

Getting to know Chester Quaker Meeting

What do Quakers stand for?

The Religious Society of Friends began as a renewal movement in English Christianity at around 1650. (We use the words *Quakers* and *Friends* interchangeably.) It still maintains a Christian basis, and includes both Christians and those who count themselves as Quaker but not Christian. Friends value greatly the teaching and inspiration of Jesus, though usually without the theological speculations which grew up about him later. Present-day Quakers cover a broad spectrum of belief, reflecting the spiritual searching of today, and share a lively exchange of thought and experience.

Most Friends would agree with Harvey Gillman, a present-day Quaker who wrote: “There is a creative loving power in all people and in the world around. Many people call it God, though it is beyond names. Everyone can become aware of it directly by listening to its promptings in their hearts.”

How is our worship organised?

Our worship belongs to everybody. We take part by being present, by learning to be still, and by opening ourselves to the creative principle of truth and love which some of us call God. There is no priest or minister, just a discipline of quiet openness from all present.

We sit in a circle of expectant silence, letting the Meeting gather, allowing each participant to find their own still centre and ponder on what is most important to them. Out of this silence, anyone who feels moved to do so may speak, perhaps including a reading from our anthology of writings and guidance, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, or from the Bible or other spiritual book. Spoken ministry in the Quaker way arises from a deep guidance of the spirit, rooted in experience, speaking from the truth and depth of the heart; fine words or long speeches aren't needed, nor is a discussion of topical or practical matters. Then we return to the creative, living silence. Sometimes there is silence for most or all of the hour; sometimes there are several spoken contributions.

What are the practical details of Chester Quaker Meeting?

In Chester, our Meeting for Worship takes place in the Quaker Meeting House in Frodsham Street each Sunday at 10.30 am, and lasts about an hour. Worship begins as soon as the first person takes their place in the meeting room, and closes with two elders shaking hands. Then everyone shakes hands with each other, and there are notices and chat over coffee.

There is also a smaller meeting at lunchtime each Thursday from 12.45 to 1.15 pm.

Children and young people have their own groups, though all join in the first fifteen minutes or so of the main meeting. Any young person who wishes to stay and join in the adult meeting is welcome to do so, and is encouraged to make the transition when they feel ready. The Children's Committee and helpers work together to plan the children's activities, and follow the guidance laid down for the care and safety of children. At present there aren't many children who come regularly to Chester Meeting, but there are always caring and DBS-checked adults available to look after those who might come, and to give them an activity which connects them to the life of Quakers.

True worship may be experienced at any time; in any place – alone on the hills or in the busy daily life – we may find God in whom we live and move and have our being. But in a meeting held in the Spirit there is a giving and receiving between its members, one helping another with or without words. So there may come a wider vision and a deeper experience. (Quaker Faith and Practice 2.11)

What follows?

Believing that we should always be open to fresh insights, Friends do not have a defined set of doctrines or obligations. However, in our life patterns we try to reflect Quaker experience in a way that is traditionally summed up in “testimonies”. Here are some of them.

Testimony to equality: This arises from the principle that each person is of equal value before God. It leads us to value each person’s ministry or contribution. We do not discriminate between men and women, and we have no separately ordained people. We all join in on a basis of equality, whether single, married, divorced, unmarried partners, lesbian, gay, etc., and of whatever class, race or education. We use no titles, and the activities of the Society are carried out by all of its members as far as they are free and able. We try to deal openly and equally with people of other faiths and cultures.

Peace testimony: When everyone is of value before God, violence and the wielding of undue power is not the right basis of relationship. We try to practise a constructive non-violence in our lives, including the upbringing of children. Quakers are often involved in peace activities, including conflict resolution and mediation, and many Quakers oppose military action, seeking to reduce or eliminate military spending.

Testimony to simplicity: This includes honesty in speech and in economic activity. Since there is only one standard of truth we do not take oaths, but in legal situations make an affirmation instead. Quakers try to live in a way which minimises demands on the environment and on other people’s labour. Many are involved in ‘green’ witness.

‘Speaking truth to power’: This is a traditional expression for taking a stand against unjust or oppressive behaviour by governments or other bodies. Nowadays you are more likely to hear this called ‘Testimony in action’.

How can you learn more?

The Meeting House has a stock of free leaflets, and our library has a collection of books you can borrow. Ask the librarian or other Friends if you would like suggestions. A good beginning is the booklet *“Advices and Queries”*, which is the nearest Friends get to a creed. The standard work is *Quaker Faith and Practice*, which covers all aspects of Quaker life. As our understanding and needs are always developing, this book is revised in every generation.

Discussion and study groups meet from time to time, and if you don’t hear one announced, or can’t see a notice on the board, ask a Friend to tell you.

Chester Friends can participate in small evening/afternoon groups, helping them to get to know other Friends and to raise questions which interest them. Discussions with bring-and-share lunches are sometimes arranged after the meeting for worship on Sunday, to look at a topic or to talk further together, or to get to know each other better.

Each year we join with Quakers from North Wales for our *Winter Gathering*, a weekend of fellowship at a conference centre somewhere within reach. There are also Enquirers’ Days, study courses, and other chances to share thought and experience, at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, or at Quaker conference and holiday centres like Glenthorne in Grasmere or Charney Manor in Oxfordshire.

How can you help the Meeting?

Above all, by being at our meeting for worship. A Meeting where people of all ages come regularly takes on warmth and life, depth and excitement.

If you have a skill or interest to offer, mention it to someone on the Nominations Committee. It's their job to suggest each year a list of names for appointment to the various jobs. If you are asked to help, feel free to take time to reflect whether this is right for you at the moment.

There are also many ways of giving occasional help, including transport, outreach or fund-raising. Are you handy? (Self-help work at the Meeting House helps to keep costs down and promote fellowship.) Do you get on with new people? Older or younger people? Any act of caring or thoughtfulness is a form of ministry.

Who runs the Meeting?

All of us play our part, as far as we are able and willing. Those who feel settled in the meeting and comfortable with our way of living are encouraged to become members. In addition the non-members, whom we call *attenders*, often take as full a part in the life of the Meeting as the members. Administration is organised in business meetings that are open to all members and generally to attenders too. Each local business meeting is held six times a year following Sunday Meeting for Worship.

Local meetings are linked in groups called *Area Meetings*, and these Area Meetings have authority to take all necessary decisions. At the national level, all meetings form part of *Britain Yearly Meeting*, which has its own executive committee and working groups. All members are invited to take part in its annual decision-making. There are also a number of employed staff, most of whom work in Friends House, Euston Road, London, which serves as a headquarters, housing our archives, reference library, bookshop and Welcome Centre. For more information on these, go to www.quaker.org.uk

Who runs the business meetings?

Each business meeting appoints, not a secretary or chairman, but a clerk, who acts as 'the servant of the Meeting'. The clerk prepares agendas, pays attention to what Friends have to say on the topic, listens for 'the sense of the Meeting', and proposes the wording of a minute. This is then considered, amended if necessary, and agreed during the meeting.

Who are 'Elders' and 'Overseers'?

Elders and *overseers* are members who have been appointed, usually for a three-year period, to help the life and welfare of the Meeting.

Elders help to promote the right holding of meetings for worship (including business meetings, weddings, and funerals) and to nurture the spiritual and community life of the Meeting. *Overseers* make friends with members, attenders and all who come to our meetings in a way that makes possible an informed and sensitive caring, and they offer advice or support where needed.

How are weddings and funerals conducted?

Quaker weddings are held, like all Quaker Meetings, without clergy or officials, and are valid in law provided the right preparations are carried out. In the setting of a specially-appointed meeting for worship the couple marry each other by making their promises, and a Quaker marriage certificate is signed by all present. The Friend appointed as Registering Officer (both legally and as a Quaker) then completes the state register and marriage certificate.

Quaker funerals are also conducted within the framework of a Meeting for Worship, whether at our own Meeting House, a crematorium, or other suitable venue. The pattern is flexible, depending on the wishes of the dead person and the choice of the family.

Other major events, such as the arrival of a baby or the re-affirming of a partnership, can also be marked in some suitable way. If you are interested, talk to an Elder or Overseer.

What about money?

Friends support the Meeting according to their means and commitments. Some can give little, while others can afford more. Our Treasurer suggests an average annual donation needed to cover local costs, and provides a contribution form. Most Quakers like also to give an equal amount for the work done on our behalf in this country and around the world. At Meeting for Worship there is a collection box near the door if you prefer to give this way.

What if you find the Meeting isn't perfect?

Don't be surprised! Having high ideals doesn't make people free from faults. If there is something in particular that causes you distress, talk to an Elder or Overseer or some Friend you get on well with. It may be the defect is something we're trying to improve, or would if we recognised it. If you feel that Quakers are not the group with whom you can share your aspirations, we won't put pressure on you. Our way of worship doesn't suit everybody, and if your exploration takes you in another direction we hope you will feel that you move on with our good wishes. If you find you feel at home in Quaker worship, and it matters to you that Quakers live up to their ideals, we hope you'll stay with us and try to make it come true.

Should you become a member?

You can truly belong to the Meeting without becoming a member. It's helpful to get to know Quakers in other places too, because Meetings are distinctive and different. Coming into membership is a mutual commitment between you and other Quakers – a commitment that you will play what part you can in Quaker life, decision-making, work and funding, and that the Society of Friends welcomes and supports you. The procedure is straightforward but significant, allowing you to make clear that you feel at home among Quakers. Not everybody feels this need, but if it seems the right way for you, consult somebody in the Meeting with whom you feel at ease.

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www.wirralchesterquakers.org.uk