not ask them. The Pastoral Care Committee has a continuing responsibility to stay in contact with all the youth of the meeting and, when the youth seem ready, to approach them tenderly. The meeting considers such requests according to the usual procedures, adapting the Clearness Committee topics for each young person’s particular situation.

As youth move into adult lives, the Pastoral Care Committee and others stay in touch with them to assure them of the meeting’s continuing care and interest and to clarify their relationship with the meeting. If young people reach adulthood and have not indicated a desire for membership, the meeting asks them whether they would like to remain listed as attenders in the meeting’s directory.