

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS
GLOUCESTERSHIRE AREA MEETING

GUIDANCE FOR SUPPORTING FRIENDS

September 2012

'Membership does not require a 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 simple process of becoming a member is part of the spiritual journey: part of the seeking that is so integral to our religious heritage. The process of becoming a member is not only about seeking but also about finding.' QFP 11.01 (proposed)

'The Area Meeting will be mindful of the need for simple, open and inclusive processes, involving the potential member, whatever their age, throughout.' QFP 11.06 (proposed)

Valuable Qualities for Supporting Friends

- Sensitivity, tact and flexibility in talking with aspiring Friends about their spiritual journeys.
- Sensitivity to aspiring Friends' own needs, personalities and learning styles.
- Sound understanding of Quaker thought, experience, testimonies and practice.
- Some awareness of, and ability to articulate, one's own spiritual journey.
- Some ability to draw key threads out of conversations and, where appropriate, not to avoid difficult issues.
- Ability, in consultation with another Supporting Friend, to discern whether the membership application is appropriate at this time.

Basic Information

Supporting Friends should be aware of, and use, the two leaflets on Membership Application and this Guidance for SFs. Chapter 11 of Quaker Faith and Practice is vitally important and all SFs should make themselves familiar with what it says. A flow chart of the stages described below is being prepared: this will be helpful to clerks, elders and overseers as well as to SFs themselves.

Membership Application Procedures

Stages 1 and 2 should be as informal as possible.

Stage 1: Expressing interest Interest in membership can be expressed at any time by an attender or by another Friend with her/his permission. The attender (from now on referred to as 'aspiring Friend' or AF) should approach the LM Clerk who will share the names of local Supporting Friends (SFs) and see whether the AF has any preferences. The Clerk passes this information to the local SFs who will make the final decision about who the SF will be. Offering a choice of SF is not easy in a small Meeting: LM clerks and SFs should be sensitive to the possibility of a mismatch between the AF and SF at this stage. Local Meeting Elders and Overseers are informed, so that the AF can, if necessary, be supported by a wider group.

In some situations it may not be appropriate to follow the Supporting Friend procedures described above. For some aspiring members a Meeting for Clearness may be a more suitable approach, either to replace the SF approach or to augment it. Either AFs or SFs (with each other's knowledge) may approach Elders or Overseers to discuss the potential for such a meeting, at any time.

Where a Friend who has resigned her/his membership seeks to re-join the Society, the Supporting Friend procedures may be shortened. A Friend in that position should inform her/his Local Meeting Clerk, who will then inform Local Meeting SFs, Elders and Overseers. One of the Local Meeting SFs will discuss membership with the Friend who wants to re-join, and decide how best to proceed, in consultation with Elders and Overseers and the Convenor of SFs. The options include following some or all of the SF procedures; holding a Meeting for Clearness; or moving straight to an application letter to Area Meeting, asking for membership to be reinstated.

Stage 2: Receiving support The focus of the discussions at Stage 2 should be around the AF's spiritual journey and on broadening and deepening her/his knowledge and experience of Quakers and Quakerism. The whole approach should be encouraging. The approach taken to broadening and deepening knowledge and experience should be designed to suit the AF's personal needs and abilities. It should not appear prescriptive and judgemental. If an AF is already deeply involved in the life of the Meeting, then this stage may be short. (This needs discussion between the AF and the SF, bringing in others if necessary)

The Local Meeting SF keeps a brief record of progress (the wording of this record should be agreed with the AF). The AF is encouraged to talk about membership with others in LM. If discussions prove problematic, the Local Meeting SF should seek the AF's permission to discuss issues with others (who could be Elders, Overseers or the SF Convenor). On rare occasions, the Local Meeting SF may be concerned that an AF is not yet ready for membership. In all such cases the issues need to be discussed openly between the SF and the AF. If necessary someone else (for example an Overseer) should be brought into the discussions. It is important that the Meeting acknowledges and learns from situations where problems arise, and that both AFs and SFs in such situations are properly supported. If an AF decides not to proceed towards membership, the Local Meeting SF should, with her/his permission, send a brief report of the decision and the underlying reasons to the Convenor of SFs.

It is not helpful to define in advance the kinds of topics or issues that may cause problems at this stage: they will almost certainly be different in each case. SFs need regular discussions as a group, to help them prepare for the few problems that do arise.

Stage 3: Making an application When the Local Meeting SF and AF consider that the time is right, the AF writes a letter of application addressed to the AM Clerk. (This may be after one or two, or many more meetings.) This letter should be brief: it should summarise the AF's involvement in the Society of Friends, but should not go into detail about his/her spiritual journey. The letter goes via the LMSF to the LM Clerk who in turn will send it to AM Clerk. AM Clerk informs the Convenor of SFs and asks her/him to nominate an Area Meeting Supporting Friend (AMSF), who is always someone from another Local Meeting. Discussions then take place between the Convenor, the LMSF, the AF and potential Area Meeting SFs. The Convenor informs AM Clerk of the name of the proposed Area Meeting SF.

On receipt of this information AM Clerk drafts a minute informing the Area Meeting of the names of the AF and of the SFs involved. The Area Meeting SF is appointed at the next

AM. Friends from both AM and LM are invited to approach SFs with any information which may be helpful to them.

Stage 4: Clarifying the AF's understanding The Area Meeting SF joins the process when the relationship between the Local Meeting SF and the AF is already established. For this reason it is desirable to change the overall focus of the discussions, so that the AF is not asked to repeat discussions that have already taken place. The focus of the discussions at Stage 4 should be the meaning and responsibilities of membership. However it should be made clear to the AF that the Area Meeting SF will wish to explore matters in her/his own way.

The Local Meeting SF should discuss with the Area Meeting SF how best s/he should be introduced to the AF, such as a social visit by AMSF to AF alone, attending Meeting for Worship together with the AF and LMSF, a visit by both SFs to the AF, etc. It is often helpful for the AMSF when introducing her/himself in the threesome to say something about her/his own spiritual journey.

Before any meeting takes place, the Local Meeting SF should provide some background on the AF and on the meetings that have already taken place.

The key to Stage 4 discussions is the search for unity between all three people involved. Where an AF is a long standing AF and active in her/his Local Meeting, unity may be achieved after one or two meetings. All those involved should be aware that it may take longer than this. If a decision is made not to proceed with an application, the Area Meeting SF drafts a minute for AM, briefly explaining what has happened.

Once all are in unity that the application should proceed, a draft minute is written. This minute should refer to the principles contained in Chapter 11 of Quaker Faith and Practice, which implies that a contract exists between members and the Society.

Guidance in writing the Minute

There are three parts to the minute:

1. Readiness for membership: the following wording (or similar) is suggested:

'We have met together in the spirit of worship and after due discussion and deliberation and a period of waiting on the guidance of the spirit we are agreed that X is familiar with ways of Friends and with the aims and practices of the Religious Society of Friends.

X accepts the fundamental elements of being a Quaker and a commitment to continued seeking; affirms the manner of Friends' corporate worship and the ordering of their Meeting's business; and declares his/her willingness to contribute to its life.

We are in unity that the time is right for X to become a member'.

2. Some agreed background information including reference to the AF's spiritual journey will assist AM in getting to know her/him. This should be drafted by the AF.
3. The Assistant Clerk (Membership) requires the address and telephone number of the AF which could be included in a footnote on the minute for the Membership Clerk.

Copies of the Minute. Six typed and signed copies are required: one each for the AF and the two SFs; three copies for AM Clerk (one for Clerk, one for Membership Clerk and one for Convenor of SFs).

At this point it is important that the LM Clerk and Elders/Overseers are made aware that the application will be considered in the near future.

Stage 5 Area Meeting. This is an important event when the minute is received, the final discernment about membership is made and a minute recording acceptance into membership is agreed. Normally the AF and the LMSF/AMSF should be present at AM even if it means a delay to achieve this.

The AF is welcome to stay in the Meeting during the item on her/his membership. This has raised questions, as Britain Yearly Meeting is clear that AM should practice discernment on membership matters: some Friends ask how discernment can operate, especially if that discernment is critical and results in an application for membership not being agreed. Chapter 11 of QFP is clear that membership is fully open to people of all ages and abilities; it is not based on 'worthiness' and each AM should adopt a simple process. It therefore follows that as long as AM's agreed process has been followed (including engagement from the beginning with Elders and Overseers), AFs should be welcomed into membership. The option of discussion and, if necessary, of rejection, remains: it would only be used in exceptional circumstances.

Book Choice. Whilst QFP is often chosen by the new member, other books can also be selected particularly if he/she already has a copy. One of the SFs should make the purchase (reclaiming the cost from AM Treasurer) and should give it to the AM Clerk so that it can be presented as a symbol of welcome and 'unity'. If an alternative book or other gift is requested, the value should be roughly equivalent to the cost of QFP.

'The Friend' offers a free personal copy to new members for eight weeks. This is a valuable way of introducing the new member to the way in which Quakers communicate regularly with each other at the national level. This should be raised with AFs when the choice of book is discussed. Vouchers are available from the SF Convener or from AM clerk.

Celebration. New membership is a time to celebrate: LMs should ensure that this is done.

Continuing support of new member. This is the responsibility of LMs. The Local Meeting SF is well placed to do this: the SF Convener will ask him or her to continue to offer support to the new member.