Ready for Membership? Voices from the 2014 Australian Quaker Survey

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Abstract

The 2014 national survey of Australian Quakers included two questions about application for Membership, with responses from 250 Members and 89 Attenders. This article summarises these views into 54 topics and 14 key themes, considers them in relation to various sociological perspectives and compares the results to those from previous surveys in Britain and the USA. The most common reasons for Membership application were feelings of belonging and wanting to commit, to make a public declaration, and a desire to take on responsibilities and contribute. The reasons Attenders did not apply included the belief that it was unnecessary, an inability to attend Meetings regularly, concerns about some Quaker processes – including the Member/Attender distinction – and an unwillingness to commit more time and support. Further education about the expectations for Membership and more personal invitations may assist in reducing the current decline in the ratio of Members to Attenders in Meetings in Australia and Britain.

Keywords

Membership, Attenders, Australia, Quakers, commitment, belonging.

Introduction

Many social researchers have discussed the reasons people seek out religious affiliation (Carrier 1965; Iannaccone 1990; Lim and Putnam 2010; Wesselmann 2015; Ysseldyk et al. 2013), but there is almost no literature on how people make decisions about the level of their Membership participation within the religious organisations that they belong to. In 2016 the proportion of adult Quakers who were classified as Attenders, rather than full Members of the Religious Society of Friends, was 45 per cent in Australia and 37 per cent in Britain (Australia Yearly Meeting 2016; Britain Yearly Meeting 2016). In both countries the ratio of

Members to Attenders is declining: in Australia from 2.5 in 1982 to 1.2 in 2016; in Britain from 2.7 to 1.7 over the same period.

This article examines comments from over 300 Australian Friends on their views about application for Membership that were recorded in the 2014 Australian Quaker Survey (AQS) in order to better understand current Friends' attitudes on this topic.

Several summaries of the development of the concept of Membership in the Religious Society of Friends have been written (Brinton 1953; 1961; Chadkirk 2014; Heron 2000; Kenworthy 1983). There was no formal system of Membership until 1737, when rules on 'removal and settlement' were introduced to define which Friends had a right to Poor Relief from Monthly Meeting funds (Brinton 1961). However, those Membership lists marked out not spiritual achievement but simply the geography of those who had already committed, along with their children (Dandelion 2007). Nonetheless, there was a concept of Membership prior to this date – what has been called 'invisible membership' – and the only criterion for determining connection with the Society was habitual attendance at religious meetings (Vann 1969) or unity with the group (Reay 1985). A person who attended meetings and who was prepared to suffer for their beliefs was known as a Quaker.

Several levels of Membership are recognised in different Quaker Meetings worldwide, including Birthright, Associate, Attender, Waiting, Affiliate and full Member (Britain Yearly Meeting 2013; Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting 1999; Evangelical Friends Church Southwest 2011; Ohio Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2014; Yearly Meeting of Aotearoa/New Zealand 2003). Today most people become a Member of a Meeting as adults by convincement: not by becoming convinced of any particular stated belief, but by becoming convinced they are a Quaker and by convincing a Monthly Meeting of this: 'membership is not a matter of joining an in-group or of being registered as a fully paid-up member of the spiritual elite: it is rather a matter of declaring a commitment' (Hubbard 1992).

In Australia, where Quakers are part of the liberal unprogrammed tradition, there are just three recognised levels of participation: Member, Attender and Enquirer. Unlike more conservative Meetings in the US or Africa, there is no test of doctrine and no outward observance imposed for Membership:

> Instead, applicants are expected to be open to inner spiritual experience, and be willing to share in the responsibilities of the Meeting. Members try to attend Meetings for Worship regularly, as a joy and a way of spiritual refreshment, as well as a contribution to the life of the Society. Members are expected to attend Business Meetings whenever possible, and to support the Society financially as they are able. (Section 3.4.2 Handbook of Practice and Procedure [Australia Yearly Meeting 2011])

Pink Dandelion, writing about the liberal unprogrammed tradition in the United Kingdom, has identified three explanatory meanings of formal Quaker

Membership: group-centred commitment (committed to well-being of the group), spirituality-centred commitment (orientated towards the individual's spiritual journey within the group) and a sense of belonging (emphasising fulfilment of personal secular needs) (Dandelion 1996). He notes how explicit emphasis on Christianity has diminished over the past 50 years, with the practical and content side of Membership being emphasised over the doctrinal, so that most applicants today are eventually accepted. This willingness to accept a great diversity of faith beliefs concerns some Quakers, who ask if there are any limits to who can become a Member. 'We need to be much more clear about who we are and what we won't tolerate' (Morgan 1992). The heterogeneity of Quaker belief and identity is seen by others as something to celebrate (Collins 2009). This diversity co-exists with what Dandelion calls a 'credal' or conformist approach to group and individual behaviour within 'Quaker-time', the times when people are together as Quakers (Dandelion 2002).

The present-day de-emphasis of the doctrinal returns Membership to its original role:

> Membership is still seen as a discipleship, a discipline within a broadly Christian perspective and our Quaker tradition, where the way we live is as important as the beliefs we affirm … . Membership does not require great moral or spiritual achievement but it does require a sincerity of purpose and commitment to Quaker values and practices. Membership is a spiritual discipline, a commitment to the well-being of one's spiritual home and not simply appearance on a membership roll. (Section 11.01 Quaker Faith and Practice [Britain Yearly Meeting 2013])

Pointing has summarised three potential obstacles to Membership that some Attenders have noted: (1) the standards of Friends are in many respects too high for them to follow; (2) their experience of religious life is not sufficient to justify an application for Membership; and (3) they have had no great crisis of feeling: they are not conscious of any inward change that is strikingly registered to which they can relate their decision (Pointing 1950). However, there seem to have been only five published studies that have researched and reported on the reasons why Attenders actually choose whether or not to apply for Membership.

In 1978/9 a survey was conducted among Members of the US Friends General Conference and questionnaires were completed by new Members from 82 different Meetings (Ives 1980). A total of 263 respondents gave reasons why they applied for Membership, which the author divided into three categories: Readiness (feeling ready, convinced and wanting to formalise the decision) (41 per cent), Inner Needs (need to belong, desire to commit and participate) (31 per cent) and External Factors (invited to join, family or residential factors, relations with other churches) (28 per cent).

In 1991 Alastair Heron conducted a postal survey of all 786 Attenders of the Yorkshire Meetings and received responses from 459 (58 per cent) (Heron 1992). One question asked which of seven possible reasons for not applying for Membership seemed relevant to them. The reasons nominated by more than 10

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per cent of participants were: commitment is unnecessary; not good enough; problems with the Peace Testimony; and too much diversity. Other reasons included: never having been asked; the application procedure; fear of commitment; theological differences; continuing loyalty to another church; domestic and time problems; and lack of information about the Society.

Heron also noted that there was a generational move towards people being more individualistic.

> It is now generally felt and understood (and acted upon) that 'you do not have to make any commitment to anyone or anything unless you have to'. As one attender put it, 'We come from a generation of non-joiners'. So if your needs can be meet *without formal (or 'public') commitment*, that is now the norm. It was another who said 'Membership is a commitment to a bunch of people, like a marriage is a commitment to one person' … . And one – perhaps perceptively – felt that 'people attend Meeting for Worship *for* something, rather than to give it anything.' (Heron 1992)

Heron followed this with a second survey in 1993, inviting all contactable British Friends who had become Members in the previous year (336) to complete a survey, and achieved a 60 per cent response rate. One question asked why the respondents' views differed from those of Attenders who believed that there was no need to apply for Membership (Heron 1994). The five categories of reasons reported (without precise statistics) were: (1) To Belong (to be part of, accepted); (2) To Contribute (pull weight); (3) To Make a Public Statement (my position made clear); (4) Readiness (felt right); (5) Need to Commit (part of a discipline). Half of the responses were in categories 2 and 3, and a further third shared between 4 and 5.

In the 2013 British Quaker Survey (BQS), conducted amongst 649 British Friends, there were two questions about Membership application that were later used in the AQS (Hampton 2014). Those results have not been analysed in detail or published previously, but a personal communication from the author indicated that:

- The main reasons that led people to apply for Membership were: To commit/serve (36 per cent); Belonging/homecoming (21 per cent); Personal (16 per cent); Wanting to belong (14 per cent); Spiritual journey/ belief (8 per cent).

- The main reasons for not applying for Membership were: Spiritual journey/belief (30 per cent); Status Quo/Don't like Member/Attender distinction (20 per cent); Community (19 per cent); Commitment (16 per cent); Belief (13 per cent); Existing alliances (12 per cent); Other people/ Not encouraged (11 per cent) (Hampton 2015).

Finally, an anthropological study of New Zealand Quakers noted the view of a significant number of Attenders that formal Membership does not offer any particular advantages. One participant said:

> There's very little difference, like status wise, between being an attender and being a member. We sometimes liken it to the difference between being married and living together, that it's really about making a declaration and saying 'you know, I've decided that this is what I want to do'. Practically it makes very little difference. (Keyes 2014)

This paper examines the views about application for Membership held by Australian Attenders and Members as reported in the 2014 AQS. The views of Australian Quakers may be of relevance to those from similarly liberal unprogrammed traditions elsewhere. The AQS was conducted using a questionnaire largely based on the questions used in the 2013 BQS. In addition to simple frequency responses to many closed questions, it provided a rich source of individual free text comments that were recorded in 27 Appendices of a summary report (Williams 2014) but which have not been systematically examined before. Two questions asking about reasons for deciding whether or not to apply for Membership elicited a large volume of responses and this article aims to summarise these reasons, describe how they conform to current theories of social identity and religious belonging and draw conclusions that may help Meetings support Attenders to consider applying for Membership.

Method

All adult Members and Attenders of the Australian Yearly Meeting (AYM) were invited electronically to participate in the 63-question AQS. In total, 378 questionnaires were completed: a 20 per cent response rate. The methods used and a comparison of the results to the BQS have been published (Williams and Hampton 2016).

Two questions about Membership were included in the survey:

1   What was the main reason that led you to apply for Membership?

2   If you have never been a Member, what are your main reasons for not applying for Membership?

There were 250 responses to the first question and 89 to the second. Most consisted of a single sentence or a few bullet points, but some answers were much longer, with up to 370 words. These texts formed the data that have been analysed here.

The Qualitative Grounded Theory Approach guided the data coding and analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008), enabling an exploration of the multiple factors influencing the decision to apply for Membership. Themes were identified through content and thematic analysis, performed separately by the two authors. The responses to each question were reviewed independently and then discussed and agreed to ensure credibility in the coding process (Rice and Ezzy 2000).

There were three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Finlay and Ballinger 2006). Open coding was performed by examining each word

of every response. The initial coding frameworks were kept deliberately wide so as not to limit the generation of ideas (Pope et al. 2000). Responses were assigned to multiple codes if appropriate. Acquired data were then compared through a process of axial coding to refine the coding list and delete and amalgamate some of the codes. Data were managed using MS Word and MS Excel as the sole data management systems. The final inductive analysis linked codes that had common elements into main thematic categories, using the constant comparison approach across the full data set. Exemplar quotes were identified and agreed by consensus to illustrate each topic. A schematic representation of the reasons for not applying for Membership (Fig. 1) was developed by one author [PW] and verified by the other [LT] (Saldana 2009).

There are several acknowledged limitations of this study and its methodology:

1 27 per cent of all adult Members of the AYM but only 11 per cent of Attenders provided answers to these questions. This closely reflects the response rate to the AQS as a whole (29 per cent of Members and 12 per cent of Attenders) (Williams and Hampton 2016), but the views of Attenders are less well represented than those of Members.

2 Analysis was limited to the written words provided as responses, and it was not possible to clarify any ambiguities by personal follow-up. The two authors were able to reach agreement easily on the meaning and coding of most of the text, but a few comments remained less certain (e.g., *Individuals in the meeting*; *Working on it!*; *Moved by The Spirit to minister in Meeting*).

3 Owing to the technical arrangements for the AQS it was not possible to link responses to demographic descriptors of the respondents or to their answers to other questions in the AQS.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the themes and topics from the analysis, showing the number of comments and exemplar quotes for each topic. The 250 respondents who had applied for Membership cited a total of 310 reasons and 52 nominated more than one reason. The 89 Attenders who had not applied for Membership cited a total of 121 reasons and 26 nominated more than one. Topic saturation was clearly reached after 180 of the Member responses were examined; no new topics were identified in the last 70 responses. Attenders identified 24 topics in the first 50 responses and three more in the next 30, with no new topics in responses 81–89. It is therefore possible that with a larger sample a few additional reasons might have been identified.

The themes from Table 2 are shown graphically in Fig. 1 and categorised as either Quaker-related (which could be influenced by changes in Quaker practice) or Personal factors.
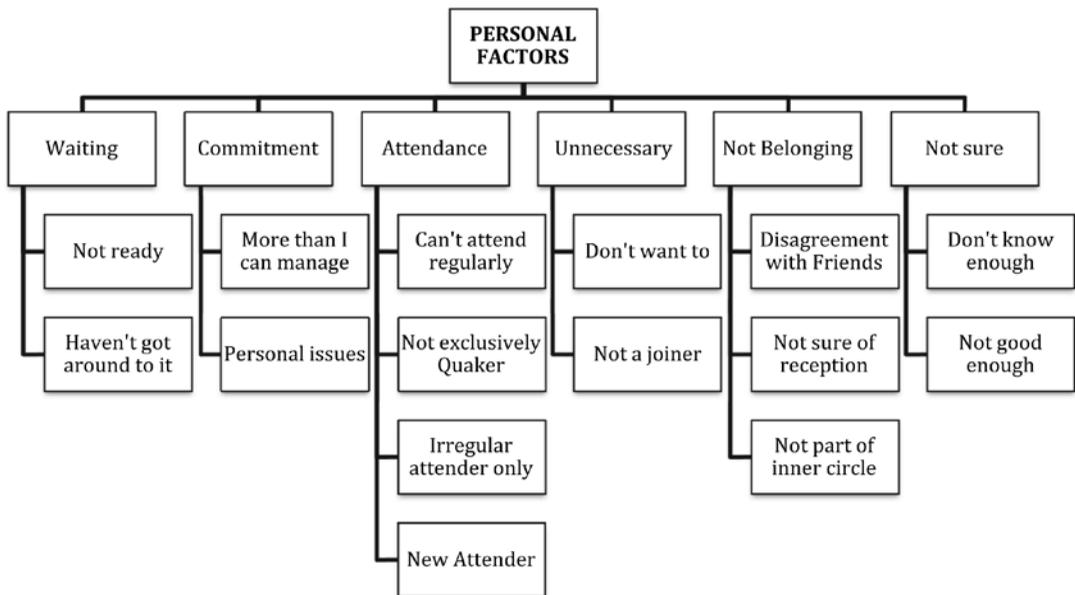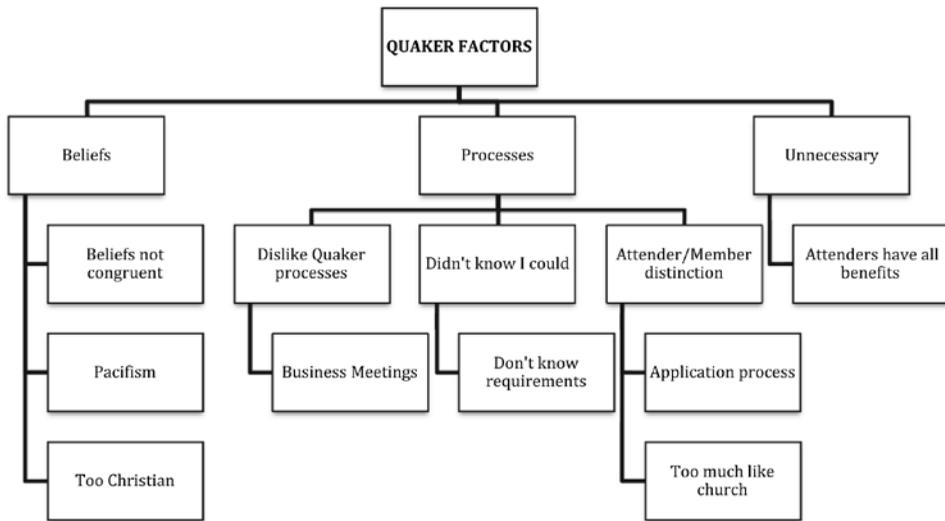
Fig. 1. Reasons for not applying for Membership

Table 1. Reasons for applying for Membership (250 responses)

Key theme (% total reasons) Topics (n=number of comments)	Exemplar quotes for topics mentioned
1. Belonging (38%)	
1.1 Feeling of being at home spiritually (n=65)	• *A sense of having found my spiritual home* • *Felt 'at home', committed and wanted to belong* • *I felt so attuned to Quakers that I wanted to belong*
1.2 Agreement with Quaker principles and testimonies (n=19)	• *I wanted to be counted as part of an organisation that stood for peace and non-violence* • *I think because of the Testimonies. It seems easier to live the Testimonies in the company of other people* • *Fell in love with Quaker ways*
1.3 Comfortable with Quaker beliefs and lack of dogma (n=18)	• *Felt this Quakerism reflected my religious beliefs* • *Freedom to explore own belief in a supportive atmosphere* • *I loved my Quaker community and the doctrines of Quakerism while not being compelled to believe in them and not discouraged from exploring other spiritual perspectives*
1.4 Form of worship (n=7)	• *The spiritual experience of Meeting for Worship and convincement* • *Attracted to contemplative forms of worship*
1.5 Quaker processes (n=4)	• *The Quaker business method seeking to do the will of God* • *Totally in agreement with Quaker practice and values*
1.6 Quaker schooling (n=2)	• *Religious attendance after school*
1.7 Birthright Quaker (n=2)	• *My parents applied for my Membership, and I continued that Membership into adulthood*
1.8 Social issues (n=1)	• *A sense of belonging and appeal to the human rights and social justice issues were close to my heart*
2. Commitment (22%)	
2.1 Wanting to commit (n=33)	• *Feeling connected. I found myself realising that I was 'owning' the sense of being a Quaker; not just joining in* • *Wanting to commit to Quaker lifestyle and community* • *It felt right to make a commitment to the Quaker way of living and of worship*

2.2 It was time (n=21)	• *After many years as an Attender it seemed the right thing to do* • *Describe myself as a Quaker to people I meet and after 20 years of attending figured I should make it official*
2.3 It felt right (n=8)	• *It seemed totally right* • *Simply wanted to be a Member*
2.4 Felt called (n=3)	• *I finally felt led to apply* • *Felt called*
2.5 Particular event (n=3)	• *Probably the Quaker Basics course was the final factor in a decision which took 28 years to make* • *Through ministry that spoke to my condition*
2.6 Felt worthy (n=1)	• *I realised that being a Quaker didn't mean you had to be perfect*

3. Declaration (18%)

3.1 To make formal commitment (n=31)	• *It fitted with my identity as 'Quaker'. I wanted to make a formal commitment* • *Outward evidence of my inward commitment* • *To make it official to my family that I wasn't a Catholic*
3.2 Suggested by a Friend (n=16)	• *Gentle urging by Friends* • *A Friend made it clear to me that some Friends thought I had a 'stop in my mind', or I would have applied for Membership by now*
3.3 Moving (n=4)	• *I was leaving the US to go to work in another country and wanted to maintain a formal link with Quakerism* • *The absolute catalyst was a planned 2-month trip to UK & Ireland. I wanted to be a Member before visiting other Meetings overseas*
3.4 Called myself a Quaker (n=2)	• *I was calling myself a Quaker and thought I should make it official*
3.5 Found I could apply (n=2)	• *I found out that one could! Quite a surprise. I immediately did so*
3.6 Everyone else (n=1)	• *Everyone else at Meeting were Members*

4. Responsibility (13%)

| 4.1 To contribute and take on roles (n=37) | • *A sense of responsibility – wanting to share fully the tasks of the meeting*
• *To serve on Quaker Committees*
• *They had asked me to be Assistant Clerk* |
| 4.2 To support sustainability (n=3) | • *A desire to support Quaker practice to continue and thrive*
• *Because I thought Member numbers were getting so low that Quakers might lose status as a religion* |

5. Community (9%)

5.1 To be part of the group (n=15)	• *Being able to say 'we' and not 'they'* • *I wanted to be part of the Quaker community* • *I felt a strong sense of belonging to the community and wanted to celebrate and affirm this through Membership*
5.2 Need for spiritual home (n=4)	• *Felt need of a spiritual home* • *I felt that I needed to have a spiritual home if I were to die* • *Stability*
5.3 Strengthened (n=4)	• *I felt I was on the right path for me and this strengthened my commitment to that path* • *I believed that a commitment would help me on my spiritual journey*
5.4 Felt accepted (n=3)	• *I attended regularly and seemed to be accepted* • *Feeling of being accepted*
5.5. Particular Friend (n=1)	• *Felt attraction to [name]*

Table 2. Reasons for not applying for Membership (89 responses)

Key theme (% total reasons) Topics (n=number of comments)	Exemplar quotes for topics mentioned
1. Unnecessary (17%)	
1.1 Don't want to (n=11)	• *I am as involved as I want to be* • *Prefer an informal approach* • *I just don't feel the need of it. That could change*
1.2 Not a joiner (n=5)	• *I am reluctant to commit to Membership of any organisation.* • *Don't tend to join any organisations*
1.3 Attenders have all the benefits (n=5)	• *Attender has most of the benefits of Members; not sure I think it necessary* • *Uncertainty that it makes any difference!* • *Feel linked to Quakers anyway*
2. Attendance (15%)	
2.1 Can't attend regularly (n=7)	• *I am not attending regularly because of distance from nearest meeting house* • *My local meeting is held at a rather inconvenient time that limits my ability to attend regularly, which means I do not feel I can participate as fully as is required of a Member*
2.2 Not exclusively Quaker (n=6)	• *Because I don't see myself as exclusively Quaker. I find meaning in other traditions as well* • *Still attend other Christian church*

2.3 Irregular Attender (n=4)	• *I feel I should become a more regular Attender first* • *I don't feel that I attend often enough*
2.4 New Attender (n=1)	• *I have only just begun attending*

3. Processes (15%)

3.1 Distinction between Attenders and Members (n=7)	• *Not wanting to get a label which might be a cause of separation from others* • *Joining a group to feel part of it smacks of us vs them elitism* • *I would be embarrassed by the distinctions made with Attenders were I a Member*
3.2 Dislike Quaker processes (n=4)	• *Concern about how some issues are handled by Quakers* • *The Quaker decision-making processes depress me*
3.3 Business Meetings (n=3)	• *Don't want to be involved with business meetings* • *I find meetings oppressive and time wasting*
3.4 Application process (n=2)	• *One should not have to go through a process* • *I have applied for Membership − it was a chaotic, exclusive and distressing experience − I withdrew my application*
3.5 Too much like church (n=2)	• *Being a Member would make it feel too much like a church*

4. Not Sure (15%)

4.1 Don't know enough (n=10)	• *Still wanting to learn more* • *I don't know enough about being a 'Member'* • *Lack of knowledge of Quakerism*
4.2 Not good enough (n=3)	• *Not worthy to become a Member*
4.3 Didn't know I could apply (n=3)	• *I did not know I could apply for Membership* • *I didn't know there was Membership as a separate thing to attendance*
4.4 Don't know requirements (n=1)	• *Being still rather new to Quakerism I am unsure of the whole commitment as a Member and what is required of me*
4.5 Not sure (n=1)	• *I am not sure*

5. Beliefs (13%)

5.1 Beliefs not congruent (n=10)	• *Not sure I support the Quaker core beliefs* • *I am an atheist* • *What I see in meeting is far too 'New Age' and doesn't resemble what I have read*
5.2 Pacifism (n=4)	• *Some reservations about the Peace testimony* • *Uneasy about the emphasis on pacifism − too idealistic*
5.3 Too Christian (n=2)	• *Not a Christian*

6. Commitment (11%)

6.1 More than I can manage (n=13)
- *Because it would mean committing more time, energy and money that I currently don't feel I can spare*
- *I do not feel comfortable stating I am a Member until I have the time to commit to more regular assistance in the Quaker community*

7. Waiting (8%)

7.1 Not ready (n=6)
- *Waiting for the right time*
- *Take Membership seriously and not yet ready*

7.2 Haven't got around to it (n=4)
- *Just haven't got around to it*
- *Laziness − I have it on my to do list this year*

8. Not Belonging (4%)

8.1 Disagreements with Friends (n=2)
- *Doubts about the common sense of some Member*
- *Individuals in the meeting*

8.2 Not sure of reception (n=2)
- *I haven't applied because I never knew where I stood with Quakers. I feared I'd be looked down upon for opening up about religion or politics*

8.3 Not part of inner circle (n=1)
- *Not yet part of the inner circle!*

9. Personal (2%)

9.1 Personal issues (n=2)
- *Too unwell*
- *Personal*

Discussion

Table 1 indicates that the prime reasons for becoming Members related to a sense of identification with Quakers and Quaker beliefs and processes, and a wish to make that clear to themselves and others. Many respondents simply responded that they felt 'A sense (or feeling) of belonging' or that 'Quakerism was my home'.

For those who remained Attenders (Table 2), this alignment had not occurred. Unsurprisingly, their sense of overall 'belonging' was not a key theme. The largest group of reasons given was that Membership is 'Unnecessary' (17 per cent), and this category included people who described themselves as 'non-joiners' and those who were happy with their current involvement and felt that Membership would make no difference. The next three themes (15 per cent each) included those who did not feel they attended often enough, were not comfortable with Quaker processes or were not yet sure about how far they could align themselves with Quakers. The combination of discomfort with Quaker processes and lack of congruence with Quaker beliefs represented 28 per cent of the total reasons given.

Members and the Attenders experienced the heterogeneity of Quaker beliefs very differently. Some stated that Quakers are too Christian and others that God is insufficiently acknowledged, or that Quaker beliefs are too unclear. Several people saw their affiliation with other spiritual communities as a barrier to Membership (Table 2, 2.2). For some Members, this diversity of belief and opportunity to participate in other spiritual perspectives was a reason for joining (Table 1, 1.3). Similarly different reactions to Quaker processes influenced decisions to become a Member (Table 1, 1.5) or not (Table 2, 3.2–3.5).

Collins argues that these tensions around belief and processes have been inherent to Quakerism from the 1650s and that talking about them, rather than resolving them, is central to Quaker identity (Collins 2009). He writes of the 'steep learning curve' experienced by newcomers to Meeting and the results in this paper suggest that providing opportunities to address these issues may help Attenders clarify their interest in Membership.

Comparison with other Studies

The reasons for seeking Membership identified in this Australian study are quite similar to those revealed in previous British and American surveys, but Table 1 shows many more specific topics than have been reported before. The four most commonly cited themes – related to feelings of belonging, wanting to commit, making a public declaration and a desire to take on responsibilities and contribute – are the same factors identified by Heron more than 20 years ago (Heron 1994), and in the 2013 BQS. They also align well with two of Dandelion's suggested types of meaning of Membership: commitment to the well-being of the group and a sense of belonging (Dandelion 1996). Some of the responses included in the themes of belonging and commitment align with Dandelion's third Membership type: spirituality-centred commitment.

However, it is noticeable that reasons related to community (including the need for a spiritual home) were reported less often; only 8 per cent of Members in both the AQS and BQS responses mentioned this. In contrast, belonging to a community of like-minded people was the most frequently agreed factor that keeps Australian Friends coming to Meetings (Williams and Hampton 2016). This suggests that Friends do clearly distinguish the benefits they derive from participation in their Meeting from the benefits of formal Membership: in other words, community support is already available equally to Members and Attenders.

It is perhaps also worth noting that 21 per cent of the responses nominated a variety of reasons, rather than one single factor. One example of such a response was: 'Strong identification with Quaker testimonies, feeling of being in the right place, desire to be fully part of the Quaker community, desire to contribute fully as a Member'.

Table 3 compares these results with those from the 1978/9 American study.

Feelings of belonging, readiness and a desire to commit and participate were the most common reasons given in both surveys, but only 10 per cent of

Table 3: Reasons for applying for Membership

Reason★	Percentage		
	USA 1978/9★	Australia 2014	AQS Topics
Need to belong	12	28	1.1, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3
Desire to commit, support beliefs	11	16	1.3, 2.1
Desire more participation	8	12	4.1, 4.2
Now ready/satisfied/comfortable	13	13	1.4. 1.5, 2.2, 2.6
Been ready/feel Member/permanent	12	7	1.2, 3.4, 3.6
Should formalise decision	8	10	3.1
Inner light/leading/convinced	8	5	1.8, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5
Invited to join	8	6	3.2, 3.5
Family factors	8	1	1.7
Job and residential factors	6	1	3.3
Relations/Christianity/churches	6	2	1.6, 5.4, 5.5

★ Ives 1980

Australian Friends mentioned external factors (the last four reasons in Table 3), compared to 28 per cent of the American Friends. However, the exact meaning of these external reasons is difficult to establish, given the limited detail reported in that study.

The reasons for not applying for Membership were more diverse. The most common were that it was unnecessary, that the person was unable to attend Meeting sufficiently regularly, and concerns about some Quaker processes. A smaller proportion (13 per cent) noted disagreements between their own and some Quaker beliefs (such as pacifism) or an inability to commit more time and support (11 per cent). These are significantly different to the results from the BQS, where issues related to personal spiritual journey and belief were the main reasons for not seeking Membership.

Table 4 compares the results from Heron's 1991 survey (Heron 1992) with results from the AQS. Although some reasons are similar – including the significant proportion stating that Membership is unnecessary – the results from the present study are more finely distinguished, with 27 different topics in Table 2, many of which were not identified in the British study.

Almost a third of respondents in the present study listed multiple reasons for remaining Attenders. One example was:

> Lack of clarity about the importance of a belief in God. Lack of clarity about the difference between members and attenders and a slight resistance about that issue. Lack of desire to join a group formally. A general lack of clarity about whether Quakers do actually live by the testimonies and a reluctance to join yet another

Table 4: Reasons for not applying for Membership

	Percentage	
Reason	UK 1991★	Australia 2014
Commitment unnecessary	22	17
Not good enough	15	3
Problem with the Peace testimony	14	4
Too much diversity	12	13
Never asked	9	5
Membership procedure	9	10
No encouragement	8	9
Other	10	39

★ Heron 1992

    group that does not live by what it says. Concern about how some issues are handled by Quakers in Australia.

It is possible to distinguish those factors that could be influenced by changes in Quaker practice from other more personal factors related to temperament, location or health, which are unlikely to be modifiable (Fig. 1). The Quaker factors can be classified as relating to beliefs, processes or necessity. Some of these barriers to Membership might be addressed quite simply (for example, by more personal invitations to Attenders to apply or education to clarify the expectations of Membership), while others could require changes to current practice to overcome (for example, how business meetings are organised). Concerns about the diversity of beliefs within a Meeting were a theme in both this study and Heron's earlier work.

    One underlying question is about the need for the distinguishing categories of Attenders and Members (Table 2, 3.1). Some have objected on grounds of principle, citing a supposed conflict with the testimony of equality created by drawing a boundary between insiders and outsiders or by the process of 'judging' who is acceptable to become a Member (Barnett 2016; Powell 2013). As one of the respondents in this research said: 'It seems un-Quakerly to be a member. I enjoy the absence of formal membership and have no need to be inducted into another religious club.' Furthermore, many Friends see that the Member/ Attender distinction doesn't have the relevance it once did, when Quakers were a persecuted minority. Formal Membership has thus become a somewhat contested issue for some Quakers, with regular calls for its abandonment or some radical revision (Wright 2014).

    Attenders in Australia and Britain are welcomed at Meetings for Worship and usually at Meetings for Business and many serve on committees, although

they are seldom appointed to the Committees for Ministry or Pastoral Care and Oversight, nor as Clerks (Kenworthy 1983; Purnell and Davidson 2011). Many Attenders therefore can feel fully committed without the need to join formally (Table 2, Theme 1).

A number of Friends saw Membership as inappropriate for those who cannot attend Meetings regularly (Table 2, 2.1). It has also been described as alienating for those for whom a regular worship community is not feasible (Higgs 2012). However, several surveys have shown that many Members do not attend either Meetings for Worship or Business Meetings on a regular basis (Chadkirk and Dandelion 2010; Slack 1967), so this perceived barrier to Membership may be an unreasonable one. A number of Attenders specifically characterised themselves as not being 'joiners', perhaps a reflection of the introverted predisposition of many Quakers (Francis et al. 2003). And, finally, a small proportion believed they were 'not good enough' – a factor noted in other reports also (Heron 1992; Powell 2013) – even though moral and spiritual achievement is not asked for, only sincerity of purpose (Slack 1967).

Social Meaning and Value of Membership

Religious commitment can be considered to have two dimensions: subjective (relating to beliefs) and behavioural (relating to participation in collective activities) (Davidson and Knudsen 1977). An application for Quaker Membership encompasses both these components. However, this paper is written within the context of fewer people joining community groups in Western societies than previously (Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010).

In Australia increased individualism and reduced community connection is indicated by fewer people joining any organisation (Leigh 2010). Leigh hypoth–esises several contributing factors: longer working hours and longer commutes; increased participation of women in the workforce; ethnic and linguistic diversity in neighbourhoods not yet comfortable with this; increased use of technologies; and the reaching of thresholds in attendance and participation leading to the disappearance of some organisations.

Likewise, attendance at Christian churches has reduced markedly since World War Two, with the exception of evangelical and charismatic churches (Bellamy and Castle 2004; Norris and Inglehart 2004). The 2016 Census revealed that 30 per cent of people in Australia have no religious affiliation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) and religion is now less important to Australians than other identifying markers such as gender, occupation, income, education or nationality (Henry and Kurzak 2012).

There are several theories within the sociology of religion that might provide insight into the issue of Quaker Membership (Pollack 2008). Firstly, *Secularisation Theory* states that the processes of modernisation have a negative effect on the stability and vitality of religious communities, practices and conviction. The numbers of Members of the Religious Society of Friends appears to be in decline

in some parts of the Western world (Abbott 2013; Chadwick 2004). Nonetheless, these secularisation trends imply no more than that religion is less significant in the workings of the social system, which *per se* proves nothing about the religious consciousness of individuals (Dobbelaere 1999). It also says little about the category of belonging *within* a religious community.

Economic Market Theory says that competition challenges religious communities to improve their services in order to retain clients and attract new ones. Examples of this model include the work of Roof, who has developed the concept of religious recruits 'shopping' (Roof and McKinney 1987), and Iannaccone, who has developed a 'human capital approach' to religion in which participants are consumers with rational choice (Iannaccone 1990). In contrast to goods whose value can be determined by monetary means, the benefits gained from religious participation are not so easily gauged (Bruce 1999). Nonetheless, this model may explain why some Attenders do not seek Membership: the perceived benefits (in terms of recognition or support) do not outweigh the costs (of commitment).

Social Exchange Theory is another frame of reference which views exchange as a social behaviour that brings satisfaction when people receive fair returns for their expenditures (Emerson 1976). Kanter has suggested that more durable religious communities are those that employ skillful 'commitment mechanisms' to maintain their Membership even in the face of hardship (Kanter 1972). Social exchange theory may be especially well equipped to explain the seeming paradox that the more demands a religion makes upon its adherents the more committed and enduring they seem to be (Perrin and Mauss 1991).

McBride extended this idea in discussing the concept of 'free-riders' in religious organisations: those who are welcomed but contribute little or nothing to the group (McBride 2015). He notes that it may be rational for people to free-ride on others' contributions of time, emotional energy and meaningful bonds because it thereby increases their personal religious capital – that is, the individual's set of skills, experiences, knowledge and familiarity with the religious group's doctrine, structure and norms. McBride suggests also that churches may deem it necessary to invest in the religious capital of free-riders in the hope that they will contribute in the future. Perhaps Attenders are accepted within Quakerism because they are seen to add to the religious capital of the Meeting as a whole and contribute in ways other than purely financial.

Individualisation Theory suggests that the relationship between an individual and religion has been emancipated from the custody of large religious institutions and that even where individuals retain their church adherence, faith practices take on an independent, individual character (Davie 1994). Davie has also introduced the notion of 'vicarious religion', performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number who not only understand but clearly approve of what the minority is doing (Davie 2008). This idea has been used to explain the persistence and support of Christian celebrations and church buildings in predominantly non-religious communities. It may be one explanation for the reluctance of some

Attenders to seek Membership: they are happy to allow more active Members to maintain the Meeting on their behalf, without having to commit more time and resources themselves.

Modern life thus rests upon a high degree of personal initiative and individual autonomy, while custom and tradition play less of a role in shaping individual beliefs; religious feelings and meanings have become more a matter of choice and preference (Roof and McKinney 1987). In other words, people give meaning to their lives by autonomously shaping the narrative of their life story, which can be depicted as a 'choice biography', a term coined by the sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck 1992; de Lange 2007). The decision to adopt Membership may be seen as one example of a choice to affirm an individual's identity, in this case as a Quaker.

Lastly, *Social Identity Theory* seeks to explain how social behaviour is structured not merely by a person's sense of themselves as an individual but by their sense of themselves as Members of a social group ('us' and 'we' versus 'I' and 'me') (Haslam 2014; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Religious identification can be particularly beneficial not only because of the social support that Members can receive from their religious community but also because of agreement with a set of guiding beliefs that offers a meaningful world view. People with religious affiliations are more satisfied with their lives because they attend religious services frequently and build intimate social networks that are accompanied by a strong sense of religious belonging (Lim and Putnam 2010). These dimensions of commitment and belonging are two of the key reasons cited by the AQS respondents for a decision to apply for Membership.

The feeling of 'belonging' was the most common reason given for a decision to become a Member (Table 1, Theme 1). 'Belonging' is an issue of identity, and for Christians the church is not just an institution or a building but a community of relationships where people's selves are with God and with one another: 'a set of relationships making up a mode of being' (Grenz 2001). This sort of belonging is more than formal Membership, service on a committee or attendance at religious services, but has been described as 'a passionate romance between the divine and the mundane that seduces us into an intimate relationship with God, our neighbours, and our own deepest self' (Bass 2012).

Although Friends have placed less emphasis on credal belief as a requirement for Membership, belief can also be considered as lived embodied performance, brought into being through the experience of belonging. This 'performative belief' plays out through the relationships in which people have faith and to which they feel they belong. As Day suggests, belief in social relationships is performed through social actions of belonging and excluding (Day 2011).

However, for many Friends Membership may be seen as unnecessary, despite a feeling of belonging (Table 2, Theme 1). Nonetheless, it seems that what brings people to lasting faith and commitment is often the quality of help, friendship and life offered by a church and the relationships made in and beyond its boundaries (Percy 2010). The transition from Attender to Member may be considered as one

type of religious conversion, *intensification* – used to refer to renewed commitment within an existing previous religious affiliation, a deepening of commitment or a making central to life that which was previously peripheral (Rambo 1993).

There may be parallels between the reasons Attenders decide to apply for Membership and the decision of cohabiting couples to marry. In both cases many people see no particular value in making the change, either emotionally or legally (Manning and Smock 2005). Research on marriage has suggested three linked reasons for a change, which relate to public display rather than private commitment (Duncan et al. 2005).

The first reason is to secure a name change. In the case of marriage it is so that all Members of the family share the same name; in the case of Friends, it may be to own the name 'Quaker'. Only one-third of Australia Attenders describe themselves as Quakers, compared to 90 per cent of Members (Williams and Hampton 2016), and the desire to make a formal declaration was one of the themes uncovered in this study (Table 1, Theme 3).

The second reason is to tidy up financial arrangements. There is a less clear parallel here, since many Attenders already choose to support their Meetings financially, but one of the expectations of Membership is a commitment to financial support and many Friends cited a desire to take on responsibilities for the Meeting as a key reason for becoming a Member (Table 1, Theme 4).

The third major reason for wanting to become married is for public performance and display. In the present study one of the five major reasons to apply for Membership was the desire to make a public commitment (Table 1, Theme 2).

A recent Australia study of cohabitation uncovered the concept of 'the Next Step' explanation of relationship development: an inevitable progress from cohabitation to marriage, house purchase and children (Lindsay 2000). Perhaps this has parallels in the reason given by some Members in this study – 'It was time' (Table 1, 2.2).

Implications for Quaker Meetings

The decline in the proportion of Friends seeking Membership has been topic of concern for many writers (Cooper 1998; Heron 2000; Kaal 2010). It should be noted, however, that this concern about how to encourage Attenders to become Members is not restricted just to the Religious Society of Friends – it is discussed in other Christian churches as well (Anyabwile 2011; Stetzer 2015).

The findings summarised in Fig. 1 provide some guidance about the three main barriers to Membership that might be most usefully addressed: Beliefs, Processes and Necessity. Despite the non-credal nature of the requirements for Membership, a number of Attenders expressed the view that their personal beliefs were not compatible with full Membership. It should be noted that this was a relatively minor theme, with only 13 per cent of respondents identifying this as a barrier. For some this was related to their non-theist views; for others it was a hesitation to accept the position of pacifism they believed that the Peace testimony

implied. The need for a clearer statement of doctrinally open Membership has been suggested to overcome such hesitations (Cressin 2010), but more broadly the recommendations to provide more systematic opportunities for regular Attenders to learn about Quaker heritage, faith and practice are still relevant (Heron 2000). Offering mentoring and spiritual friendship is also suggested as important to assist Attenders in considering and understanding the meaning of Membership (Barnett 2016).

A greater proportion (around 40 per cent) of Attenders noted concerns about the personal involvement that Membership might require of them (attendance at Meetings, Quaker processes and commitment to service). These concerns might be overcome by education, but also by creative thinking about alternatives to current practice. It is notable that there have been recent experiments with online Meetings for Worship both in Australia and internationally, which might allow Attenders who are prevented from regular physical participation to feel more actively involved. In his 2014 Swarthmore Lecture Ben Pink Dandelion noted how some meetings have overcome burdensome and complex inherited structures of committees and positions to focus on only a smaller number of essential Spirit-led tasks (Dandelion 2014).

In Heron's 1993 study nearly half of respondents reported having been given no encouragement to apply by a Friend in their Meeting and he advised that 'elders, overseers and seasoned Members should be alerted to the particular importance of providing such encouragement after the second year during which someone has been a fairly regular and interested attender' (Heron 1994). In the AQS, 5 per cent of Friends had applied for Membership at the direct suggestion of others in their Meeting, and a surprising number of Attenders were unaware of the possibility of applying. Together this suggests that personal contact with and the gentle encouragement of regular Attenders would be a fruitful strategy in increasing Membership, and is consistent with the noted importance of non-doctrinal socialisation to maintain cohesion within the Society (Pluss 2007).

The application process itself was a deterrent to some Attenders. The offering of a Clearness Meeting to help Friends clarify their understandings and concerns before any formal application has been suggested (Riermermann 2007). It may, however, be difficult to address the views of those who see no particular advantages in Membership, aside from the ability to hold certain offices.

Finally, a very small proportion of Attenders (6 per cent) stated that they did not feel welcomed, or felt uncertain about their relationships with Friends in their Meetings. Such issues should always be of concern to the pastoral carers in Meetings, and might be uncovered more readily if Heron's recommendations about personal engagement and encouragement to consider Membership were adopted.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reflect many themes from previous research but develop a more finely grained analysis of the reasons people have not applied for Membership. Further research would be valuable, using individual interviews to deepen our understanding of the themes identified and to examine how different Meetings in the unprogrammed tradition are working to resolve barriers to Membership application. If Meetings wish to increase applications for Membership, the results of this study may provide some guidance about ways to do this. The barriers for most Attenders seem to be related more to personal concerns about commitment and readiness than to disagreements about beliefs. Personal invitations to apply, mentoring and regular education about the meaning and expectations of Membership, and the exploration of alternative means of involvement and service may be helpful. However, it could be also timely for Meetings to reopen discussion about whether the separate categories of Attender and Member are still relevant and necessary today.

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