More about Quakers

Discussion of ideas and practices

Quakers
AUSTRALIA

This pamphlet is intended for those who know something about Quaker practice and organisations and wish to know more.

Our official name is The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and we are known more simply as either Quakers or Friends.

Quakers believe that it is each person's own direct spiritual experience that is important. As a result, Quakers do not have an official creed which everyone must accept. Quakers come from a wide range of religious backgrounds and so our experiences differ. How we talk about our spiritual experience differs too. For example, some of us talk about the Inner Light or the Spirit; others talk about God or Jesus Christ.

However, we are not a totally disparate group without common beliefs or practices. There are beliefs that are shared, though some people might hold some of these more strongly than others. There are also practices that are distinctively Quaker, such as the worshipful process of group discernment used in our business meetings.

Our beliefs are guides to which we listen and by which we try to live. These beliefs are expressed in how we worship, how we are organised and how we live our everyday lives.

> *Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or a 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**

'Quakers believe that it is each person's own direct spiritual experience that is important.'

History

The Society arose at a time of great religious restlessness in seventeenth century England. Many of those who became Friends withdrew from institutional religion seeking something more experiential and alive. These people, originally called Seekers, met without ordained priests to worship together, silently waiting upon God. George Fox was an early focus for the group, joined by his wife Margaret Fell.

Early Friends were persecuted in England and many emigrated to America, where they established influential Quaker communities. One of these early Friends was William Penn (whose family name gave rise to Pennsylvania).

In Australia the Society of Friends was first established in Tasmania in 1833 as the result of a visit by two English Friends, James Backhouse and George Walker. These Friends came to inquire into the condition of penal settlements in Australia, the welfare of the Aboriginal people and the welfare of the free settlers. By the end of the 1850s, the number of Friends in Australia had increased considerably. In 1861, meetings in Hobart, Melbourne and Adelaide were formally recognised. In 1902 a General Meeting for Australia was established under the responsibility of British Quakers. Finally in 1964, Friends in Australia became autonomous as Australia Yearly Meeting.

'These Friends came to inquire into the condition of penal settlements in Australia, the welfare of the Aboriginal people and the welfare of the free settlers.'

Shared beliefs

DIRECT SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IS CENTRAL TO QUAKER WORSHIP AND TO HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES

Quakers believe that we relate directly to God rather than through an intermediary. The Society of Friends in Australia does not ordain ministers or pastors. We are a community where each person has responsibility for spiritual and pastoral care.

> *Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us.* **'Advices and Queries', n.9, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

THERE IS THAT OF GOD IN EVERY PERSON AND IN THE NATURAL WORLD

Quakers believe that every person has that of God in them and that each of us has the potential to grow in our relationship with God. Everyone is worthy of respect and love. Because of this, most Quakers believe that we should not fight in any wars.

> *Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.* **George Fox, 1656**

EACH OF US FINDS OUR OWN WAY TO RELIGIOUS TRUTH

> *Respect the wide diversity among us in our lives and relationships. Refrain from making prejudiced judgments about the lives and journeys of others. Do you foster the spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness which our discipleship asked of us? Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God.* **'Advices and Queries', n.24, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

While Quakerism has a Christian history, we recognise that there are many ways to grow spiritually. We try to see the differences between us as positive and of benefit to us all in our search for spiritual development. One of the obvious differences is between those Quakers who are 'Christocentric', i.e. those for whom their relationship with Christ is

central to their religious experience, and those who are 'Universalist' i.e. those who incorporate other beliefs in their spiritual lives. We recognise the value of this variety and try to learn from it.

> *Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it.* **'Advices and Queries', n.19, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

RELIGIOUS LIFE IS INSEPARABLE FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

Quakers believe that our spiritual life influences everything that we do. We understand that we can experience direct contact with God at any time, not only in Meeting for Worship.

> *Cherish that of God within you, so that this love may grow in you and guide you. Let your worship and your daily life enrich each other. Treasure your experience of God, however it comes to you. Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way.* **'Advices and Queries', n.2 (in part), Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

WE SHOULD BE OPEN TO NEW INSIGHTS FROM ANY SOURCE

Quakers believe that rather than adhering to set rules we should listen to God to help us work out what to do. This may mean being open to other religious teachings or to doing things in unexpected ways.

> *Be aware of the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of your daily life. Spiritual learning continues throughout life, and often in unexpected ways. There is inspiration to be found all around us, in the natural world, in the sciences and arts, in our work and friendships, in our sorrows as well as in our joys. Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come? Do you approach new ideas with discernment?* **'Advices and Queries', n.7, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

> *… here I was led to think on the nature of the exercise which hath attended me. Love was the first motion, and then a Concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life, and the Spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some Instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by following of the Leadings of Truth.* **John Woolman's journal, 1763**

Meeting for worship

Meetings for Worship are at the centre of Quaker life. The meeting begins as we sit gathered together in a silence that grows deeper as it progresses. Here people try to open themselves to the love of God and to that of God in each other. This inner openness or listening shapes the silence.

> *Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us.* **'Advices and Queries', n.9, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

We generally sit together for about an hour, often in a circle. We usually meet on Sunday mornings but meetings also happen at other times. People come into the meeting room and simply join in the silence. Some people find it helpful to read at the start of the meeting, so most meetings have a collection of writings available, including the Bible and *Quaker Faith and Practice*. An hour of silence can seem daunting when it is unfamiliar. At times, it may feel as if the meeting as a whole is restless. At other times, the meeting may continue to the end in silence. When this happens, it can become a living silence, alive with the presence of God.

During the meeting, someone may feel moved to speak about a particular feeling or thought. Those who give such ministry tend to say that they felt compelled to speak, they were moved to their feet by the spirit of God. The words spoken may tune in very directly with other people's feelings or with the meeting as a whole. At times you may feel the person has known just what you needed to hear; at others the words may not relate to you at all. Several Friends may speak during a Meeting for Worship, sometimes on a related theme, sometimes on quite different issues. They may speak a few words, or speak for a few minutes. People don't plan to give ministry; each individual is moved to speak from that of God within.

It is important to allow time between people speaking to allow the meeting to contemplate what each person has said.

I found myself within reach of a Friends' meeting (1872) and, somewhat to my surprise, cordially made welcome to attend it … Before the meeting was over a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man … I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking his presence. To sit down in silence could at the least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me as it did that morning the very gate of heaven. **Caroline Stephen, 'Quaker Strongholds', 1890**

When you are preoccupied and distracted in meeting let wayward and disturbing thoughts give way quietly to your awareness of God's presence among us and in the world. Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others. Remember that we all share responsibility for the meeting for worship whether our ministry is in silence or through the spoken word. **'Advices and Queries', n.13, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

Children come into meeting for part of the time, usually for 10 to 15 minutes either at the beginning or the end. Arrangements for the children differ between meetings.

Meetings for Worship may be held for other purposes such as marriages, funerals or for peace.

'At times you may feel the person has known just what you needed to hear; at others the words may not relate to you at all.'

Quakers in the world

The inner experience of Meeting for Worship leads Quakers to care about what is happening in the world.

We value all people equally. Historically, Quakers have been involved in working against injustice which is based on discrimination. This tradition continues.

> *Are you alert to practices here and throughout the world which discriminate against people on the basis of who or what they are or because of their beliefs? Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society's conventions or its laws. Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life. Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear. Are you working to bring about a just and compassionate society which allows everyone to develop their capacities and fosters the desire to serve?* **'Advices and Queries', n.36, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

> *Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand.* **'Advices and Queries', n.37, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2008**

Because of the Quaker view that all life is sacred, Quakers have always been involved in peace issues. The Quaker Peace Testimony, which was written in 1661, says:

> *We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatever, this is our testimony to the whole world … the Spirit of Christ, which leads us unto all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world … Therefore we cannot learn war any more.*

We generally oppose violence of any kind, whether committed by one person against another or at national or community levels. Conflict is part of life, but can be solved non-violently. Because of this, Quakers have been involved in many local and international activities.

Quaker Service Australia (QSA) is an organisation within Australia Yearly Meeting which channels the corporate concern of Australian Friends for the building of a more peaceful, just and compassionate world. QSA funds aid projects in Australia and overseas.

Membership

Membership of the Religious Society of Friends is 'a recognised outward sign of an inner spiritual commitment to a way of worship and of life, as lived within the Society' (*Australia Yearly Meeting Handbook of Practice and Procedure*, 1995).

Application for membership indicates a desire to identify with and be accepted by the Religious Society of Friends. It also signifies a commitment to helping with the work of the organisation. People vary considerably in when they feel ready to apply for membership – some take many years, others feel ready much sooner. Those who are not members are called 'attenders' and may be actively involved.

> *Membership does not require great moral or spiritual achievement, but it does require a sincerity of purpose and a 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. The process of application with its personal consideration, writing the letter to the monthly meeting, preparing to be visited and being visited are all part of the spiritual journey … The membership application process is not only about seeking but also about finding.* **'Quaker Faith and Practice', Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995**

During the early years of the Society of Friends, there were no clearly defined rules of membership. The need to identify and support those Friends imprisoned for faithfulness to Friends' testimonies led to a clearer definition of membership.

At present, the process for becoming a member begins with writing to the clerk of Regional Meeting asking for membership. Your letter will be considered at the next Regional Meeting where a small group of Friends, usually including one you know, will be appointed to visit you. They will meet with you to explore your feelings and thoughts about your spiritual life. Such visits will give you an opportunity to ask questions about the Society and to talk about your views and experiences of it so far. Part of the aim of the visit is to make sure that you understand the commitment involved. The visitors

report back to Regional Meeting on the visiting process and the meeting decides whether to accept the person into membership.

As a rough guide I would feel that when attenders are reasonably sure that Meeting for Worship has become a necessary part of their lives, and when they feel themselves at home in the company of Friends and have a broad sympathy with their outlook, although complete agreement on every point is not required, then they should seriously consider applying for membership. **George Gorman**

'People vary considerably in when they feel ready to apply for membership – some take many years, others feel ready much sooner.'

Structure and organisation

The Religious Society of Friends has a flat rather than hierarchical structure, in line with our understanding that we are all equal. The general organising body for Friends in each State is the Regional Meeting. Local meetings, worshipping groups and isolated Friends are under the care of the Regional Meeting in each state/territory. The Regional and Local Meetings have clerks, usually appointed for a three-year term. Clerks prepare an agenda and guide the Meetings for Worship for Business, represent their meeting to the general public and at ecumenical gatherings and generally see that no matter of business is lost or forgotten.

Young Friends (aged 16 to approximately 30) and Junior Young Friends (aged 14 to 16) participate in the life of the meeting, organise activities and have national gatherings at camps twice a year.

Australia Yearly Meeting is the national coordinating body and has international links through Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC).

Quaker decision-making

Our decision-making meetings are held as Meetings for Worship for Business because we wait upon God to help us find the right way forward. Our business is conducted in a way that is particular to Quakers. When a decision needs to be made, the issue is thoroughly considered from all sides to reach unity in the way forward. This means that people should only speak when moved to do so and if they have something to say that has not already been said. It is not a debate or a time for scoring points.

Sometimes the clerk will suggest a period of silence for people to reflect in a spirit of worship on what has been said. It is the role of the clerk to ascertain whether the meeting is ready to come to a unified decision. If so, the clerk will prepare and read a statement (called a minute) to express this 'sense of the meeting'. There is no voting. The meeting may accept the minute or further work may need to be done on the minute before it can be accepted.

If you would like to attend a Regional or Local Meeting for Worship for Business, you will be very welcome. Please ask the clerk who will then ask permission of the meeting.

Where an individual or Friend needs help in making a personal decision, a Meeting for Clearness may be called. This meeting is of a small group of Friends, conducted in the spirit of a Meeting for Worship. The meeting begins in silence, with occasional questions asked by its members. These questions are not part of the discussion, rather they are offered from within the silence, to help the person who has called the meeting to clarify and explore his/her concern. Depending on the wishes of the person involved, members may be asked for suggestions. Clearness Meetings may also be called by a Regional Meeting to consider either the concern of a member or how to respond to a public crisis or issue.

'It is the role of the clerk to ascertain whether the meeting is ready to come to a unified decision.'

Committees

Each Regional Meeting has several committees and working groups. Some of these do the kind of work any group generates, for example finances, newsletters, hospitality and library/ archives. Other committees and working groups are particular to the needs and ways of Friends.

All committees use Friends' ways of conducting business. Meetings usually begin with a period of silence. A convenor creates an agenda and guides a committee through its work. A committee might conduct routine business without further reference to the Regional Meeting. Other actions may require the approval of the Regional Meeting, such as expenditure approvals or matters of principle.

Quakers do not have priests or pastors. We believe that we are called to be pastors to one another. Because of this, experienced Friends take on roles which focus on the spiritual life of the meeting and on the care of individual Friends. In some meetings these roles are held by elders and overseers, often these roles are combined in the Ministry and Oversight Committee. While it is the responsibility of Friends to care for each other, Ministry and Oversight has a coordinating role in supporting Friends in need, ensuring the right holding of Meetings for Worship and encouraging the spiritual health of the meeting.

Nominations Committee looks for members and attenders to fill the roles needed on each committee and for such positions as clerk and assistant clerk. Within a small meeting, this can be a difficult task. Committee members need a wide knowledge of the skills and current activities of Friends.

Peace, Social Justice and Indigenous Concerns Committees coordinate Friends' responses to current community issues. The Quaker Service Australia Committee coordinates support for Australian and international development projects. Australia Yearly Meeting also has committees for special purposes.

'All committees use Friends' ways of conducting business.'

Finances

Being a Friend implies a sense of belonging and brings some responsibilities, including those relating to finance. It is the practice of Friends to seek the leadings of the spirit of God when making decisions, including in matters of finance.

Members and attenders are presented annually with what is called a 'schedule'. This schedule outlines the suggested contribution towards administrative and operational costs of the society. People are asked to contribute according to their means. Yearly Meeting has a paid secretary working for Friends in Australia.

The schedule may list other categories to which funds may be allocated. Meetings sometimes have collection boxes for general or particular causes.

> *Let us be ready to deny ourselves in order that we may be more able to help the work to which our Society is called. In periodically renewing our loyalties, let us bring to the claims of Quaker finance the quality of stewardship which does not ask, "How much must I give?" but "How much can I give?".*
> **'Handbook of Practice and Procedure', AYM, 2005**

Where to find out more

OUR WEBSITE

Some basic information about Australian Quakers can be found on our website **www.quakersaustralia.info** This site is linked to other sites which relate to Quaker concerns and Quakers in other countries.

CONTACT ADDRESS:

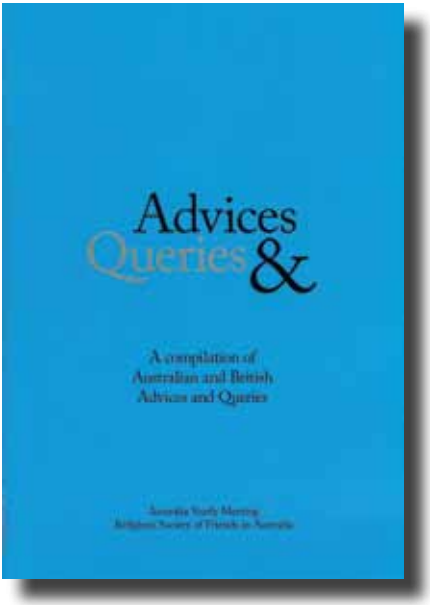
Australia Yearly Meeting's national secretary can be contacted at:

AYM Secretary
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia
Australia Yearly Meeting Office
PO Box 4035
Carlingford North NSW 2118
P: 0423 308 550
E: secretary@quakersaustralia.info

There is at least one meeting in each state and the ACT. To find your nearest meeting, looking in your local phone book under 'Friends' or 'Quakers' or 'Religious Society of Friends'.

YOUNG FRIENDS

The Young Friends clerk can be contacted at:
RMYFClerk@quakersaustralia.info



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