

## Quakers in Yorkshire

### Notes from session on 21 January 2023 at Quakers in Yorkshire on Simplification in the Society of Friends

#### Format of session:

Introduction by BYM Trustees – Carolyn Hayman, Kate Gulliver & Ellie Harding.  
Update on the GRASP consideration in QiY – David Olver  
Update on simplification in Scotland (also London and Wales) – Kate Gulliver  
Break-out groups – (4 in meeting house, 1 online)  
Reporting back

#### Introduction

BYM Trustees have been considering 'simplification' for over 5 years, starting with general aims and principles and then moving on to practicalities. They are now reviewing how to make the central structures and committees of BYM simpler, more inclusive and more sustainable. It was noted that the Yearly Meeting Review Group is looking at both Yearly Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings.

Each generation reviews its Quaker structures. So historically regular change has happened. The aim should always be to 'put our house in order' and make it fit for the present generation so that our testimonies can be put into action.

Our structures should be understandable by new-comers, who should not be put off by apparent complexity. It should be clear how concerns, arising in one part of the structure, are subject to broader discernment before potentially being adopted for action. If the structures are right, they should enable all to participate. Committees need to be run inclusively, have diverse membership and be sustainable.

Trustees have held online focus groups to seek views. One-point emerging is that many Friends do not consider worship and witness to be separate.

The problem at the moment is that our central structures are not simple. They ought to be more inclusive, more flexible, more open.

Above all, they need to be sustainable. They need to respond if the number of formal members continues to decline. They need to ask what is especially Quaker about what is being done centrally.

Our Quaker structures need to be fun to work with.

#### GRASP

A summary of the consideration of simplicity in Yorkshire was presented. It started in 2019 with the formation of the GRASP group which published their report in early 2021, entitled Reinvigoration and Simplification. This has been extensively considered by the seven area meetings and local meetings. The focus has been on how to simplify our structures. There is currently a proposal for a working group to look at options for ways of simplifying our charitable structures, noting the large number of Friends across Yorkshire who are serving as trustees. It was emphasised that simplification is a route towards reinvigoration. GRASP stated that in order to reinvigorate and simplify we need to return to the core of Quakerism:

1. Worship, arising from conviction of the power of the Spirit/God, is central to us;

2. Through our shared testimonies we aim to translate faith into action in spirit-led daily living;
3. We seek to be an inclusive, diverse, supportive community at all stages of life;
4. We aim to be non-judgmental, listening to and learning from each other, especially when we sense difference;
5. We aim to support Friends called to witness their faith, in the wider world;
6. We want to give service with joy.

## **Scotland, London and Wales**

The current considerations in Scotland were described. They had started relatively late but were now making good progress. Quakers in Scotland have a history of working together and devolution gives them opportunities, for instance they have a Scottish Parliamentary Engagement Office, and now a Local Development Worker. They like the GRASP report and aim to build sustainable communities. They have got to the stage of being willing to consider changing structures. They are asking questions such as: What do we actually need? Do we have to physically meet? What resources are needed? How can we provide for our needs?

The considerations of simplification in London and Wales were also recounted. The area meetings in London have been considering a proposal to have just one area meeting covering all London, though not all the AMs seem to be content with the proposal. Wales has just agreed to merge charitable functions and keep the separate area meetings, see:

<https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/news/quakers-across-wales-cut-bureaucracy-to-realise-quaker-vision>

## **Summary of responses from break-out groups which discussed the question: What changes could we make that would make more space for worship, witness and discernment?**

### **Group 1:**

- The requirement to have trustees creates problems. There is confusion over different types of charitable organisation ( for instance Charitable Incorporated Organisations - CIOs).
- The London Quakers Property Trust is a good example of sharing responsibilities for property.
- Smaller meetings with large meeting houses cause considerable burden on members. This is also the case with old properties, particularly heritage properties.
- However, there is pride in ownership which can release voluntary effort.

### **Group 2:**

- How to have committees that do not become a burden on Friends.
- It is the 400th anniversary of the birth of George Fox next year. This presents opportunities but also suggests that we might ask the question: What was it that George Fox founded?
- New technology has both uses and abuses. There are examples among Friends of both.

### **Group 3:**

- We should not lose the essentials of the Quaker Business Method.
- We should learn from other Quaker groups. Young Friends General Meeting has different approaches to business, with different roles, including some with short terms, so that Friends do not have to serve fixed yearly terms.
- Changes which other bodies have introduced can also work for us.

### **Group 4:**

- “What are we going to stop doing?”
- A committee structure that, aiming to be inclusive, involves more Friends, doesn’t reduce the volume of work (number of tasks) which is where the focus needs to be.
- Do new members know enough about what membership requires of them? Do we skate over the importance of contributing to the running and the activities of the Meeting? (“As an attender of only 6 weeks, I was invited onto the flower rota”).
- We need to give attenders the opportunity to learn through involvement, discovering early on what skills they offer.
- The geographical boundaries of our AMs don’t always make sense. (An example was given of three geographically close LMs in three different AMs, which doesn’t facilitate bringing their teenagers together).
- Amalgamating at a higher level, reducing the number of clerks, treasurers and trustees, is an obvious route to consider.
- We’ve spoken earlier today of reinvigoration and of finding joy – we need to celebrate more!
- What’s preventing us? Some Friends are still shell-shocked, post-pandemic.
- Much effort is put into maintaining old buildings, draining the energies of a few dutiful Friends, but proposals to put them to other uses or dispose of them can polarise the Meeting, stalling progress.
- Zoom has enabled us to connect in a new way across large distances, saving time, travel costs and carbon-based energy consumption, but some assert that good discernment in a meeting for worship for business is impossible on Zoom. However, we’ve had more than 350 years of in-person Meetings and less than three-and-a-half on Zoom or in hybrid meeting. We can learn.

### **Online Group:**

- A big space could be opened up if Yorkshire Friends set up a shared property company to own and manage the Meeting Houses, as has been the case in London since the beginning. More generally, employing professionals to give support in areas such as finance and property would take some of the load, rather than just shuffling the same amount of work around different Quaker configurations.
- Committees should be seen as places of friendship learning and spiritual growth. A single AM for Yorkshire would take away opportunities for more Friends to practise the skills of clerking and community building. And would there be Friends willing to take on the challenges of being a Trustee for a Yorkshire wide AM?

- Should we worry that only a small proportion of Friends attend AM, and they are mostly role holders? Could AM be more appealing if there was more space for discussion and discernment, rather than reports being read out? Friends do meet outside their LMs for witness and education, so maybe we are not so congregationalist as we fear?
- It's hard for stronger Meetings to support weaker ones – the weaker ones don't have the capacity to accept the help.
- Younger Friends may be doing their Quakerism in quite different ways that don't involve regular attendance at Sunday morning Meeting for Worship.