



# Thoughts on meetings for worship outdoors during the pandemic

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## Introduction

*Any group of Friends may meet to worship at any time.*

*Quaker faith & practice 4.31*

*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 this individual experience is not sufficient, and 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*

This paper begins to explore ways that Friends could worship outdoors. It begins with some overall thoughts about moving forwards, then considers meeting outdoors sitting in small groups, and ends with ideas of other ways of worshipping outdoors.

## Moving forwards overall

*Friends are seekers but we are also the holders of a precious heritage of discoveries. We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then, we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of the truth will, again and again, be amended.*

*Quaker faith and practice, introduction.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged how Quakers worship, come together as a community and live out our values, in ways we have not experienced in our lives before.

We are a generation called to seek the “Light and Life” in an unprecedented situation. However, we were already being challenged particularly to respond to questions of diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, arising from our long held commitments to peace, justice, equality and integrity.

As a Quaker community in Britain we have been, for the most part, agile in rising to the new challenge of remaining a worshipping community when unable to meet in person.

We have an opportunity now not simply to return to a version of what we did before, but to emerge from our lockdown cocoon in different shapes and colours. We have a chance now to “make our own”, creatively and adventurously, what is revealed to us by the light and life we have found.

Over the coming months, Quaker Life and Woodbrooke will work alongside Friends to explore how we go forward. We will listen, share, accompany, network and offer learning and resources. This will be done in partnership with colleagues from Quaker Peace & Social Witness.

This document is just one of our resources, about some approaches that you could take. There will be more to share over the coming weeks – keep an eye on Quaker! and on the Quaker Life Network page on Facebook, and the [Quakers in Britain Coronavirus webpage](#). Also, share with us what you are doing, or ideas which you have: [supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk](mailto:supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk). We can share your ideas, and put you in touch with like-minded people.

## **Is meeting for worship outdoors allowed by the government?**

Government guidance may be different in England, Wales and Scotland, and is changing as the pandemic progresses. Government guidance in your area may allow small groups to meet outdoors before places of worship are allowed to open, provided suitable measures are taken – such as limiting the number in the group and maintaining social distancing. So do consult the relevant guidance, and be prepared to adjust as it changes. You can find the main government guidance related to worship on the [Quakers in Britain Coronavirus webpage](#).

In the UK Government’s [revised guidance on Places of Worship \(for England\) 29 June](#) it makes some definitions clear in Table 2:

*“A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining car parks, courtyards or gardens for which the venue managers are also responsible.*

*The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre. These premises will only be able to be used where they are permitted to be open and additional guidance may be applicable.*

*This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.”*

## Is it allowed by Quakers?

Theologically, any group of Friends may meet to worship at any time. During the pandemic, the advice from Britain Yearly Meeting has been to follow government guidance regarding worship.

Generally, holding a *public* meeting for worship is a decision of the local business meeting. Has this question been considered by elders? Has the location and time changed from the normal meeting arrangements?

## How many people may come?

You need to check the regulations in your area, which are changing often. Within the regulations, consider the following:

How will we limit the numbers attending, to what is allowed and what is safe?

Will we need to prioritise the needs of some people over others?

How will we handle and communicate this? Including responding to people who cannot participate, due to their own circumstances or by prioritising.

## Does it matter whether it is a public meeting for worship, or private?

It can help to think about two types of outdoor meeting – public or private:

Public	Private
Similar to a regular indoors meeting	Similar to a meeting in a Friend's home
Organised, often well in advance	Can be relatively short-notice, impromptu
An 'extra' meeting is recorded in local and/or area meeting minutes	No 'notice' of the meeting happening is necessary
Publicised, either just in minutes or more likely on social media/website/newsletter	Less publicity - perhaps in newsletter/ email/social media to Quaker community
Might be part of 'outreach' or a 'faith in action' event. Or a social or an adventure.	Might be a very personal arrangement e.g. an 'Experiment with Light' group
Space to accommodate unpredictable numbers attending	Space to fit those known to be attending

Friends may need to begin with private meetings while there are restrictions on the number of people who can meet together, in order to avoid having to turn people away when the capacity is reached.

## How much outside space would we need?

To provide 2m between people, and assuming each person is 0.5m wide and needs 0.5m behind them for sitting space, then:

- 6 people in a circle need a 6m circle of space (based on sitting in a hexagon)
- 6 people in an oval only needs 3.5m x 7.8m
- 6 people in a rectangle needs 3.5m x 6m
- In a rather extreme case, 6 people in a straight line need 13.5m
- 8 people in a circle need a 7.5m circle of space
- 8 people in a rectangle need 3.5m x 8.5m

### **Will it be safe?**

Are we following the government guidance for groups of people outdoors?

Is it safe to get there (eg avoiding public transport or sharing cars)?

What will happen about socialising afterwards?

Is it clear who has responsibility for children and young people?

### **Could we worship with others in our locality?**

Are there other Quakers in your locality who may want to join, in particular those who go to a local meeting in another area meeting?

### **Can we meet in the garden or grounds of a meeting house that is closed?**

See 'Is meeting for worship outdoors allowed by the government?' above, and the text in italics. See also guidance for Scotland and Wales when published.

### **Can we go into a meeting house to use the toilets?**

If the meeting house is closed to comply with not being allowed to open as a place of worship, or is not ready to open as a place of worship, then going in to use the toilets during outdoor worship may not be in keeping with the spirit, and possibly the letter, of the guidance.

If the meeting house is open for other purposes, for example like a community centre, then use of toilets would need to follow whatever hygiene and distancing arrangements are in place generally. Consideration also needs to be given to the impact on any other users of the building.

### **Is it covered by our area meeting's insurance?**

Does our area meeting insurance cover outdoors events? It may depend on the following: Is it a local or area meeting event (i.e. with a minute from a business meeting)? Has a risk assessment has been completed? Have the relevant people been asked or informed, e.g. the Friend dealing with insurance?

## **Can we connect with others online?**

Outside, will our mic and speakers be sufficient for all to hear?

Have we seen the ideas and information in the paper [Thoughts on blending physical and online worship \(PDF\)](#)?

## **Can we meet at times other than Sunday mornings?**

Yes. Quakers can worship at any time.

## **Could we hold meetings of six or eight one after another?**

Provided it is within national restrictions on groups gathering, this is likely to be permissible, but consider the following issues:

If we are using chairs, will we be cleaning them between uses?

Will there be time and space between the groups, and their entry and exit?

Are we focusing too much on the physical location?

## **What general things should we think about, when meeting outdoors?**

How do we ensure the spiritual care of the meeting? Should some worshippers be asked to act as elders?

How long should the meeting last?

If members of the public are likely to be in the area, would it be useful to have a simple sign explaining what is happening?

Will we invite people to join us, say with a smile or a hand gesture? Will this be feasible?

*Adjust during the pandemic:* Shall we have some leaflets or the small 'What do Quakers say?' cards available for interested enquirers?

Are there any restrictions on using public space or private land? Is there anyone to ask or inform?

What about the weather? Will we go ahead 'whatever the weather', or will there be a number to phone to check?

In open space, will it be clear where we are meeting?

Is it important to have *Quaker faith & practice* or *Advices & queries* at the meeting? Who will bring them? Could we bring them on our phones: [Quaker faith & practice online](#)

## **Worshipping outdoors in many ways**

There are many ways of worshipping outdoors. Here are some more ideas. Some may need some adaptation to take account of restrictions during the pandemic period.

### **Walking meeting for worship**

Walk together in silence. If someone wishes to minister, they signal that to the rest of the group. Find a signal which works for your group. The group stops whilst ministry is given. As with any other meeting for worship, you can consider how to introduce it; health and safety considerations; how long - in time and distance; terrain; ability; inclusion. Remember that every activity you do does not have to be capable of including every person; what is important is that your community provides worship and fellowship opportunities for a variety of people.

- A slow circuit of the park
- A two or three mile flat ramble in a woodland or parkland
- “Slow wheels” for trikes, scooters, bikes, wheelchairs and walking frames; great for bringing different generations together.
- A ten second toddle (which may include a ministry of falling over)
- A special places walk – where you walk between different sites and stop at them for a time. This could be natural places, such as a tree, hilltop, riverbank; or places of worship in the town or significant sites in the town.
- Linking up Friends – walk between the homes of two friends, with a time of worship at each end. This could include Friends who are staying at home and can't come to meeting for worship.
- A more challenging walk such as a hill, mountain, all day walk. There could be different times for worship; themed conversations and general chat.
- Walking barefoot on sand or grass
- Creating a labyrinth and walking it
- Walking to a destination for another activity – bonfire; performance; picnic; worship; swim.
- Walking/wheeling is not the only outdoor activity which can become an intentional meeting for worship. Running, swimming, movement practices such as yoga or tai chi, dance, boating, music, singing are all activities which people describe as being part of their spiritual practice. They can be used intentionally as ways of gathering in worship. There are many more!

### **Relay meeting for worship**

This creates an opportunity for people to be included in worship, even though their participation may take place at different times and in different places.

- two people meet and share a time of worship
- they separate, and go to two different places, and meet another friend each

- those two new people then go elsewhere and meet two more people
- ...and so on

This could be done as one continuous meeting for worship, maybe starting early in the morning, and going throughout the day. It could also be staggered – with the continuation being the connecting of one friend with the next, even if that happens several days later.

It means that friends who can't leave home could be included as their home/garden could be the destination. It cuts down on travelling; although the travelling could be by any means – walking, cycling, car etc. It could be small groups as well as pairs, depending on circumstances and geography.

It would be possible to share a sense of ministry given as the meeting flows onward; or an item of ministry could be passed on. The length of the time of worship could vary with each encounter; depending on people's preferences. The traveler could treat their travelling as part of their worship and ministry.

### **Offering and receiving ministry**

An outdoor meeting for worship offers opportunities to experience ministry beyond the spoken word. It could include:

- drawing people's attention to the sounds heard, such as birdsong, water, traffic, laughter
- sharing something seen; the view, a play of light and shadow; a flower or creature
- collecting an item during the walking, and sharing it at the end. This could be simply by showing it, or by everyone in the group placing their items together as led to create a sculpt
- passing a found item between people to share how it looks, smells, feels (*adjust this during the pandemic*).

### **Share your experience**

Do share with us what you are doing, or ideas which you have:  
[supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk](mailto:supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk).