

Quakers in Yorkshire

Group to Reinvigorate and Simplify Structures and Processes (GRASP)

Interim Report and Consultation – January 2020

1. Background

The GRASP working group was formed after Quakers in Yorkshire met in Doncaster in April 2019 and heard from Paul Parker (Recording Clerk). The meeting was enthused about the opportunities to re-invigorate and simplify Yorkshire Quakerism. GRASP has one representative from each of the seven Area Meetings which make up Quakers in Yorkshire. The aim is to explore ways of simplifying structures, governance and proceedings, so as to create conditions that help meeting communities to grow, thrive and flourish. GRASP is not a decision-making body. It will make recommendations to the area meetings and it is the area meetings which will make decisions.

GRASP has met 5 times and collected data to assess the current organisational picture of Yorkshire Quakers. It has interacted with the national Simpler Meetings Project (see below).

2. Reinvigoration and Simplification

The aim of simplifying our structures resonates with Friends. We have an ageing and declining membership so need to free up time for the core of Quakerism. It is the core which needs reinvigorating. GRASP is clear that we are simplifying in order to reinvigorate Quakerism. We note that Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees have adopted as their strategic priorities “A simple church, supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism”.

3. Core of Quakerism

The heart of Quaker communities lies in our local meetings. Our structures should support and enhance our local meetings, but too often the structures impose a burden and take up a lot of time.

Worship is our core practice. Friends (meaning members and active attenders) meet together to worship and support the witness of our testimonies.

GRASP has identified other core aspects as:

- we have a shared belief in the power of the spirit;
- we want a supportive community at all stages of life;
- we aim for a spirit-led daily life;
- we aim to listen to each other and learn from each other, especially when we sense differences;
- we want to be a community which is inclusive, safe, diverse and non-judgemental.
- we aim to support Friends who are called to witness their faith.
- we want to give service with joy.

All these are focussed on our local meetings and supported by wider structures. We note that none of them depend on property, or finance, or regulation.

The wider structures (area meeting, Quakers in Yorkshire and yearly meeting) are there to support the core aspects of Quakerism. There is a wealth of support provided nationally by Woodbrooke and Friends House. *Quaker Faith & Practice* (Qf&p) is our book describing Quaker worship and witness.

4. What do we mean by reinvigoration?

We aim for our meetings to be active, lively, all-age, diverse and able to support and uphold their members. We want to see our meetings grow. The measures of success are different for each meeting. But experience tells us that we know when we are part of a vibrant worshipping community.

If meetings need assistance in discerning the right course for them, members of GRASP are willing to help.

5. What do we mean by simplification?

Quakers in Britain have inherited a complex governance structure which can be traced directly back to the beginnings of Quakerism in the 17th century and was designed to deal with a hostile environment with personal and corporate persecution. In today's different world, this means that a lot of time and personal energy is taken up in organising and administering British Quakerism. We need to ensure that we devote the right amount of time to worship and witness.

6. Opportunities for change

The opportunities for simplification can, for convenience, be divided into local meetings and area meetings.

Local meetings can consider whether they wish to reduce the number of roles in the meeting. Are all committees and tasks really necessary? Are there simpler ways of doing things? It is often assumed that each local meeting must have at least some basic officers (e.g. clerk and treasurer) but this does not have to be the case. Two or more local meetings might collaborate in sharing roles.

Area meetings are the “primary meeting for church affairs” (Qf&p 4.02). It is at the area meeting level where most opportunities for change exist. Five of the seven AMs in QiY are registered charities and the other two behave as if they are. The AMs are both churches and charities. A survey of the number of roles across the 7 AMs shows that there is a total of about 350 roles at AM level (excluding elders and overseers), or about 50 roles per AM. Each AM has a set of trustees (who look after the legal and charitable aspects of the meetings - regulations, finance, property). There are 59 Friends serving as AM trustees.

The opportunities for simplification are considerable and for convenience can be divided into a hierarchy of possibilities:

- Facilitating the sharing of roles between local meetings;
- Using new technology to replace some face-to-face meetings with online meetings.
- Buying in professional services in areas where it is hard to find Friends able to fill roles. Examples are accounting, property services and safeguarding.
- Reducing the number of roles in the AM - by asking - is the task really necessary; or can it be done in a different way?

Then there are opportunities for sharing roles across/between two or more area meetings. Our seven AMs have been in their current form for a long time (the last major change was in 1921 when Brighouse Monthly Meeting split to form three Monthly Meetings – Brighouse, Leeds and Settle).

- Do the present boundaries match today’s population hubs and transport networks?
- Do the seven AMs currently serve the needs of their meetings in the most appropriate way?

Options for change could be:

- Sharing roles across/between AMs;
- Merging the charity functions of two or more AMs and retaining current AMs for spiritual and outreach functions;
- Full merger of two or more AMs.

7. The wider picture

The concern in Yorkshire is reflected in other regions of Britain Yearly Meeting and there are corresponding initiatives. A number of projects aim to support meetings. Woodbrooke and BYM Trustees have been running a Vibrancy project with a paid worker in four regions. This is now being extended with more Local Development Workers and regional hubs or clusters of BYM staff. A Simpler Meetings Project is being run by Quaker Life with the aim to assist Friends and meetings to decide what might be simplified. There is a wealth of ideas and material on the web at:

<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/support-for-meetings/simpler-meetings>

8. Questions for consultation

GRASP would welcome feedback from Area and Local Meetings as a response to the questions below: Your member on GRASP is available to help you understand them.

1. Are you content with our sense of the core aspects of Quakerism [section 3] and the challenges we are currently facing?
2. Out of the options identified in section 6, which is the priority for your local and area meeting for reinvigoration and simplification?
3. What would help you to achieve reinvigoration and simplification?
4. What are the smallest changes which might make the biggest differences?
5. What opportunities have we missed?

We look forward to hearing your meeting's response to some or all of these queries.

Responses should be sent to your member on GRASP, or to David Olver (email: david@olver.plus.com)

GRASP members (appointed by each AM)

David Bunney (Central Yorkshire), Alison Clarke (York), Steve Hallett (Pickering & Hull), Jim Ledwidge (Brighouse West Yorkshire), Tracey Martin (Leeds), David Olver (Craven & Keighley), Rosie Roberts (Sheffield & Balby), Barbara Windle (QiY Trustees)