



Starting Points

What is Quaker faith and practice?



What is *Quaker faith and practice*? Quaker faith and practice is the book of Christian guidance for members of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

It contains a wide variety of writings chosen to help us on our spiritual journeys. It consists of advice and counsel, and a variety of extracts which encourage self-questioning and hearing each other in humility and love. As we read, we try to understand the truth about God as seen by the writer, trusting that faith is robust, compassionate and not quick to take offence and that the Spirit which gives the words is communicated through them.

What place does *Quaker faith and practice* play in Quakerism? The book is intended to show the interdependence of our faith and our practice. The matters of church government are included with the other material to help and encourage deeper understanding of the nature of our organisation as an expression of community, of right ordering of our affairs and of the religious foundations on which our structures are built. The revised 'Advices and queries', the first chapter, may prompt ministry to enrich and deepen our meetings for worship.

The book is intended to enrich our own spiritual lives through the experiences and understandings of others. This in turn will enrich the worship which is at the heart of our Quaker experience.

When might I use it? *Quaker faith and practice* is useful in guiding personal worship and for offering inspiration from those who have gone before. It offers thoughts on different aspects of life and help in dealing with problems, such as old age, a life of service to the community, sharing the world's resources.

How should I tackle it? Should I read the whole way through or dip into it? *Quaker faith and practice* can be used as desired. Reading through it gives an overview of Quaker thought, practices and beliefs. However, it can be dipped into as a particular question arises, using the various chapter headings as guidance. Also, it offers clarification about procedures, such as a marriage, a memorial meeting or the responsibilities of a clerk.

Do I have to agree with it? Can I be a Quaker if I disagree with some of the writings?

No it is not necessary to agree with everything written. The book is a compilation of other people's understandings of truth. It is not a complete answer as we are limited by our use of words as tools. Many other Yearly Meetings publish their own books of discipline and we are finding, increasingly, that we are learning from and valuing a shared searching.

Contents. *Quaker faith and practice* is made up of sections beginning with the 'Advices and queries', a chapter on approaching God in worship and in prayer, church government at various levels, caring for one another, responsibilities within the society, procedures for marriage, funerals and memorial meetings, and then extracts dealing with the origins of our Religious Society, living faithfully today, personal journeys, close relationships, social responsibility, the peace testimony, the unity of creation and reflections on our experiences. The book ends with sections on unity and diversity, and on sharing and passing on the Quaker experience.



The book shows the ways of life, both individual and corporate, which have sprung from our faith and the testimonies into which we have been guided. It includes accounts of the lives of individual Friends whose commitment is an example to us and the statements and descriptions of our faith that spring from our experience. The last chapter indicates some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is still known among us challenging us to create a new a Society in which human lives are changed.

History. *Quaker Faith and Practice* is a tradition among the Religious Society of Friends dating back to its beginnings in the 1650's in England. The practice started as a series of letters containing advice and counsel for ministers traveling in Europe and North America and Queries and Advice for the Friends Meetings struggling under persecution from the English church and crown.

Eventually, these letters were collected, printed, and distributed to the increasing number of Friends Meetings around the world. These books were regularly updated over the years as Friends laboured over religious concerns related to living the Gospel in a society and the wider world. For example, Quakers struggled with the fair and equal treatment of women, Native Americans, slaves, and apprenticed persons long before those concerns became part of the social discourse. Quakers have been committed to peace and non-violence since 1660, refusing on a spiritual and scriptural basis to participate in war and any industry that contributes to war.

The book of discipline was first issued in manuscript form in 1738. At that time there had been requests for a compilation of minutes of advice and counsel which had been sent from time to time in earlier years to monthly and quarterly meetings.

The first printed collection appeared in 1783 and has been revised at regular intervals since then (every 20 years or so); the present edition is the tenth. Each revision has been undertaken as the result of a growing feeling among Friends that the current edition fails to express their insights adequately. Revision itself has been an inspiring process as those who value the old words are challenged by those seeking change.

From 1861 the book was divided into separate chapters, Christian doctrine, Christian practice and Church government. In 1921 Christian doctrine became Christian life, faith and thought, attempting 'to state truth, not by formulating it, but by expressing it through the vital personal and corporate experience of Friends'.

The book of discipline was revised 1985 to reflect the many changes in language, in religious thought and social attitudes and in the nature of British society itself, this was in response to pressure 'not from the centre but from local meetings and individual Friends, as well as committees' for Meeting for Sufferings to appoint a Revision Committee.

The Revision committee was sensitive to the gender- exclusive language and the hurt it can cause. Effort was made to avoid such modes of expression, accepting that quotations from earlier times must remain in the language of their age, but exercising discretion when there has been a choice of extracts. It recognised the likelihood that in other areas the language of today may in the future seem insensitive.

Every 30 years or so, Quakers in Britain review the book of discipline - Quaker faith & practice. We try to ensure that in it is information about how Quakers in Britain are organised, descriptions of our history, and more general guidance, so that it remains relevant to how Quakers are together now. The Yearly Meeting is currently in the process of discerning whether now is the time to revise the Book of Discipline.



Minutes on the revision of the Book of Discipline from BYM 2014

Minute 20: Revision of the book of discipline

We receive Minute S/14/02/06 of Meeting for Sufferings held 1 February 2014, together with a briefing note in *Documents in advance*, which has been introduced to us.

We note that the book of discipline, *Quaker faith & practice*, was last revised in 1994, although the last full revision of the church government sections was undertaken in 1967. The request for a revision originated with area meetings minutes in 2012, which initiated a formal consultation which was completed in November 2013.

Our consideration this evening has not reached the point where we can respond to Meeting for Sufferings' minute. Some Friends are urging that we proceed to a revision now but we have also heard a number of voices calling for caution, and time to resolve certain differences within the Yearly Meeting. There are also those who feel that we as a yearly meeting are simply not ready.

We agree to return to this matter later in this Yearly Meeting.

Minute 42: Revision of the book of discipline (continued)

Further to minute 20, we have heard an introduction describing Meeting for Sufferings' decision process in bringing this matter before us and its plans for a preparation group.

With some regret we find ourselves in the position through lack of time where we cannot reach unity on whether to initiate the process of revision, although some Friends feel that we need to start immediately. However, we are aware that Meeting for Sufferings through its preparation group will already be starting a process of discernment. We encourage it in this service and look forward to engaging with the work.

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to bring the matter back to Yearly Meeting when it feels that the time is ripe for a Revision Committee to start its work.

