

Quakers in Yorkshire



Reinvigoration and Simplification

**Report and Recommendations of
Quakers in Yorkshire GRASP**

February 2021

Quakers in Yorkshire
Group to Reinvigorate and Simplify Structures and Processes
(GRASP)
Report and Recommendations

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Summary and Outline Recommendations

SUMMARY

GRASP's purpose is to suggest how to Reinvigorate and Simplify Structures and Processes. The work began in autumn 2019 and has continued to January 2021.

This report reviews why the work was/is needed, what it is and how Quakers in Yorkshire became involved.

The ageing and declining membership of Quakers in Britain imposes increasing strains on the complex governance and administrative structure we have inherited. Data backing up these statements has been collected and analysed.

To reinvigorate and simplify we need to return to the core of Quakerism:

- Worship, arising from conviction of the power of the Spirit/God, is central to us;
- Through our shared testimonies we aim to translate faith into action in spirit-led daily living;
- We seek to be an inclusive, diverse, supportive community at all stages of life;
- We aim to be non-judgmental, listening to and learning from each other, especially when we sense difference;
- We aim to support Friends called to witness their faith, in the wider world;
- We want to give service with joy.

These words were confirmed in our Interim Report, January 2020. Action since then has been unavoidably curtailed by coronavirus restrictions on us all. Friends have been positive, finding new ways to worship together whilst being sensitive to widely diverse needs in our communities. We can indeed change rapidly when necessary.

This report looks forward. Its recommendations start with the vital nominations processes. Then it suggests how local and area meetings might simplify. It finishes with options for working together more widely, focused on the core aspects of Quakerism.

GRASP and Quakers in Yorkshire are not decision-making bodies. The success or otherwise of this report lies entirely with its readers in all local and area meetings. GRASP and Quakers in Yorkshire will happily advise and support if asked to do so.

OUTLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

Nominations (Section 6)

Filling roles through our nominations process is one of our most vital and challenging tasks. The aim is to make the nominations process joyful and fulfilling. Encourage a wide range of Friends to serve on nominations committees. Use the training and support available by Woodbrooke and others.

Review all roles by asking what functions are being served by your current role-holders. What roles are difficult to fill? Ask how they might be done differently, or shared among people.

Local meetings (Section 7)

We urge local meetings to approach simplification and reinvigoration positively. Simplifying can free more time for worship and witness and building our community.

Set your objective to be a thriving and growing community which puts worship and witness at the heart of what you do.

Ask what functions and roles take up time or resources which could be better spent witnessing to core Quaker values. If you have a meeting house, consider how best to run it effectively and efficiently.

Look outwards to working with other Friends and the local community. Publicise your meeting for worship locally, particularly if using virtual or blended worship. Explore ways of encouraging more people to experience Quakerism.

Area Meetings (Section 8)

AM business meetings are often administration heavy to the detriment of building community. Look for the balance *between worship, mutual support, administration, learning, deliberation and social life which can make its meetings enjoyable occasions and build up the spiritual life of its members.* (Quaker Faith & Practice 4.02). Making worship and witness the main focus will attract wider participation.

Facilitate the sharing of roles between local meetings, emphasising that real sharing can be rewarding in itself and can reduce burdens.

Explore new technology and virtual meetings as ways to improve business by making meetings (particularly committee meetings) work for all, thus encouraging more Friends to give service.

Consider buying in professional services for some core functions and so release the energies of members.

Area Meeting Trustees (Section 9)

AM Trustees have an important role in supporting and facilitating simplification and collaboration.

Whatever is under consideration, always keep in mind your primary aim to support and enhance the spiritual life of local meetings by simplifying charitable functions.

Review your policies and procedures. Are they proportionate to the requirements, well communicated and easy for all Friends to understand?

Every area meeting charity has very similar aims and objectives so look for opportunities for simplifying by sharing and collaborating between area meetings.

Sharing between meetings (Section 10)

Develop personal links between neighbouring local meetings and area meetings facilitating connectivity. Explore together what inhibits cooperation and collaboration and how these factors could be transformed. Sharing functions can reduce the total number of roles.

The opportunities are many, from having one Friend covering a role for two area meetings (e.g. Registering Officer, Safeguarding Co-ordinator), through merging functions (e.g. financial book-keeping), to merging charitable functions.

What brought us to consider Reinvigoration and Simplification

1. Background

Quakers in Yorkshire (QiY) met in Doncaster in April 2019 and Paul Parker (Recording Clerk) took “Reinvigorating Quakerism” as his theme. He spoke of the transformative power of coming to meetings for worship but noted that Quakerism is not as visible as our voice of faith might wish. Friends present strongly concurred that it is time to face the steady decline in membership and ask whether our complex governance structures get in the way of the worship and witness. (See Supplementary Section G).

The Group to Reinvigorate and Simplify Structures and Processes (GRASP) was set up by QiY Trustees at the request of the April 2019 Meeting. It is composed of one representative from each of the seven area meetings forming QiY plus two co-opted members representing QiY itself and links to children and young people.

The initiative in Yorkshire is not alone. Other regions have developed similar projects. Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees have supported programmes e.g. the Vibrancy and the Simpler Meetings projects. The renamed Vibrancy project is to be extended and will involve Yorkshire. (See Wider Quaker Community, page 8)

GRASP has met regularly since autumn 2019. The aim was to explore ways to simplify structures, governance and processes so as to create conditions that help Quaker meetings grow, thrive and flourish. It first reaffirmed that structures are secondary: their purpose is to enable and energise our worship and witness. It then looked at what might be simplified and how. Its January 2020 Interim Report asked Friends and Meetings if the approach was right. Responses clearly confirmed both the desire to consider changes and the approaches proposed.

Detailed consideration across all our meetings was severely interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic’s restrictions on meeting. This delayed the final report. One silver lining was that when meetings were restricted to their fundamental role as worshipping communities, they found ways of continuing to function, most notably via new technology and online meetings. Meetings are still coming to understand the impact of the use of IT, with varied levels of take-up and perceived success.

We re-emphasise that neither GRASP nor QiY are decision-making bodies in relation to this Report. Its recommendations are offered to each area meeting and their local meetings. It is their responsibility to discern how and whether to take specific recommendations forward and whether or not GRASP should continue.

2. Reinvigoration and Simplification

The aim of simplifying our structures in order to reinvigorate Quakerism resonates with Friends today and is in line with the strategic priorities set by Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees who have adopted the aim to be “*A simple church supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism*”.

What do we mean by reinvigoration?

We aim for active, lively, all-age, diverse meetings able to support and uphold their members and attenders. We all want to see meetings thrive and grow. The measure of success will differ for different meetings. For most it will mean growth in attendance and activities. For some it may mean radical change in where and how they meet. There is nothing sacrosanct about a particular meeting. When circumstances change, a new location may better serve the local Quaker community.

How can we assess if a time for change has arrived? We know by experience whether or not we are part of a vibrant worshipping community. However, knowing is only the first stage. Inertia, or differences of view, may inhibit conversations. At this stage external support may be helpful in encouraging the meeting to go forward.

Meetings which are struggling, undecided, or just want to discern the right course for themselves, can call on assistance from area meeting or Quakers in Yorkshire. Members of GRASP, individually or collectively, can act as sounding boards, share experiences or field questions, without pressing any single way forward.

What do we mean by simplification?

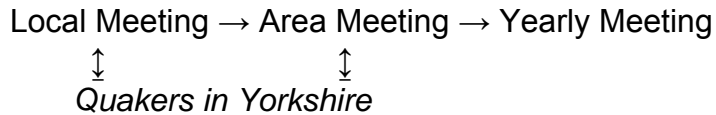
Our complex governance structure goes directly back to the beginnings of Quakerism and was designed to deal with a specific hostile environment. It has served us remarkably well. Its complexity arises from a healthy tension between two conflicting aims. First, to have a flat structure where every member has a part in the governance of the Society, balanced by a discerned discipline with agreed procedures throughout Britain Yearly Meeting. Second, in both practical and spiritual matters, the guidance of the inner light of the individual is tested by the discernment of the Quaker community under the leadings of the Spirit. This discipline – which is exemplified in *Quaker Faith & Practice* – necessarily implies keeping the community together and growing its understanding through systematic consideration in local meetings, area meetings, Meeting for Sufferings, and Yearly Meeting. One consequence of the tension is that each local and area meeting has traditionally perceived itself as a self-contained administrative unit.

The unintended consequence leaves numerous small bodies dealing with over-complex finance, property and nominations matters. This is unnecessarily draining. While local meetings may like to do their own accounting, look after their premises, appoint all its own officers etc., many aspects of managing finances and premises are not specific to a particular location. Sharing and cooperating between meetings can produce savings in time and energy. For example, Pickering & Hull AM has already streamlined the finance functions with a unified set of accounts.

Yorkshire's numerous nominations committees – local, area, Quakers in Yorkshire all have a series of roles to fill but rarely coordinate with each other. Working together could lead to gains for everyone. We already have successful examples of working together, as in, QiY's programmes for children and young people which build on those in local meetings. There may be good ideas to transfer from this work into other areas of responsibility.

3. Quakerism in Yorkshire

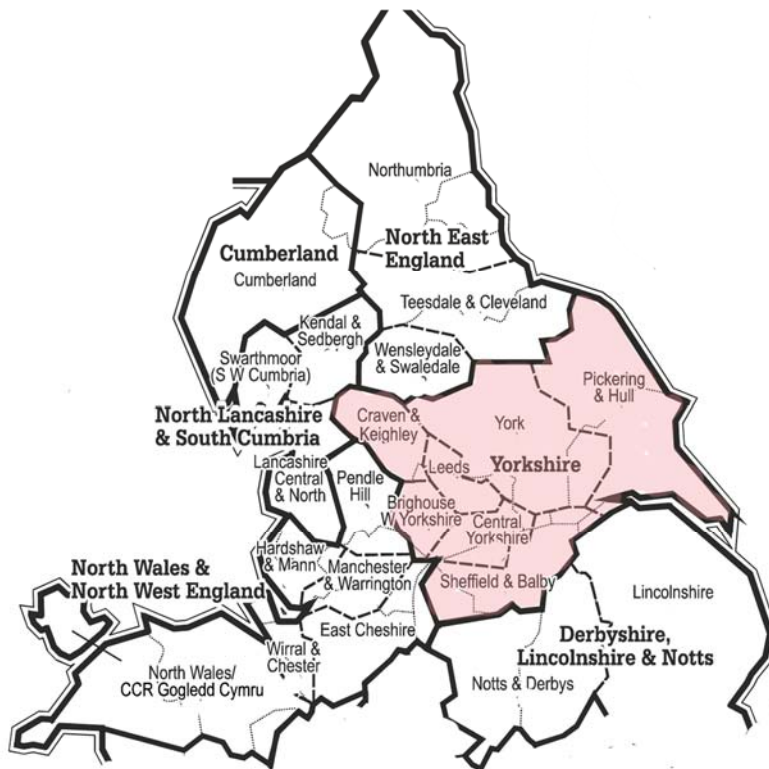
Quakers in Yorkshire supports Quaker worship and witness in the region covering seven area meetings. It is a registered charity which is 'owned' by the area meetings. The relationship can be expressed:



The seven area meetings cover 38 local meetings as follows:

- Brighouse West Yorkshire AM** (Bradford, Halifax, Hebden Bridge, Huddersfield, Scholes);
- Central Yorkshire AM** (Ackworth, Barnsley, High Flatts, Pontefract, Wakefield, Wooldale);
- Craven & Keighley AM** (Airton, Bentham, Keighley, Settle, Skipton);
- Leeds AM** (Adel, Carlton Hill, Gildersome, Ilkley, Rawdon, Roundhay);
- Pickering & Hull AM** (Beverley, Hull, Kirkbymoorside, Malton, Pickering, Scarborough, Whitby)
- Sheffield & Balby AM** (Balby (Doncaster), Hope Valley, Sheffield Central, Sheffield Nether Edge)
- York AM** (Acomb, Friargate, Harrogate, New Earswick, Thirsk)

The map shows the area meetings in Quakers in Yorkshire and those surrounding QiY. More background information on the history of QiY and on the current area and local meetings is contained in Supplementary Section G.



Within the boundary of Yorkshire are four Quaker schools (Ackworth, Bootham, Breckenbrough and The Mount). Quakers in Yorkshire appoints governors for Bootham, Breckenbrough and The Mount. It is the responsible body for Bootham and The Mount. The schools are large Quaker employers and teach mainly non-Quaker children within a 'Quaker-ethos'. They represent a potential pool of people who experience Quaker worship and learn our testimonies and witness in the world.

Wider Quaker community

Quakers in Yorkshire is closely intertwined with the wider Quaker community in Britain. Actions in Yorkshire to reinvigorate and simplify will impact on others and vice versa.

Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) Trustees have been promoting simplification for a number of years. Actions have included drastically reducing the size of internal committees and supporting relevant projects. The projects which are particularly relevant for GRASP are, Local Development Workers (LDW); Simpler Meetings project and Youth Development Workers. The LDW project builds on the previous Vibrancy project to put staff in four regions of the country (North West, Devon & Cornwall, Kent and Wales). The evaluation of the Vibrancy project showed it has been a success, helping to engage local Friends more in their worship and witness. BYM and Woodbrooke Trustees are now committed to rolling out LDWs across the whole of the Yearly Meeting. In the next phase, commencing in 2021, LDWs will be placed in Yorkshire (together with Scotland, North East and East Anglia). GRASP sees the Yorkshire LDW as an opportunity to enhance Quaker communities in QiY.

BYM is also committed to providing a hub for some of the staff who currently work out of Friends House in London. They have chosen Leeds as the base for the hub, partly because a number of staff have homes in Yorkshire.

For the last three years, BYM has supported a fixed term project based in Quaker Life called Simpler Meetings. The aim is to coordinate and collect ideas for simpler meetings, particularly to find ways of reducing the burden on key role-holders. This has generated a lot of interest. There is a section on the national website with a wealth of practical ideas and suggestions on how meetings might simplify. See <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/support-for-meetings/simpler-meetings>.

BYM has also supported a three-year youth work research project, employing two youth development workers in the Bristol area and in Yorkshire (based in Sheffield). The two youth workers, often working together, have been successful in developing activities to enable the young Friends to flourish. The project ends in 2021.

Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre is working with BYM to take learning out to Friends. This supplements traditional short courses with taking learning to meetings and offering online courses. The pandemic has hastened this process. Woodbrooke has a wealth of resources to provide learning in the community. Responses to the closure of the physical Woodbrooke site in Birmingham during the lock-down already show that there is an appetite for online learning about all aspects of Quakerism. It is a mark of a vibrant Quaker community that it is willing to embrace and promote such learning alongside personal contacts and face-to-face learning

Where we are now

4. The Core of Quakerism

The heart of Quaker communities lies in our local meetings. Friends (meaning members and active attenders) meet together to worship and to support the witness of our testimonies. Our structures should support and enhance our local meetings, but too often the structures impose a burden and take up a lot of time. The basic structure of local meetings under the umbrella of an area meeting has been in place since the early days of Quakerism. It has served us well and should continue but be simplified. Britain Yearly Meeting forms an over-arching umbrella and is the final constitutional authority. Quakers in Yorkshire is not part of the administrative structure of the Yearly Meeting but provides pan-Yorkshire services and links the Quakers communities in Yorkshire.

To reinvigorate and simplify we need to return to the core of Quakerism:

- Worship, arising from conviction of the power of the Spirit/God, is central to us;
- Through our shared testimonies we aim to translate faith into action in spirit-led daily living;
- We seek to be an inclusive, diverse, supportive community at all stages of life;
- We aim to be non-judgmental, listening to and learning from each other, especially when we sense difference;
- We aim to support Friends called to witness their faith, in the wider world;
- We want to give service with joy.

Quaker Faith & Practice is our core book containing extracts expanding these core aspects of Quakerism. The book expresses our understanding of the truth about the Spirit/God as witnessed in our Quaker testimonies. The core aspects are focused 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 the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and Britain Yearly Meeting.

5. GRASP work informing recommendations

GRASP members have collected data on membership trends, the number of roles in our area meetings and a list of meeting houses. The data is reported in Supplementary Sections A to D. It confirms that we have a slowly declining membership in Yorkshire and that we have a large number of roles in our area meetings, all of which need to be filled by Nominations Committees. We also have a large number of meeting houses, many of them historic, which require time and resources to maintain.

In January 2020 GRASP published an Interim Report for consultation. The report was intended to start the process of meetings considering reinvigoration and simplification as well as sensing the appetite for change. Meetings responded

positively and confirmed that our thinking was along the right lines and Friends are ready to simplify structures as long as all change is made with spirit-led discernment. There was endorsement of the core aspects of Quakerism. Further information is in Supplementary Section E.

The consideration of the Interim Report was interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic and the consequent closure of meeting houses in March 2020. This had a major impact on how meetings function. The three lock-downs to date have led meetings to respond in many positive ways, particularly by using online meetings and new technology. A summary of the ways meetings have responded to date is contained in Supplementary Section F. For now, all we can say is that:

- The long-term impact is unknown and it is too soon to make predictions;
- The pandemic has reminded us that Quakerism was born in a period of change and we can still change rapidly;
- The pandemic may force us to change in ways which will also be needed by the climate emergency;
- Online virtual meetings present clerks and others with a real challenge to discernment and getting ‘the feeling of the meeting’;
- The financial impact on meeting houses may precipitate consequences as yet unforeseeable.

The Way Forward

6. Filling roles and the nominations process

One of the most challenging tasks in local and area meetings is to find Friends to fill the roles needed to keep the local and area meetings operating. The scale of this task is evident from the data in Supplementary Section C which is the result of a survey of the roles in our area meetings. Across the 7 AMs, there are about 400 roles plus another 250 Friends undertaking spiritual and pastoral care (Elders and Overseers). The total membership in the QiY region is about 1300 so there are, on average, two members to fill each role. In practice, many members are not able to contribute to filling the roles, so fewer members end up taking on multiple roles. As these are the most active members, they have less time for the spiritual and witness side of Quakerism.

Nominations Committees are at the heart of finding the right Friends to fill the roles. The successful life of the local and area meetings depends on the nominations process being undertaken with care and sensitivity. All but the smallest local meetings will have nominations committees. It is estimated that across Quakers in Yorkshire about 250 Friends serve on nominations committees.

The task of the nominations committee can be summarised as: (i) to respond to requests from their parent meeting; (ii) to assess the skills and experience needed for each role; (iii) to find the names of Friends who potentially have the requisite skills; (iv) to discern who should be approached and in which order; (v) to approach

and ask those selected; (vi) to interact with Friends considering accepting nomination; (vii) to nominate the Friends to the appointing body.

Each LM and AM will wish to approach the task of reviewing their nominations process in their own way. The following are recommended questions to ask.

Particular roles and functions

- What function does this particular role fulfil?
- Is it essential? Could it be better done in a different way?
- By a team or individual? Would sharing responsibility feel less burdensome?

More generally: ways of doing things

- How might roles and functions be delivered?
- Where might paid support be useful? (finance/audit, admin, maintenance?).
- Who can service these roles? (Member? Attender? Professional? Other?).
- Where would you look beyond your local meeting?

Looking more broadly

- What roles or functions might be shared across a wider group within QiY? (trustees? prison visitors? data protection? Safeguarding? Registering officers?)
- Where would you start the conversation within your own AM?
- Who would you approach beyond AM to share ideas? (AM clerks forum? AM clerks of trustees?)
- Which nearby AMs might be glad to work with you, to pool lists, share ideas?
- Is there a benefit in drawing together some roles?

In November 2020, GRASP organised an online workshop for Friends involved in nominations. The workshop was attended by 25 Friends with all area meetings represented by at least three Friends. All had been on nominations committees at many different levels. The contributions emphasised:

- the importance of maintaining spiritual discernment;
- seeing the nominations process as Quakerism in action,
- ways of simplifying roles;
- the potential for pooling resources across area meetings;
- the availability of training and value of being pro-active within the community.

A fuller summary is at Supplementary Section H. A small group of the workshop participants came together to make a 17-minute video, *Willing and Able*, talking about positive ideas in relation to nominations. This video is available and a link is on the GRASP page of the QiY website <https://quakersinyorkshire.org.uk/GRASP>

7. Simplification at local meeting level – opportunities for reinvigoration

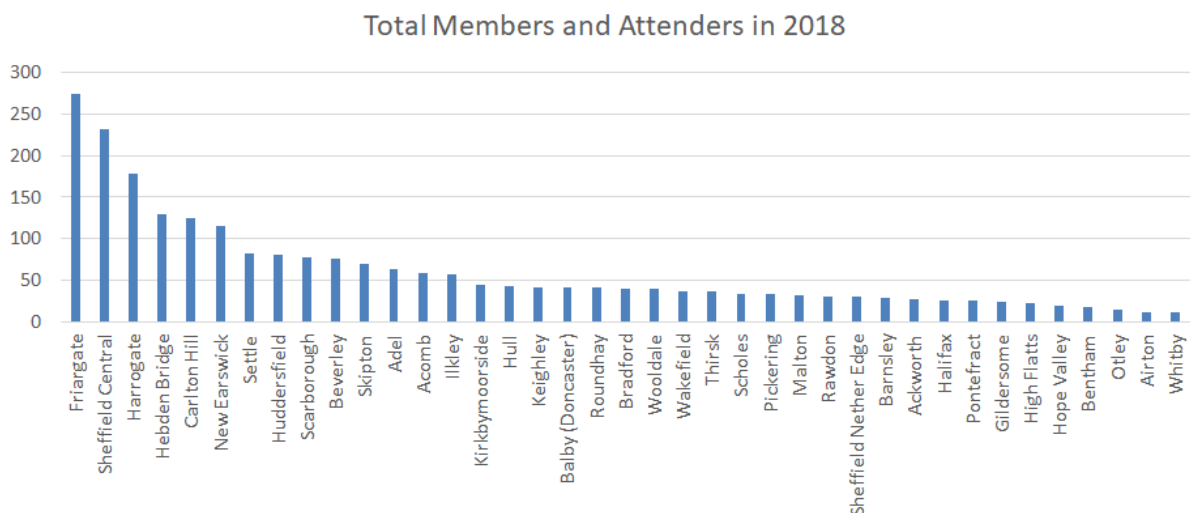
Our local meetings are the heart of our Quaker life. They form a community with worship at the centre and from the worship springs witness which can be local, regional, national and international. The life of members and attenders revolves around the local meeting. It is worth noting that only a small subset of members and a few attenders engage with Quaker service outside their local meeting. Thus, if there is going to be reinvigoration and simplification, it needs to be focussed in our local meetings. Without engagement with the issues at local level, there will not be buy-in at area meeting level and beyond.

It is not the intention in this section to offer a menu for simplification. To do so can be overwhelming and not necessarily helpful as each local meeting is unique. Furthermore, there is a large amount of information and ideas already available on the Britain Yearly Meeting website: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/support-for-meetings/simpler-meetings>

Reinvigoration should be seen as a positive aim for local meetings. Positive because it can unite and enthuse members and attenders. The objective should be to make the meeting a growing community which supports and cares for each member. Ideally it should be a rewarding process. Questions to ask include:

- Are our members and attenders gaining from their association with the meeting?
- Do they go away from worship and events feeling satisfied?
- Have they learnt more through discussions?
- Do they take part in external events and courses? Looking outwards is a sign of an active meeting - irrespective of size.

Local meetings in Yorkshire vary considerably in their size and this fact means that what is feasible to consider for a large meeting, makes no sense for a small meeting. The chart below shows the size of the meetings across Yorkshire (see Supplementary Section A for more detail). There are a few large meetings, a large number of medium size meetings and a tail of small meetings.



Small meetings clearly present a challenge to keep functioning. But they do have some things in their favour. Most of the active Friends associated with small meetings tend to be strongly committed to preserving the life of the meeting. In contrast, in a larger meeting, only a subset of Friends will be involved in running the meeting. The desire to keep a small meeting operating can lead to innovative ideas, particularly if members can enlist the support of a neighbouring meeting. Each small meeting is unique so generalisations cannot be made. Most of the small meetings have heritage meeting houses which are the formal responsibility of the AM Trustees. This can lead to tensions but if properly managed it can lead to rewarding partnerships.

Local meetings might consider whether they wish to reduce the number of roles in the meeting.

- Are there simpler ways of doing things?
- Are all committees and tasks really necessary?
- Can some formal roles be replaced by volunteers who do the function when needed?

Over recent years, many of our meetings have decreased in size, but retained the organisational structure which was appropriate for a larger meeting. 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. Another local meeting can take on some tasks. The important thing is to find a way for the resources in the meeting to be used to primarily maintain the worship and witness.

This points to perhaps one of the most useful ways of simplification – namely collaboration between local meetings. There have been many examples in Yorkshire where this has arisen naturally and has been productive. But more might be considered. Talking informally to a neighbouring meeting may be worth-while, if only to show that there are different ways of organising tasks. The AM naturally has a role in fostering collaboration. Examples might be sharing financial or property management between two or more local meetings. Sometimes it may be worth considering using external, paid, assistance (e.g. property management or financial services).

The upkeep and maintenance of meeting houses imposes a significant responsibility on meetings. This is a shared responsibility between the local meeting, the area meeting and Trustees. Often the main burden falls on the local meeting because the members are using the premises week by week. Professionals are usually used to undertake maintenance tasks on buildings. Just organising professionals can be a time-consuming task so it may be worth considering employing people to manage the buildings – assuming that the finances allow this to be done. It may even mean considering whether owning the meeting house constitutes a disproportionate drain on your capacity for worship and witness. Do you have options?

Most of the suggestions above have been inward-looking. They have been about making suggestions for survival. We all want to **thrive**, rather than just survive. This means looking outwards and asking how can we increase our membership and how can we enable the meeting to grow. Outreach is needed to people who do not

currently worship and witness with us. It may mean thinking radically. It may mean taking Quakerism and our silent worship to where people live and work – rather than expecting people to come to our meeting houses.

8. Simplification at area meeting level – opportunities for reinvigoration

This section considers the internal opportunities for simplification in our area meetings. The AM is also the charitable unit with trustees and this aspect is dealt with in the next section.

Area Meetings are the primary meeting for church affairs in Britain Yearly Meeting. But equally important, they are supposed to be at the heart of our spiritual and caring community. It is worth quoting from paragraphs 4.01 and 4.02 of *Quaker Faith & Practice* as these define the role and responsibility of Area Meetings:

4.01 Until 2007 area meetings were known as monthly meetings. The change was made to give more emphasis to the area meeting as a spiritual community rather than a regular event, and in the interests of accuracy because many monthly meetings no longer met monthly. •••••

4.02 The area meeting is the primary meeting for church affairs in Britain Yearly Meeting. Its role is to develop and maintain a community of Friends, a family of local meetings who gather for worship and spiritual enrichment. It should provide that balance between worship, mutual support, administration, learning, deliberation and social life which can make its meetings enjoyable occasions and build up the spiritual life of its members.

Area meetings act as facilitators and co-ordinators, ensuring that their constituent local meetings have access to opportunities for fellowship, spiritual development, and spiritual and pastoral care, including the care of children and young people. They also provide mutual support through the shared testing of concerns. •••••

The reality nowadays is that administration often dominates our business meetings to the detriment of the other core functions in 4.02 of **worship, mutual support, learning, deliberation and social life**. As a result, it is not often that the meetings are *enjoyable occasions which build up the spiritual life of its members*. Hence, an important reason to consider simplification of AMs is to free up time to enhance the spiritual life, witness and caring of the Quaker community in the AM.

The opportunities for simplification are considerable. The following topics are not comprehensive and each area meeting will wish to approach consideration in their own way. Here we discuss four topics:

- Facilitating the sharing of roles between local meetings
- Using new technology
- Buying in professional services
- Reducing the number of roles in the AM

Facilitating the sharing of roles between local meetings

The previous section highlighted opportunities in local meetings and included the possibility of sharing between local meetings. This may be a good role for the area meeting which is in a position to oversee the appropriate balance and fairness between the differing needs of each local meeting.

The aim should be to make sharing a joy, and not an imposed effort. True sharing can be invigorating and give a spiritual dimension to necessary tasks.

Using new technology

- Once members of a committee know each other, some meetings can be replaced by virtual meetings, saving on time and transport costs
- Pre-circulation of draft minutes can be efficient, but this must not prevent genuine consideration and discernment

Using new technology can contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and a small positive step towards reducing the climate emergency. But virtual meetings depend on 'cloud computing' which has some carbon emissions.

Buying in professional services

Look at the following:

- Accounting
- Property
- Safeguarding
- Recruitment and staff management (contracts, terms and conditions, pensions, pay and rewards)

A number of area meetings are already using professional financial services, including the use of professional external examiners to do the auditing of the annual accounts. There are good transparency and accountability reasons for doing this as it provides an independent examination of the accounts. The next stage might be to use professional book-keepers who can relieve the AM treasurer of this task. This could be extended to take over the book-keeping done by local treasurers. However, this will obviously cost money so there is a trade-off. Finally, there might be the option to professionalise all the financial and accounting functions. What may work for finance, could also be extended to other areas. Property is the most obvious. Local meetings with property already use a significant number of professional services. Extending this to property management is the next logical stage. Again, there is a trade-off. Safeguarding is an area where professional advice may be very helpful (currently provided nationally by the organisation *Thirtyone-eight*). It can be a real challenge to find Friends willing to take on the role of safeguarding coordinator/officer because they often do not feel that they have the expertise. The professional will not replace the needs for local safeguarding, but could help by being retained to provide advice and guidance on how to deal with specific situations.

Reducing the number of roles in the AM

The number of roles in our AMs are listed in Supplementary Section C. We have inherited a large number of roles. Some are needed to keep the area meeting functioning but it is often becoming harder to find Friends to fill all the roles. It is well worth asking a few questions:

- Is the role really necessary?
- Can it be done in a simpler way?
- Do we explain how the role adds to the life of the meeting?
- Do we provide induction and training for Friends new to roles?
- How might a task be made a joy, rather than a burden?

9. Simplification at AM Trustee level

One of the greatest organisational changes in the history of British Quakerism over 350 years took place in the early part of this century with the registration of area meetings as charities. This has **added** a layer of administration which did not exist previously. It caused the new role of appointed trustees to be created. Their responsibilities are defined by law, which goes against the concept of all Friends being equally responsible as members of our Society.

Previously Area Meetings were charities, but not registered charities. This is because one of the four strands of charitable status has always been the advancement of religion. But Quakers, along with other churches, had “excepted” status which meant that we did not have to register and hence were not regulated by the Charity Commission. This changed with the 2006 Charities Act which aimed to provide a more level playing field for all charities by abolishing excepted status. However, to complicate matters, the Charity Commission could not handle all registrations in one go, so introduced a financial turn-over below which excepted charities were told not yet to register. This process still continues with the result that in Quakers in Yorkshire, one of the seven area meetings is not yet registered. However, Central Yorkshire AM has chosen to behave internally as if it were a charity and appoint trustees, just as others did before they were registered.

There are a number of consequences resulting from becoming registered charities and appointing trustees, some of which are relevant to the simplification agenda:

- Nominations committees need to find trustees. These are significant roles with a limited number of members with the skills, or experience, or desire, to take on the role. At a time when the pool of members has decreased this puts a strain on everyone.
- A tension often exists between the role of trusteeship and the role of the AM business meeting.
- Trustees have to follow the requirements of the Charity Commission and other regulatory bodies. The trustees collectively are responsible and this can create tensions within the group of trustees.
- Trustees might be tempted to cover themselves by creating “policies” without putting in place the mechanisms for them to be communicated and hence observed. Trustees should (and in some cases must) ensure the AM has

policies in relation to such things as safeguarding, data protection, health and safety, risk assessment, lettings, employment, finance and sustainability. It is worth thinking about a policy from the perspective of the reader and asking is it simple? Is it realistic? Also is it written in easy to understand English?

It might seem that there are few opportunities for simplification in the trusteeship function. But there are options which can be considered:

- Simplifying the finances of LMs and AMs;
- Using new technology for meetings (where Friends are content to use it).
- Ensuring the process of discernment used in trustee meetings is applied correctly;
- Considering the impact trustee decisions might have on others;
- Asking how the spiritual life of the meetings can be enhanced by trustees;
- Not increasing the burden (perceived or real) on other role-holders in the AM.

There could be a useful role for trustees in fostering collaboration. This might be internally within the area meeting, between local meetings, or externally with another area meeting. Section 7 has considered the opportunities for sharing between Local Meetings and section 10 considers the opportunities for collaboration between AMs, including the possibility of merging charitable units. If sharing between meetings is going to work, it needs the support and encouragement of trustees.

10. Sharing between meetings

There has been some collaboration and cooperation between meetings since the start of Quakerism, but it has not been large scale. An example is where small meetings have received the support of larger neighbouring meetings. There are natural barriers to overcome. Humans are geared to working in family units and this concept gets extended to the groups to which we belong, including our local meetings, where we hope to form strong bonds that foster a sense of community and care for each other as we worship together. This natural tendency to try to solve problems internally deters collaboration between local meetings, even when geographically close. This tendency extends to the area meeting where its status as the primary membership unit and charity deters cooperation between area meetings.

If we are genuinely considering reinvigoration, we need to move beyond this mindset to ask whether sharing and partnerships between two or more local meetings or two or more area meetings might not simplify our structures and promote reinvigoration.

Most cooperation starts with personal contact and is fostered when two or more Friends get on well together either socially or workwise. Thus, the starting point needs to be meeting together informally and encouraging the growth of friendship. The aim in all collaboration should be to free personal resources for the flowering of the spirit, both through worship and through witness. Necessary administration needs to be streamlined and economical.

Compared to most other regions in Britain Yearly Meeting, we already have (thanks to QiY's quarterly meetings and other activities) regular opportunities for much better informal contact between individual Friends across Yorkshire. Even so there is

relatively little direct interaction between the seven area meetings. Geography plays a part. Two or more local meetings in different area meetings may be relatively close together but hills or transport barriers often mean formal contacts are limited.

If we are to maximise the potential for simplification, it is worth resisting old barriers of habit, location, reluctance to change and looking at what we have to gain. New technology has a useful role to play. With each area meeting committed to very similar administration, we can look for short cuts and avoid reinvention of the wheel. And as the first stage in any cooperation is to get like-minded Friends in two or more AMs together, encouraging this is an obvious role for Quakers in Yorkshire and specifically for GRASP.

The opportunities for AMs working together form a framework:

- Sharing roles with one Friend covering two (or more) area meetings. e.g. Registration Officer where some of our AMs have few marriages.
- Assisting with roles. e.g. chaplaincy when there are no prisons in one area.
- Combining roles. e.g. safeguarding which requires particular skills not available in one area meeting.
- Merging functions. Examples might be property oversight or financial resources.
- Sharing policies. There is no need for each AM to have its own unique set.
- Merging charitable functions. Each AM is currently a designated charity. There is no legal necessity for this. If two or more area meetings agreed to become one charitable unit (while still remaining distinct AMs), they would need only one set of trustees. The Charity Commission encourages mergers and makes the process easy, particular where the objectives are the same. London Quakers and Friends in Wales are considering having one set of trustees, but retaining their area meetings.
- Merging area meetings. This would need the full support of Members in the AMs but with potentially big savings in roles. Again, the Charity Commission encourages mergers and makes them straight-forward. As every AM's governing document is based on *Quaker Faith & Practice*, the process ought to be relatively simple.

The present seven AMs in QiY have been in place since 1923 when the then Brighouse Monthly Meeting split into three, forming Brighouse, Leeds and Settle Monthly Meetings. Even then, many of the properties were retained in a common charity. This was recently disbanded, with transfer of remaining responsibilities to QiY Trustees.

Postscript

We hope you will enjoy considering and implementing this report as much as we have enjoyed its preparation. Try to embrace the prospect of change, remembering that help is available and there are practical suggestions in the report. Change is an essential sign that we are alive.

Quakers have a way that is quite distinctive in the world. We need to be more widely known and to reverse the current decline in numbers by reinvigorating and diversifying our community. Simpler structures are part of the process of freeing the spirit in our meetings and ourselves.

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

Postscript to an epistle to 'the brethren in the north' issued by a meeting of elders at Balby, 1656.

GRASP (February 2021)

David Bunney (Central Yorkshire), Alison Clarke (York), Tim Herrick (Sheffield & Balby), Jim Ledwidge (Brighouse West Yorkshire), Tracey Martin (Leeds), David Olver (Craven & Keighley), Rosie Roberts (co-opted), Phyllis Wicks (Pickering & Hull), Barbara Windle (co-opted).