

Speaking out as Quakers

Advice for meetings



Communicating publicly about our faith and the testimonies is an essential part of our lives and something all Quakers are encouraged to do. The following advice will help local and area meetings speak out confidently.

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), the body that represents Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) between sessions, has agreed a Speaking Out policy. This is a short summary, for the complete document please email the address overleaf.

The Speaking Out policy identifies two categories of speaking out:

- a Yearly Meeting statement, which defines a new position on an area of concern;
- public statements and comments, which are addressed primarily to the wider world.

Yearly Meeting statements

Yearly Meeting statements establish an agreed text about a Quaker position on a matter of concern and are agreed by BYM or MfS. These may be in the form of a minute or a stand-alone statement.

If a Yearly Meeting statement is used by a local group, it is important to make clear where the BYM statement ends and where comment begins.

Public statements and comments

Public statements and comments may take the form of a press release, letter to the media, broadcast interview or online comment. They will use language appropriate to the particular audience. They also have a role in keeping other Quakers informed.

If an area or local meeting makes its own statement, it should include the name of the meeting in the title or opening text. It should not be implied that they are statements from Quakers in general or of Quakers in Britain.

Quaker meetings are advised to set up procedures for making public statements and comments. This will involve consultation among a specified group, including the clerk of the meeting. When speaking locally Quakers are encouraged to draw on statements and comments made by Quakers in Britain and to contact the Advocacy & Public Relationships team, who can support and advise on the most effective use of different types of media.

When communicating publicly on behalf of Quakers, the views expressed must have been discerned by an appropriate Quaker body.

Who speaks out?

When a meeting issues a public statement or comment, the clerk will normally approve it, unless another arrangement has been agreed.

When quotes are attributed to a Friend, they must agree to their name being used.

Non-public messages

Letters to elected representatives or others with influence should not be publicised by the sender, unless it states it is an open letter. However, in practice even private letters are sometimes quoted by recipients.

Taking action

Quakers who participate in marches or vigils should be aware they may be identified as Quaker spokespeople.

When taking part in a demonstration, an organised Quaker group will be clear about the objectives, that the organiser/s is one that Quakers support and the event is intended to be peaceful.

Some may wish to participate in nonviolent direct action. If there is an intention to break the laws of the state for conscience's sake, participation by any Quaker should be tested with their worshipping group. If a Quaker group trains or supports actions intended to break the law, this should be tested by their responsible body and trustees.

Yearly Meeting statements establish and explain the witness of Friends on an issue of concern. They arise from a process of discernment by Yearly Meeting in session or by Meeting for Sufferings and are primarily addressed to Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting.

Such witness arises from the leadings of the Holy Spirit and is tested in the gathered meeting. It is an expression of love and truth. To be convincing, it must arise from our engagement with the issue addressed as well as from our testimonies.

When rightly discerned, we believe our Yearly Meeting statements will convey a spiritual quality that reflects their origin. It follows that these statements should not be strident, recriminatory, judgemental, self-righteous, clichéd, or ill-informed. Neither should they be narrowly prescriptive.

Our Yearly Meeting statements are addressed first and foremost to Friends, to state the Yearly Meeting's discerned position, to explain how we came to it and to encourage all Friends to unite with it. When we speak out to the world, our voice is not always heard, but our Yearly Meeting statements should nevertheless galvanise us to put our convictions into action.

Public statements and comments, released via the media, are made by BYM staff and committees to explain Quaker witness in more specific terms. They are also made by Quaker meetings at local level, by special interest groups and by individual Friends. They are primarily addressed to the wider world, though they also play an important role in keeping Friends informed.

The general principles that guide BYM statements are also relevant to public statements. Such comments should be grounded in discernment and should convey a spiritual quality that reflects their Quaker origin. They contribute our religious witness to the evolving discourse around current events and broader issues of world affairs, using language that will be widely understood by non-Quakers.

Public statements and comments should follow the basic principles indicated in *Quaker faith & practice*. Friends must be careful to explain the provenance of their statements and must not claim to speak on behalf of BYM without explicit authority.

Nevertheless, the message should derive from agreed policy of Quakers in Britain (normally evidenced by minutes, agreed BYM statements and/or *Quaker faith & practice*). There should be sufficient current or recent concern among the body of Friends it is speaking for to justify speaking out on this subject. The way it is expressed should conform with Quaker values. No area of Quaker work should be jeopardised by the message. If this is a possibility, those considering making the statement should ensure that it can be justified.

Meetings, groups and individuals are encouraged to seek advice from relevant Friends and to consult BYM's Advocacy & Public Relationships team.

Joint statements are those which BYM (or another Quaker body) supports alongside other bodies. Quakers often have a share in the drafting of such statements, which are addressed to the wider world and/or to agencies responsible for delivering relevant policy.

Joint statements make a necessary contribution to Quaker action. Statements on behalf of Quakers in Britain are subject to careful scrutiny by BYM staff, using a checklist authorised by BYM.

Joint statements will only be endorsed when we are willing to support all their messages and to share a platform with all co-signatories, when language and tone are acceptable to Friends, and when we are confident that such statements will not harm other Quaker work that may be going on quietly. Joint statements are reported to the relevant BYM committees, to which they may also be referred for a further process of discernment.

For advice on working with parliamentarians, the media, or using social media, please contact Jane Dawson at janed@quaker.org.uk.