

Membership in the Religious Society of Friends From New England Yearly Meeting

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Introduction

The personal decision to request membership in a monthly meeting in New England Yearly Meeting of Friends represents a marker in a person's relationship to their spiritual community and in their relationship to the Divine presence. This section is addressed both to attenders who are considering applying for membership and to those who have been members for many years, or a lifetime. It also provides guidance to monthly meetings. Appendix 4 includes templates and other information concerning practical aspects of the membership process.

General Considerations

There was no formal membership in the Religious Society of Friends for the first 85 years. Individuals were considered Quakers if they participated in meetings for worship, had experienced the Living Christ or Inward Light, felt themselves in unity with Friends, and were prepared to make public witness to their faith. Commitment to how Friends lived their faith was a defining trait and Quakers took care to know, keep in touch with, and support one another. Today the commitment and intention of a person to live according to the faith and practice of Friends is recorded as membership in a monthly meeting following the discernment process of a meeting's clearness committee on membership.

Friends trust that there is an underlying Truth that can unify all our individual perceptions when we open ourselves to direct and unmediated encounters with God. In New England Yearly Meeting we do not ask that all who come into membership name this encounter in the same way. New England Friends name this experience variously, including God, Christ Jesus, Spirit, Inward Light, Truth, and Love. Trust in the possibility of Divine guidance that transcends our individual will is crucial because on this rests unity and spiritual authority within the Religious Society of Friends. Experience of the Inward Light gives us the basis for spoken ministry during worship, for how we do business, and for how we "let our lives speak" as we live our testimony in the world. The Society holds the faith that we can witness with transformed lives to the power of the Spirit, known to us individually and collectively. The meeting holds us accountable for our willingness to seek Truth, and the actions that arise from that search.

When entering into membership, we ask individuals to describe their spiritual experience and understanding from a place of openness and to hear the experience of others with openness and respect. The life of the Spirit is released and vitalized when we use our own authentic spiritual language and voice. Yet it is also true that the words used to convey spiritual mysteries and understandings that are life-affirming to one person may be distressing for another. The Society will not ask its members, and members should not expect to ask others, to change authentic descriptions of spiritual experience to accommodate another member's discomfort with that language or way of encountering the Divine. Each member's perception and attunement to the Spirit of Truth is valuable and needs to be offered and

received with humility, knowing that we each perceive Truth only in part. We continually seek through honest and sensitive exploration of our differences to uncover our spiritual unity.

“The Society of Friends might be thought of as a prism through which the Divine Light passes, to become visible in a spectrum of many colours; many more, in their richness, than words alone can express.” (Christian Faith and Practice in the experience of the Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting 1960, Introduction to Chapter 1.)

It is important for meetings to articulate clearly the expectations and understandings that go along with membership. Uncertainty, vagueness, or a superficial membership process can inadvertently result in dilution of Quaker faith and practice.

Membership is held in a monthly meeting, and by virtue of that membership one also holds membership in a quarterly meeting and in New England Yearly Meeting, our ultimate denominational body. But it should also be recognized that membership is in the Religious Society of Friends as a whole; that we are a part of something larger than the Quakers in the six states of New England. The yearly meeting holds membership in and supports several national and international groups: Friends General Conference (FGC), Friends United Meeting (FUM), and Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC). These cover a diversity of Quaker practice, experience, theology, history, and cultural background. Awareness of this implies acknowledgment that not all Friends meetings are alike and that we sometimes struggle with those whose beliefs, language, or practices differ from our own, in some way.

To Those Considering Membership

It is through experience that a person grows in the Spirit. The journey may begin with powerful experiences of Divine presence and guidance, a pressing need to be in relationship with God, or a feeling of discomfort with other religious paths. At some point a person may become convinced that the Quaker path is where they can best serve others or that their way of seeking and following Divine guidance is Quaker. For other individuals the journey begins through participation in social justice activities and witness of Friends, where they encounter the spiritual impulse that lies at the heart of this work. The most transformative values and actions of Friends arise as an outgrowth of obedient listening to the Inward Teacher.

Becoming a member is an outward sign of an inward reality. Membership shows an individual's commitment to the Friends' faith community, as well as the commitment of the Society to the individual member. While no act of joining imparts any special sanctity or favor, membership is of value and importance because it unites Friends in a shared commitment to a well-traveled path and its disciplines. Friends welcome fellow travelers to walk alongside them on their journeys, but not all fellow travelers seek or are taken into membership. When seasoned members of a meeting discern that a faithful attender may be ready to explore membership, it can be very helpful to gently suggest it to them. The consideration of membership can clarify the attender's relationship to the meeting and bring increased vitality to their spiritual journey. Joining the Religious Society of Friends affirms to the outside world that a person wishes to be counted as a Quaker. It is a public acknowledgment, a statement of faith, and a commitment to the local meeting and to the Religious Society of Friends as a whole.

An understanding of all Quaker ways is not a requirement for membership. The patient accumulation of experience with other Friends and participation in the meeting's life has been shown to be the most

useful teacher. For those who are feeling called into membership, participation in meetings for worship and for business is essential. The essence of being a member is the relationship among the member, the meeting, and the Divine. A careful reading of NEYM's Faith and Practice will help the applicant gain an understanding of Friends' ways of worship, the transaction of business, and the responsibilities of membership. Friends come together to learn—to learn from one another, certainly, but most importantly to learn from the Inward Guide.

Queries for those considering membership are found at the end of this chapter following "Membership Advices and Queries."

The Member and the Meeting Community: A Covenant Relationship

Membership is a mutual commitment between the individual and the Religious Society of Friends, within the framework of a particular monthly meeting. In accepting someone into membership the meeting's commitment is to offer opportunities for, and assistance in, spiritual growth; to help individuals discover and use their gifts; and to offer pastoral care as needed. Members commit to living their daily life in accordance with the faith and practice of Friends, to encouraging and cherishing other individuals in the meeting, and to being supportive of the spiritual and temporal well being of others. Members commit to participation in the life of the meeting as they are able: regularly attending meetings for worship and business; contributing their time and energy; and, according to their means, contributing financially. Being a member of the Religious Society of Friends is a relationship of mutual trust before God, and like other intimate, trust-based human relationships it is not always easy or risk-free.

Responsibilities of Membership

Membership comes with different expectations than those held for attenders. With membership comes the privilege and challenge to participate fully in the life of the Society, to be stretched and sometimes made uncomfortable.

Some long-term attenders have become valued parts of the common life of their meetings without seeking membership. Some Friends see only afterward that they became inward members long before formally seeking membership, drawn by the bonds of relationship and responsibility that occur naturally in a religious community. In a welcoming meeting, all persons are nurtured by participation in activities and responsibilities at any level of involvement. Yet meetings should discern carefully who has the authority to make decisions important to the life of the meeting. It is the members of a meeting who bear the burden of spiritual and societal accountability for acts of conscience and for decisions that have legal ramifications. For this reason, trustees, treasurer, clerk, and recording clerk of a meeting; members of Ministry and Counsel; members of the Membership committee; and representatives to the quarterly and yearly meeting Ministry and Counsel should be members of the meeting. In small meetings with few members, care should be taken that all legal documents are signed by a member or an individual given such authority by the meeting.

Types of Membership

The process of becoming a member of a monthly meeting is always initiated by a request. A child becomes an associate member by parental or guardian request. An individual becomes an adult member by personal request. Both types of membership are a formal recognition that the person is a valued part of the life of the meeting and that the meeting has accepted responsibility for their pastoral care. It is hoped that children who are associate members will eventually choose to request membership in their own right. NEYM no longer grants “birthright” membership. Any member in NEYM who was granted birthright membership in the past retains their membership. Ultimately, all membership that embraces responsibility for full participation in the life of the meeting is through personal request of the individual.

Adult Membership

When a person feels moved to apply for membership, an application should be made in writing to the monthly meeting, addressed to the clerk of the meeting. The details of the membership process are laid out in Appendix 4.

Membership of Children by Parental Request

Adult members may request that their children be accepted as associate members. Such a request for membership is made in writing to the clerk of the monthly meeting. Associate membership is granted by the monthly meeting if both parents are adult members of the meeting or if one parent is an adult-member of the meeting and the non-member parent consents. Children are not expected to take on the responsibilities of adults but are in every other way regarded as members of the meeting whose spiritual lives are valued and encouraged. Associate membership is an interim membership lasting until the individual has grown in the spiritual life to conviction when they may request membership based on their own personal choice. See Appendix 4 for the details of this process.

Embracing young children as members in this way is an expression of the understanding that children and young people have a unique and valued role and relationship within the meeting community. It is a part of the meeting’s covenant to actively nurture the spiritual well-being and growth of its children and to provide spiritual and practical support to their parents in this endeavor. As spiritual maturity develops in parallel with an understanding of the Quaker faith, Friends hope that the young person will embrace this path as their own. At that time the young person writes a letter to the clerk of the monthly meeting stating their readiness for adult membership. The meeting takes up the request as in the case of any applicant for adult membership. The purpose of the clearness process at this time is to provide the meeting and the young friend an opportunity to clarify their relationship and to recognize that its nature has changed. When young adults apply for membership care should be taken to acknowledge that many young people relocate frequently and that this is not a barrier to membership. Some form of regular, reciprocal contact is, however, necessary to maintain the integrity of the membership relationship. Being received into adult membership acknowledges that Quakerism is the member’s spiritual path even though their attendance may be sporadic.

Some young adults may choose to postpone adult membership until they are settled and can fully engage with a meeting community. Many have active spiritual lives where they live their witness. The home meeting of such an associate member should inquire whether they would welcome the meeting’s regular contact and continued concern for their spiritual well-being. If the answer is affirmative, the

meeting should make a commitment to the care of these Friends, maintaining regular contact with them as an encouragement to continue to stay engaged with their Quaker community.

Sojourning

A member who is temporarily living away from their home meeting may become a sojourning member of the meeting they are attending without giving up membership in their home meeting. (See Appendix 4F)

Non-Resident Members

It is important for meetings to keep in touch with members who live at a distance, including those sojourning in another meeting or who spend part of the year in another location. For those living full-time in another location a personal letter at least yearly is suggested, with a message of kindly interest and inquiry into the Friend's religious life and activities. When appropriate, members should be advised of the advantages of transferring membership to a meeting in their immediate neighborhood or, if their absence is temporary, of becoming sojourning members in such a meeting. If, following outreach, no information is forthcoming from a member for a number of years, the monthly meeting may consider the membership to have lapsed.

For some non-resident members, attending a meeting is not possible due to distance, transportation limitations, or other extenuating circumstances. In these cases, it is especially important for the meeting to maintain regular contact with the absent member so that their spiritual connection with, and support from, the home meeting can be maintained.

Dual Membership

New England Yearly Meeting recommends against a Friend holding membership in two different faith communities.

Membership in the Religious Society of Friends, at its best, expresses a settled recognition that this is the best framework to allow one's spiritual and temporal life to flourish. It is a commitment to God and to the other members of the Meeting, in covenant relationship.

If an individual requests membership in the Religious Society of Friends, and at the same time wishes to retain membership in another tradition, to have dual membership, it is important for their clearness committee to explore with them their reasons for this and its implications. The same is true when a member of the Religious Society of Friends wishes to join another church and wants to retain their meeting membership. It is essential in each of these situations for a clearness committee to question whether the individual's desire to be in a formal membership relationship with two faith traditions indicates a lack of clarity regarding their spiritual path and its expression. The clearness committee may well inquire if there are creedal aspects of the other faith which conflicts with Friends' understanding of continuing revelation. In addition, there may be obligatory outward sacraments that contradict Friends' witness that the sacraments are not a necessary vehicle to access the inward spiritual reality. Dual membership implies that an individual intends to commit fully and formally to the covenant responsibilities and spiritual understandings of two different religious traditions. Through membership, one is taking on the commitment of contributing to the life of the religious community not only through

attendance at worship, committee work, and financial support, but also in the care, concern and responsibility for the other members and the children of the community.

Affiliation with Other Faith Communities

It is understood, and accepted, that many Friends in New England today have come to Quakerism from other spiritual traditions and often bring with them deep ties to that heritage. These Friends often continue to participate in these traditions when visiting family or at times of specific religious celebrations. The acknowledgment of these gifts from their ethnic or religious heritage, need not disturb their commitment and witness as Friends.

There are also Friends who find ongoing inspiration in the wisdom and devotional practices of various Christian churches, as well as other religions. This enriches their spiritual lives and brings that enlivened spirit to their meeting. Since the early days of the Quaker movement, Friends have recognized the unity of those who witness to the Light within their chosen religious traditions. Friends encourage members to expand their understanding of the spiritual insights of other religions through reading and participation as led and to seek the ways in which Friends can unite with them. Members are also encouraged to bear witness to Friends' distinctive spiritual path and contribute their understanding to the spectrum of religious experience.

Lapsed Membership

Many Friends who have grown up in meetings, or been active members of a meeting, understand themselves to be Quakers long after they have ceased to be active with Friends in any way. It is not a denial of this spiritual identity for a meeting to acknowledge that the individual is no longer a participating member of the Quaker community. Meetings should engage sensitively with such members, letting them know that the meeting believes that their membership has lapsed. In such a case, Ministry and Counsel recommends to the monthly meeting that it remove the name from the membership rolls. The meeting may encourage them to remain in contact with the meeting and with Friends. Such individuals may apply for membership in the future if so led.

If for a number of years the meeting has been unable to sustain a relationship with a member over the age of 25, it may consider the membership to have lapsed.

Transfer or Removal of Membership

Transfer

Membership in good standing is transferable from one monthly meeting to another, unless either meeting has discerned for weighty reasons that transfer is not advisable. Members transferring to and from another yearly meeting should become familiar with the book of Faith and Practice of the new yearly meeting. Transfer may be requested for personal reasons after careful consideration, or it may be due to relocation. Transferring membership after one relocates encourages one to engage fully with the new meeting. A letter of transfer from the original meeting is sent to the clerk of the new meeting, recommending the member to the care of the new meeting. When the letter is received, Ministry and Counsel appoints a clearness committee to consider the request for the transfer and to acquaint the member with the spiritual life of the new meeting. There is wide diversity among Friends and care should be taken that both the meeting and the new member are aware of how this diversity might be

present in the new relationship. When the membership transfer is accepted by the new meeting the member is formally welcomed into the new meeting. An adult who is a birthright member in another yearly meeting will transfer as a member. A child who is a birthright member will transfer as an associate member. An adult who is a member by parental request may apply for adult membership to their home meeting before transferring or may apply for adult membership in the new meeting. (See Appendix 4D for a full description of the process and a sample transfer certificate.)

Resignation of Membership

Members wishing to resign their membership in the Religious Society of Friends should put the request in writing to the clerk of the meeting. Where appropriate, the meeting may reach out to the individual and offer to convene a committee to visit the member in a spirit of loving care to be clear concerning the cause of the resignation. While a resignation may be a sign of alienation from the meeting, some Friends may simply grow in a direction that makes membership in a different religious body right for them. The meeting may grow from understanding and considering the reasons for a member's resignation. Resignation of membership from the monthly meeting also signifies resignation from the Religious Society of Friends. The meeting drafts a minute accepting the Friend's resignation with a copy of the minute sent to the individual.

Discontinuance of Membership

Discontinuing a Friend's membership may be considered when the conduct or publicly expressed opinions of the member are so much at variance with the principles of the Society that the spiritual bond has been broken. Friends may find that for this person to continue to be considered a member carries with it a lack of individual and/or corporate integrity.

There may come a time when the meeting community can no longer live with the spiritual or human costs of maintaining a relationship with such a member. While the meeting does have significant responsibility to work with the person via support committees, clearness committees, counseling, and individual personal contact, the meeting cannot sacrifice itself for the preservation of the membership relationship with any one individual.

Much responsibility falls to Ministry and Counsel in times of such difficulties. The quarterly and/or yearly meeting Ministry and Counsel may be called upon for support and resources. Often these resources provide emotional and spiritual support for those within the meeting who are working to restore or maintain the unity of the meeting community and are working to provide pastoral care for the individual.

Within the meeting, the work needs to be done in a way that honors both the member in question and the members of the community. The final decision to discontinue membership is a meeting decision and must be made in a meeting for business after sufficient work within the community to be sure that everyone understands the process and the purpose. It is important that personal support be offered to the individual whose membership is being discontinued during this process in whatever way is acceptable, and that the individual be kept fully informed when such a meeting is being held.

It may also be possible to continue to care for the individual after membership is discontinued by working with the person's community and family outside of meeting, making sure support systems are in place if they are needed.

A Friend whose membership has been discontinued by the monthly meeting may, if dissatisfied with the decision, file an appeal within one year with the quarterly meeting for a review of the matter. If either the Friend whose membership is in question, or the monthly meeting concerned, is dissatisfied with the decision of the quarterly meeting, an appeal may be addressed to the Permanent Board of the Yearly Meeting. The decision of the Permanent Board is final.

One whose membership has been discontinued may subsequently apply for membership in the usual manner, after one year.

Extracts on Membership

1. 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. Like all discipleships, membership has its elements of commitment and responsibility but it is also about joy and celebration. Membership is a way of saying to the meeting that you feel at home and in the right place. Membership is also a way of saying to the meeting and to the world, that you accept at least the fundamental elements of being a Quaker: the understanding of divine guidance, the manner of corporate worship and the ordering of the meeting's business, the practical expression of inward convictions, and the equality of all before God. In asking to be admitted into the community of the meeting you are affirming what the meeting stands for and declaring your willingness to contribute to its life. (Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995)

2. Membership is a covenant relationship, a commitment both to God and to a community. People in a covenant relationship are bound together by love, answerable to each other for their words and actions. There are mutual expectations in a covenant: trust, open communication, forgiveness, participation, and perseverance in the face of differences. (Draft of Illinois Yearly Meeting Faith & Practice, 1999)

3. [M]embership is simply a rite of passage in that [life-long] process of [transformation], the moment of adult declaration that this is the church structure, this is the spiritual community within which we feel called to live out the process of our spiritual maturing. This is the trellising that best supports the growth of our interior relationship with God and our exterior relationship with the world. These are the people with whom we will live out the vicissitudes of our inner and outer lives. Worthiness has nothing to do with membership. God has already accepted us in our imperfection and is loving us forward toward a more perfect image of God's self. The real issue in membership is commitment on the part of both the meeting and the applicant to remain faithful to the development and requirements of the process within Quaker tradition. (Patricia Loring, 1999)

4. The test for membership should not be doctrinal agreement nor adherence to certain testimonies but evidence of sincere seeking and striving for the Truth, together with an understanding of the lines along which Friends are seeking Truth. (Friends World Conference, 1952)

5. I felt so at home among Friends that I realized I had actually been one for a long time without realizing it. It never occurred to me not to ask for membership, but the process—clearness committee, the whole works—forced me further on: I had to consider issues that, like it or not, needed to be wrestled with. For me, the main wrestling match was with the Peace Testimony—a bout which is not over. (I keep running into Hitler and the Holocaust, and it's still a matter of "I believe. Help thou my unbelief.") (Marnie Miller-Gutsell, 2002)

6. I resisted membership in any group for many years, feeling that it was unnecessary and that all people, of all faiths, who were trying to live based in their experience of the divine, were “the church universal”. I didn’t like the idea of making formal separations between us. While I experienced and still experience the informal drawing together, as if by a magnetic force, of those who are my “companions along the way” I began to feel a need for a group to join where I could be part of a larger communal voice and work in the world. I had been attending an unprogrammed Friends meeting for several years and had realized that this was where I “fit in” spiritually For me, membership is akin to marriage. It is hard to describe what the inner difference is except that it is a deeper commitment, a sense that a decision has been made and barring something which arises within the context of that commitment which threatens to be destructive to me, I will stay with it. (Maggie Edmondson, 2002)

7. I find myself surprised, time and time again, when I hear older Friends speak with urgency about the future vitality of the Religious Society of Friends and express dismay at the lack of young adults in their meetings. If Friends are committed to addressing these concerns and not simply wringing their hands, perhaps it is time to explore new approaches to membership with the needs of the younger generations in mind. If the monthly meeting structure is frequently less relevant to the “next generation” of Friends, then is it wise to use monthly meeting membership as the primary measuring stick by which we gauge the health and vitality of our faith community? Quakerism is vibrant and thriving in many worship groups and Quaker colleges, to name two examples, yet our declining membership statistics fail to take these groups into account and thus paint a rather grim picture of our future. Perhaps we can envision a more optimistic landscape if we let go of our historical attachment to monthly meeting membership as the locus of all meaningful Quaker community? (Emily Higgs, 2012)

8. Our membership of this, or any other Christian fellowship is never based upon worthiness We are none of us members because we have attained a certain standard of goodness, but rather because, in this matter, we still are all humble learners in the school of Christ. Our membership is of no importance whatever unless it signifies that we are committed to something of far greater and more lasting significance than can adequately be conveyed by the closest association with any movement or organization. (Edgar G. Dunstan, 1956)

9. In describing our own religious experiences, we should use words which liberate rather than words which imprison the spirit. Jesus said, “I am the way.” He did not say, “I am the End of the road.” We say to an applicant for membership: “We expect you to have a belief, but we do not require you to accept a particular statement of belief. You need not have formulated a full theology, and you need not subscribe to a particular theology, but you must be sincerely seeking Truth. We expect you to be a humble learner in the School of Christ. We hope you will study the Scriptures and we hope you will try to formulate your beliefs, but you need not have arrived at Truth, what we ask is that you be sincerely seeking Truth.” (Thomas Bodine, 1985)

10. Convincement is that moment when the idea of being a Quaker becomes a lived reality of being a Quaker, in which the Quaker way comes into the heart and finds a home and makes a nest and settles. It’s a subtle, subtle thing, but it’s everything also. It’s everything. When Jesus said, “I am the way,” my understanding of that is that when we come to Spirit and we say “yes” and we allow Spirit to be in us, we live in the world in a different way, and it becomes our way of being.

So I am now a Quaker. I am a member of this tribe and I'm committed to its health. But every time that I say yes to something there's a new level, a new arena, a new something that I'm ready to learn that God is calling me into, and there is a deeper connection to Spirit.

So when I first came into the Religious Society of Friends, I was not conscious of the need to work on issues of racism, but recently I have become convinced that that is a part of my piece in this fellowship. And I don't even know what it is are the future pieces of conviction that need to happen in me that I need to be open to.

And, so, yes, I'm a Quaker but I'm not yet fully the Quaker that I might be. And it's when I stop and say "Been there, done that, it's over" that I think I stop being a Quaker. And I need to, maybe, become convinced again. (Walter Hjelt Sullivan, 2015)

11. For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we who are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12:4-5)

12. In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives! (Parker J. Palmer, 1977)

13. While her children were in their infancy she had a great concern to become a member of Friends Society not only because she was fully convinced of the excellence of the principles professed by that society, but because she earnestly desired that her children should receive the guarded education Friends give theirs. She mentioned her concern to a Friend who said do not apply, you will only have your feelings wounded. Friends will not receive you. Thus admonished, and feeling that prejudice had closed the doors against her, she did not make her concern known to the Society. There was nothing but my Mother's complexion in the way to prevent her being a member, she was highly intelligent & pious; her whole life blameless. (Sarah Mapps Douglass, 1844)

14. This was the way that Friends used with me, when I was convinced of truth, they came oftentimes to visit me; and sate and waited upon the Lord in silence with me; and as the Lord opened our understanding and mouths, so we had very sweet and comfortable seasons together. They did not ask me questions about this or the other creed, or about this or the other controversy in religion; but they waited to feel that living Power to quicken me, which raised up Jesus from the dead. And it pleased God so in his wisdom to direct, that all the great truths of the Christian religion were occasionally spoken to. Now this was Friends way with me, a way far beyond all rules or methods established by the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness with God: And this is their way with others that are convinced of the truth. (Richard Claridge, 1697)

15. My first impression of Quaker Meeting was confusion. I could not believe that people really were uniting together in practice not in dogma. It was literally incomprehensible to me, the fact that people believed different things and used different language but could be a community – and such a great community – because they shared the same set of practices, and because they came together in the same space and through that shared worship – that waiting worship – they developed a kind of sense of community and a sense of body, a sense of integration. (Robert Fischer, 2016)

16. I said to one of the Cuban Friends, “It must be hard to be a Christian in Cuba.” He smiled. “Not as hard as it is in the United States,” he said. Of course, I asked why he said that, and he went on, “You are tempted by three idols that do not tempt us. One is affluence, which we do not have. Another is power, which we also do not have. The third is technology, which again we do not have. Furthermore, when you join a church or a meeting, you gain in social acceptance and respectability. When we join, we lose those things, so we must be very clear about what we believe and what the commitment is that we are prepared to make.” (Gordon Browne Jr, 1989)

17. Today membership may not involve putting liberty, goods or life at risk but the spiritual understanding of membership is, in essentials, the same as that which guided the ‘Children of the Light’. People still become Friends through ‘convincement’, and like early Friends they wrestle and rejoice with that experience. (Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995)

Membership Advices and Queries

Advices to the Meeting

Be clear with attenders considering membership that, while they are not expected to subscribe to specific beliefs they are choosing a spiritual path that is grounded in the guidance of the Inward Light.

Provide instruction and mentoring for those interested in becoming members. Learn to articulate the spiritual grounding and the responsibilities of membership. Encourage prospective members to read NEYM’s book of Faith and Practice and be ready to engage with them about what they read there.

Advices to Meeting Members

Become familiar with all aspects of the meeting’s life and help each other to discern where and how it might be appropriate to become engaged.

Share the responsibility and privilege for the ongoing search for Divine guidance. This is fruitful both for the individual and for the group.

Look upon members as fellow disciples seeking Divine guidance. If you feel discomfort with the spiritual language of others, ask yourself why and help others explore their discomfort with yours. Authentic religious expression does not exclude those with a differing experience or differing ways of expressing it.

Become acquainted with the whole meeting community; share in its joys and sorrows and be willing to let the full community share in yours.

Encourage one another in personal devotional practice outside of meeting for worship.

Turn to the One who unites us in a perfect love when as members, we meet our limitations of understanding and ability to love.

Although Queries may often be answered with a simple affirmative or negative, it is vital to ask corollary questions, such as “why,” “how,” or “when.” A qualified answer arising from introspection is more meaningful and constructive than an uncritical “yes” or “no.” (North Carolina Yearly Meeting [Conservative], 1983)

Queries for the Meeting about Potential Members

Are we aware and supportive of an individual who may be moving toward the commitment of membership?

How do we help attenders learn more about Quaker faith and practice?

Do we encourage seekers to find a spiritual home, whether or not it is with Quakers?

Do we help individuals to become familiar with and participate in the life of the meeting community?

Queries for the Meeting about Membership

Do we understand the responsibilities of membership to offer ongoing nurture and support to each other?

Do we value, support and maintain connections with all our members?

Are we living as a spiritual community under Divine guidance?

Queries for Individuals Considering Membership

Why do I want to be a member of the Religious Society of Friends? What does membership mean to me?

Am I actively engaged in nurturing my spiritual growth?

How do I take responsibility for the spiritual vitality of the meeting?

What part does meeting for worship play in my life?

What is my understanding of the spiritual foundation of Quaker worship and of Quaker business process?

What role does being a member of the Religious Society of Friends play in my relationship with the Divine?

Am I familiar with New England Yearly Meeting's book of Faith and Practice?

To what extent have I become acquainted with the meeting community and what experiences have I shared with them?

Do I trust the community to help me discern a leading? Do I participate in the discernment processes of the meeting?

Am I willing to be vulnerable with meeting members and deal tenderly with their vulnerabilities?

In what ways do I demonstrate my commitment to the meeting community and to the Religious Society of Friends?