

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

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Nurturing the Small Meeting or Worship Group

by Lynne Phillips

In a pleasant living room eight people (two men, four women, and two little girls) are seated in comfortable chairs and a sofa as they settle into silent worship. After 15 minutes, one of the adults rises and leaves the room, taking the girls downstairs to a family room with a few books to share with them. Upstairs the remaining adults continue in worship. Towards the end of the hour, one woman talks about the joy she gets from watching the mist over the lake and how the Spirit speaks through the beauty of nature. Another woman speaks of her difficulties with her aging mother. At the end of an hour a man reaches out to clasp the hands of the people sitting on either side of him. The group relaxes and someone goes downstairs to welcome the children back to the living room. The girls are invited to talk about what they learned through reading and discussion with their friendly adult companion. The group shares a few announcements, followed by conversation while the host couple and helpers set out the potluck offerings for a shared meal. An hour later the worshipers leave among good-byes and reminders about the next worship date two weeks hence at the home of another Friend.

Is this a familiar picture? Not perhaps to Quakers who worship in meetinghouses with congregations that average thirty or more on First Day. But this is the reality for many small meetings and worship groups. In Canadian Yearly Meeting, which is my yearly meeting, there are more small worship groups than there are monthly meetings (32 worship groups; 24 meetings). The average worship group includes about seven worshipers. Even among our

monthly meetings nearly a third average just ten members. And this phenomenon is not unique to Canada. About a quarter of all unprogrammed meetings in North America have fewer than twenty members; ten percent have fewer than twelve.

While this article is meant to speak to the needs of these smaller meetings, even large established meetings may find helpful ideas.

Opportunities and Challenges of Small Meetings and Worship Groups

While small groups have many of the characteristics of larger Quaker groups, smallness has some unique advantages. Small groups can more readily achieve a cohesive and caring community. Communications are easy, so the group can quickly rise to challenges from outside, or to emergencies or conflicts within the group. Practical matters such as flexibility in time, location, and program are easier to arrange. There is more opportunity for each person to serve. When

opportunities arise for spiritual formation, a larger proportion of the group may participate or be influenced. There may be increased motivation to attend larger Quaker gatherings.

On the other hand, small meetings and worship groups share the same challenges of larger meetings but with fewer resources. It is difficult to meet the needs of families when there are just a few children. Conflict, whether around theological, personality, or practical issues, is more noticeable and may affect the whole group's sense of trust and community. Finding people to serve in key positions may be more a matter of "Whose turn is next?" rather



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than discernment of gifts. Fear of change, while no stranger to meetings of any size, can be amplified in small groups. Thus, small groups may fail to encourage and welcome new attenders because of an unconscious preference for the familiar closed circle. A small group can be abruptly diminished when members become unemployed, divorced, or ill. If just one "key" couple or individual leaves the group, the gap may be difficult or impossible to fill. Seasoned Friends may be scarce or may feel uncomfortable in the role of the "expert" or "elder." Smallness encourages informality which can result in a loss of Quaker process for spirit-led discernment and less commitment to spiritual study

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programs. When practical concerns such as limited finances motivate Friends to meet in homes rather than in rented public places, it can discourage outreach. Feelings of isolation can be generated both by geographic distances from the center and by social distances from the norm. Members in large and small meetings alike struggle to live their Quaker testimonies when the secular society is indifferent, hostile, or scornful. Loneliness is a significant personal problem. It is more difficult for small groups to create a subculture which helps an individual to carry that feeling of "otherness" without damage to one's self esteem. Lack of regular contact with other Quaker groups can lead to a drift away from Quaker process and traditions. Sometimes this is perceived as freedom to "do our own thing" and to regard the concerns of the wider body of Friends as "their problems."

Planning for Spiritual Formation

As Allen Oliver observed in his useful article, "Adult Religious Education in the Small Meeting" (*Companions Along the Way*, 2000), "When the meeting is small there is a dynamic that occurs that discourages planning. Somehow the stakes seem small when there are fewer people involved. Instead, just the opposite is true. The stakes are very high when the meeting is small. Without proper planning the effort will die." *Companions Along the Way* has an excellent section on organizing and teaching adult religious education. Each article in the book either contains content for a study session or directs the reader to a program for more extended study. This is a rich resource that can help

small meetings and worship groups plan for adult spiritual development.

Another resource which enriches the spirit broadly and deeply is *Quaker Dialogue for Creative Listening*, published by Claremont Meeting. This is a strategy perfect for small groups. In brief, it begins with a small group coming together to listen and share. The topic is announced by the leader who, after a period of worshipful silence, begins the sharing. After a short silence, each person speaks in turn around the circle. Anyone has the right to pass. Participants speak from feeling and experience rather than from theory or reading, there is no discussion about what is said, either during or after the sessions and statements are held in confidence. The booklet includes a wide range of suggested questions for dialogue.

Welcoming Children to Small Meetings and Worship Groups

Religious education of our children is a major responsibility of all meetings, big and small. In small groups, however, there may be few children, often widely spaced in age. When attendance by children is sporadic, adults are reluctant to plan a formal First Day program. Too often the responsibility is left to the parents who are themselves hungry for the spiritual renewal of worship. Groups run the risk of losing their families unless they provide spiritual hospitality to parents and children.

One very practical resource with good advice and easy to follow suggestions on how to include children in worship is *Opening Doors to Quaker Worship*, published by Friends General Conference. There are many books and programs for First Day school. As a start, even simple plans can welcome and engage children. Depending on the tolerance and appreciation of the group, children can be encouraged to play quietly in the corner while adults learn to worship around the "ministry" of play. If the presence of the children in worship is disturbing to the adults, the group can decide that adults will take turns, each one spending a First Day every month or two in another room with the children. Almost any adult can read books and discuss the ideas, tell and listen to stories, write stories that children dictate, draw and color with the children, or enjoy their play with toys (provided by

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the group if possible so that they are special to First Day experiences). By rotating the responsibility among the adults, parents get an opportunity to worship the whole hour and children get to know all of the adults in the group.

If adults are not comfortable taking the children for a special time away from the other worshipers, perhaps a teenager can be asked to care for younger children, or can be hired by the group to baby-sit. As children grow older, they can be encouraged to worship for longer periods with the adults. *Opening Doors* has good advice on logistics for including children in worship.

Extending spiritual hospitality to children is more than avoiding the distraction of children in meeting for worship. They are not only the future of the Society of Friends, they are members right now in the family of the Society of Friends and deserve as much care and consideration as any adult. Research in affiliation suggests that while many churches "lose" their youth during teenage and young adult years, adults come back to their "home" faith community when they have established themselves in careers, homes, and families, IF they have had good spiritual and social experiences as children. (Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd. 2002.)

Overcoming Informality in Small Meetings

Some meetings lack experienced Friends and knowledge of Friends' ways. Clearly, it is desirable for such meetings to participate in some form of education, either through self-study or through attendance at classes or conferences. Worship groups perhaps have even a greater need to understand worship and attention to business in the manner of Friends, especially if the group wishes to move towards becoming a preparative meeting. To obtain materials for study, contact Pendle Hill Bookstore and Quaker Books FGC. Both organizations publish and sell excellent pamphlets and books on Quaker process in meeting for worship for business.

In addition to self-study, there are rich resources for conferences and workshops through yearly meetings, Pendle Hill, Quaker Center, and the FGC Gathering. Though some scholarship assistance is available for attending those programs, Canadian Yearly Meeting has found that it is more cost effective to bring in a resource person for a meeting workshop than to send one or two people away. Sometimes the cost can

be shared between two meetings if they are close enough. The FGC Traveling Ministries Program, and Quaker Center for Friends on the West Coast, are resources for visitors to your meeting or group. Some yearly meetings also help to identify teachers and retreat leaders within the yearly meeting.

The following print resources offer help across a wide variety of topics on Quaker process. Britain Yearly Meeting publishes many useful, inexpensive pamphlets; I particularly recommend *Conflict in Meetings* which has an easily understood process for resolving conflicts through a structured four step discussion and through role plays. The pamphlet, *Quality and Depth of Worship and Ministry*, contains advices and queries that could provide many weeks of rich discussion for adult study. Another resource is the book recently published by Quaker Books of FGC: *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings*, which is a collection of previous issues of Pastoral Care Newsletter for ready reference. The topics are timely and eternal. Each essay has questions for reflection and discussion at the end. This book, too, could be a rich resource for adult study as well as a source of practical information for Friends still growing into Quaker traditions.

Of course, blessed beyond measure are meetings and worship groups with wise and experienced Friends willing and able to guide the group into a deeper commitment to Quaker process. The resistance to "formal" practices melts as meetings come to understand how Quakers have, through centuries of experience, developed structures which deepen their ability to discern and follow God's will. The blessing of experienced Friends also makes small groups vulnerable when such Friends move or are unable to continue. A wise meeting actively promotes mentoring of less experienced and/or younger Friends and consciously opens opportunities for them to discern their leadings for service.

Reaching Out to Other Friends

Meetings are the fundamental unit of the Religious Society of Friends, but no meeting can exist in isolation. Small meetings in particular need to reach out to the quarterly, half yearly or yearly meeting for guidance, instruction, nourishment, and inspiration. Worship groups need this contact with other Friends even more than meetings, although worship groups at least have the expectation that their "parent" meeting will be there for them, both in response to requests for help and in a

proactive way as well. Meetings and worship groups should take care that visitation to other Friends and Quaker events is shared by as many people as can reasonably go, particularly if the group lacks a solid core of experienced Friends. This is an easy way of mentoring less experienced or younger Friends.

Small meetings are further challenged to meet the needs of worship groups and isolated Friends under their care. The burden of some small monthly meetings is complicated by the fact that these meetings consist of small scattered worship groups with no sizable core or geographic center. These meetings establish community by meeting as a whole three or four times a year. Weekend and week-long retreats are especially valued for friendship and spiritual renewal. (See "Retreats Hold Vernon Meeting Together" in *PCN*, January 2003). These face-to-face meetings make real the abstraction of membership and thus make it possible to conduct much business by email, mail, and telephone. Some scattered meetings set up email lists for exchange of personal news, spiritual and social concerns and activities. Members of such meetings often send the family Christmas letter to the meeting as a summary way of sharing their distant lives with their faith community.

However, even more cohesive monthly meetings struggle to find members to fill positions necessary for the life of the meeting. Visible and immediate needs that relate directly to the function of the monthly meeting often take precedence over caring for distant Friends. It is a matter of time and energy. When a monthly meeting has some members with a leading to nurture worship groups and isolated Friends, the links can be strong and nourishing between out-of-town members and members who live close enough to participate fully in the meeting community and out of town members. While monthly meeting should be mindful of their responsibilities to care for worship groups and isolated Friends, the cold hard fact is that worship groups and isolated Friends usually have the burden of squeaking for spiritual "grease."

There are numerous ways in which the meeting and its worship groups can engage in a mutually satisfying partnership of nurture and care. Many of these actions also apply to the nurture of isolated Friends. The ideal meeting would ensure that all worship groups receive the meeting minutes and newsletters which include worship group news, meeting times, places, and contact people. Meetings would ensure that all distant Friends receive information about

opportunities and events from outside Quaker organizations. Members would visit the worship groups periodically. They would periodically renew the invitation for distant Friends to visit the monthly meeting and set aside a special weekend once or twice a year for all worship groups to gather together. They would encourage worship groups to do outreach and include them in all appropriate outreach actions of the meeting. The meeting would name representatives from worship groups to serve on meeting committees, consider naming the members of worship groups to yearly meeting positions, and solicit views on important meeting questions.

The meeting can expect financial support from the worship groups and grant the worship groups the right to draw on meeting resources. The meeting would provide services that only monthly meetings can perform (e.g., receive new members, give charitable tax receipts) and would respond to requests for help with memorial meetings, clearness committees, etc.

Small meetings need to reach out to the quarterly, half yearly or yearly meeting for nourishment.

Reasons to Grow through Intentional Outreach

Intentional outreach is a phrase from Harvey Gilman's excellent little pamphlet *Spiritual Hospitality*. Gilman says that outreach is intentional when we communicate our faith to others, not necessarily to make them into Friends, but because we think our faith is worth sharing. Gilman gives some practical advice on articulating and sharing the faith, building community, welcoming and nurturing newcomers, pitfalls to avoid, and advice on how to recognize and revive a dying meeting.

Another useful pamphlet is *Reaching to Community: A Story of Twelve Quaker Meetings* by Peggy Heeks. She made an extensive analysis of four small, four medium, and four large meetings in Britain. She concludes that the expectations of British Quakers are best satisfied in medium sized meetings but better satisfied in small meetings than in very large meetings, so take heart!

Heeks and Gilman also give frameworks for conducting a spiritual review of a meeting. This is a necessary step in determining the most effective approach to spiritual education as well as outreach. The topic of outreach is too vast a subject to cover in a paragraph or two but the bibliography contains good references. The *Survival Sourcebook* from the North Pacific Yearly Meeting Outreach Committee is another resource of particular usefulness to small meetings and worship groups.

New attenders are only Friends I haven't met yet.

Harvey Gilman said "Community grows when we ourselves feel at home, but when we can still remember what it means to be the guest... There is always the danger that we end up designing the home of our faith in such a way that only close relatives feel at ease. The Religious Society of Friends opens its doors and windows to the breeze or gales of the Spirit, does it not?" Smallness gives groups the opportunity to be an extended family where people worship together, celebrate together, and mourn together, where Friends

are friends, supporting, sharing, listening at the deepest level of friendship and spirituality. If we and our guests can feel like we are coming home when we come to meeting, we have mastered the art of spiritual hospitality. Blessings on us all.

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One Meeting's Experience

The Joys and Struggles of Two Small Worshiping Communities

Chester Meeting is an old Pennsylvania meeting. In fact the very first known Quaker meeting for worship in Pennsylvania was held in Chester. Nowadays, however, average attendance is fewer than ten worshipers, though it can be as many as twenty when all the families come.

Our First Day School is one of our strengths because we have given ourselves permission to be flexible. The First Day School planners keep in touch with the families and plan for when

children are expecting to be present. On Sundays when no formal program is planned, one of the adult members is prepared to be with any children who may attend. All members of the meeting are invited to help facilitate a lesson, particularly when the subject touches on their experiences. Children are encouraged to participate in the meeting for worship as much as they are able. One child often chooses to sit in meeting and read a book. Another asked if it was O.K. to read in meeting and was advised to "bring a book and see if you are led to read or to settle into the quiet worship." He discovered that he would often be led to go back and forth between the two.

We wish we could do better with pastoral care. We regret that none of us visited a beloved member when he was in a nursing home. Few of our members are free in the daytime and some of those members don't drive. Three different members had made plans to visit but were prevented by various circumstances. When the Friend in the nursing home died, we were saddened that we had not visited.

Our business meetings deal with most of the meeting's affairs as a committee of the whole. One regular attender decided to join after his experience of business meeting because he witnessed conflict handled openly and with care for one another.

Even though Chester Meeting is small, it is an active meeting. Our members participate in yearly meeting

events and community activities. We have recently held clearness for two applicants for membership. And we are pleased to have our building and park-like grounds as a resource to our mixed-income community in the struggling small industrial city of Chester.

Interview with Joan Broadfield
Chester (PA) Meeting

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The North Central Wisconsin Worship Group has been meeting together for more than twenty-five years. Its seventeen members live in a sixty mile radius of Merrill, Wisconsin, where we meet twice a month; once in the evening at a local church and once in a member's home. Recently we began to meet on the other two or three Sundays in members' homes on Sunday mornings.

Our group enjoys the benefits of being a small worship community. We know each other well and have a level of trust that allows us to talk about things easily, even though we don't all think the same way politically, theologically, or spiritually. We often have completely silent meetings for worship; messages, when they are given, tend to be deep and spiritual.

We have a lot of fun together. In the summer we have all day meetings twice a month—we worship in the morning, do recreational activities, share meals, and have longer time for discussion, sometimes with guest speakers. We can do things that bigger meetings would have trouble doing like changing schedule around on short notice. We have been reading the same book and discussing it chapter by chapter. When we do something we all do it.

We have our struggles, of course. Many members travel a lot. Just a few people missing makes a big difference in the group. We don't have a newsletter and it is a challenge to keep people up to speed on what we're

doing as a group or individually. Members of the worship group tend not to go to wider Quaker events. When we had a visitor from the FGC Traveling Ministries Program it was energizing to hear the viewpoint of a person deeply steeped in Quaker process and Quaker ideas.

The group has chosen not to develop into a monthly meeting. We have no committees and no formal business meeting, making any needed decisions as a committee of the whole. Stevens Point Meeting, which is the nearest meeting to us, has no more members than we, but has chosen the more structured path of becoming a monthly meeting. So far we are happy to retain the simplicity of worshipping together and caring for one another.

Interview with Peg Pearson  
North Central Wisconsin Worship Group

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**Remember
to renew
Pastoral Care Newsletter
for next fall**

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the strengths of our meeting or worship group? How do we encourage one another in our spiritual development and faithfulness?
2. What are the challenges to our group as it is presently constituted? How are we acknowledging and addressing those challenges?
3. What resources (in our group, in the community, in the wider Quaker community) can we call upon to support our group and to meet our challenges?
4. Who does the work of our group? Is it shared equitably among the participants? Do more seasoned Friends help others to develop their leadership?
5. Do we wish to remain small? Why or why not? What do we have to offer new attenders? How can we make our group more accessible and welcoming to newcomers?

Resources

Visitors to your meeting

FGC Traveling Ministries Program. Deborah Fisch, Program Coordinator, 916 41st Street, Des Moines, IA 50312, 515-277-2189, deborahf@fgcquaker.org.
Quaker Center, PO Box 686, Ben Lomond, CA 95005, (831)336-8333, mail@quakercenter.org.

Print Resources:

A New Friends Meeting by Pat L. Patterson. Quaker Press of FGC, 1986. *

Companions Along the Way: Spiritual Formation Within the Quaker Tradition. Florence Ruth Kline and Marty Grundy, eds. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. 2000. *#

Conflict in Meetings (vol. 4) and *Quality and Depth of Worship and Ministry* (vol. 5). Britain Yearly Meeting Committee on Eldership & Oversight. 2000, 2001*#

Creating Spiritual Community: An Introductory Guide for Isolated Friends Wishing to Start (or Revitalize) a Quaker Worship Group by Jane Orion Smith. Quaker Book Service, Box 4652 Station E. Ottawa, ON. K1S 5H8. Canada (mail only)

Fostering Vital Friends Meetings: A Handbook for Working with Quaker Meetings by Jan Greene and Marty Walton. FGC 1999 *#

Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting, Patricia McBee, ed. Quaker Press of FGC. 2002. *#

Growing the Blessed Community: Ideas for Outreach and Inreach, by Jane Orion Smith, Quaker Book Service, Box 452 Station E, Ottawa ON K1S 5H8, Canada.

Making New Friends: Spiritual Hospitality by Harvey Gilman, et. al. Quaker Universalist Fellowship. 1994. *

Opening Doors to Quaker Worship. Quaker Press of FGC. 1994. *#

Quaker Dialogue "Creative Listening". Claremont Friends Meeting. 1991.*#

Reaching to Community: A Story of Twelve Quaker Meetings, by Peggy Heeks. Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. UK. 1994.#

Survival Sourcebook: The Care and Maintenance of Small Meetings and Worship Groups by North Pacific Yearly Meeting Outreach Committee, c/o Corvallis MM, 3311 Northwest Polk, Corvallis, OR 97330. 1989.#

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556, quakerbooks.org.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220, www.pym.org. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

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