



Meeting for Listening

“...Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God’s guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions...”

Quaker faith & practice 3.02

What is a meeting for Listening

A meeting for listening is a way that Friends can gather to look at issues that may be contentious. It is a way that matters can be discussed in a space created that can hold all those involved in tenderness and care. A Meeting for Listening has been developed as an appropriate tool to explore queries that involve individuals as well those which do not have a personal aspect to them.

In November 2016 a group of Friends and Quaker staff members gathered to consider conflict in Quaker meetings and other Quaker communities. The group's hope was to find better ways to respond to conflict and develop methods for Quakers to help themselves before going down the route of seeking support from outside their community. At that meeting a theme arose on more than one occasion: that meetings had been in touch asking for support having found them self in a situation along the lines of:

We are having problems with a Friend, so we have offered them a Meeting for Clearness so that they will change their ways.

A Meeting for Clearness is not intended for such a situation, so the group wanted to come up with a possible method of dealing with these sorts of situations. The idea of a Meeting for Listening was discussed and an outline developed. This leaflet will help Quaker communities to make use of this process.

A Meeting for Listening is not a decision-making meeting. Nor is it a meeting to prepare to make a decision. It may lead to a Meeting for Clearness (for an individual) or a Threshing Meeting (for a group) to help prepare to make a decision. Or it may feed into a Meeting for Worship for Business or other Quaker decision-making forum.

Quaker faith & practice stresses the need for listening with undivided attention and for "tact, affirmation and love". Those taking part in a Meeting for Listening are not there to question or respond to the ministry raised on the topic being discussed. They are there to uphold the gathered group and allow the whole gathering to hear all that needs to be aired to find the truth.

Convening a Meeting for Listening

It is likely that a Friend with responsibility for eldership and oversight will convene a Meeting for Listening. It is possible that the subject matter of the meeting will be contentious and may have already been raised in another gathering, such as a Meeting for Worship for Business.

Hard feeling may already have developed between some of the participants and so choosing a facilitator or facilitators carefully is important. They will need to have little or no connection to the issue so as to remain impartial. Sometimes a meeting may look outside of its own community to find the right person to help.

In a Meeting for Listening it is important to appoint Friends to serve in an eldership capacity. The eldership role helps to uphold the worshipful space which allows the issue to be considered in a way that supports that participants. Those Friends with responsibility for eldership are there in that capacity only, they do not participate in any other aspect of the meeting. It is important to think about the number of people participating in the meeting to be sure that there is adequate eldership in place to uphold the gathering.

Area or regional meetings may have a group that can be called upon to support in such circumstances, see Qf&p 4.23.

Preparation for a Meeting for Listening

It is important that all participants have the opportunity to prepare adequately for a Meeting for Listening, thus it must be arranged with plenty of notice. If there is a lot of factual detail it may be helpful to prepare this in the form of a briefing and share this with all participants in advance of the meeting.

Meetings for Listening can be a one-off or part of a series of meetings if there is a particularly difficult topic that needs to be taken in stages. If a series of meetings is taking place participants should be aware of what has taken place. If there is material that can be shared from a previous Meeting for Listening this will help to prepare participants joining for the first time.

Procedure

A Meeting for Listening should be held at a comfortable time for all those who need to be present. Pay attention to physical needs such as rest and food as well as spiritual needs such as ample time for worship. If the process is taking longer than is comfortable – maximum an hour and a half for most people, as given in the suggested timings – take a break of at least twenty minutes, and continue later or another day.

A Meeting for Listening should be held in a space which is reasonably private, so that people can speak without being overheard, and neutral between those involved. A room at the meeting house may be a good choice if it can be made relaxed and comfortable. An elder's home may be a good choice if the elder is able to offer a ministry of hospitality. The home of someone involved in a conflict will probably not be appropriate.

The facilitator(s) will introduce the people and the subject and explain the purpose of the process and any ground rules. Trust is based on the understanding of openness and confidentiality. Throughout the meeting the facilitator's main responsibility is to uphold the worshipful space of the meeting to help participants share in openness and honesty. For larger groups a pairing, with the support Friends with responsibility for eldership share the holding of the space between them. Friends with eldership responsibility will be clearly identified at the start of the meeting.

A note-taker may also be appointed to keep a record of the meeting, this is particularly important if there is a sense that there may be an additional process of decision-making at a later time. But this may be considered unnecessary – what is forgotten is not required for right discernment.

The meeting begins with silent worship in which mind and heart are prepared to be truly sensitive to the topic being explored. Each person holds the undertaking in the Light. The facilitator may choose to offer some ministry during the opening silence but open ministry is discouraged to avoid the topic being sent in an unhelpful direction before the meeting has begun. The facilitator will give an introduction to the meeting and indicate when they are ready invite participants to begin the exploration.

The entire meeting is conducted in a reverent spirit of prayerful listening, listening with complete attentiveness. Meetings' for Listening often include plenty of silence.

“There is silence for reflection, for recollection, the comfortable silence that flows gracefully round questions and answers – when we give ourselves to hearing them and considering them before responding”

Patricia Loring, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305

Outline timetable for a Meeting for Listening

There are three main steps, bracketed by a welcome and a closing. The three steps could be compared to the steps involved in spring-cleaning a cupboard: fetch everything out, give it all a scrub, then put back only what should be there.

1. **Welcome.** This includes the casual greetings and handing out of cups of tea, etc., and develops into a formal introduction. The facilitator should aim to make sure everyone is able to introduce themselves by name, and explain their role in the meeting. Allow time in silence, perhaps after the introductions, for people to settle themselves. (15 minutes)
2. **How do you feel?** This is the stage in which everything is fetched out into the light. It may not come in a tidy order. The facilitator may have been told what the presenting problem is, but should avoid allowing this to steer people into particular topics at this stage. Using the format of a go-round, in which people speak in turn, may be helpful in allocating equal time. Using 'I statements' can be encouraged but should not be compulsory. (20 minutes)
3. **What do you want to know?** Invite those present into curiosity. They can ask questions to the group as a whole or to individuals. These can be collected – some groups may ask one of the elders to act as a note-taker or scribe – but do not have to be answered. If it seems appropriate, especially if someone does want to answer some questions they have been asked, this step can be allowed to develop into discussion. If it does, the facilitator should watch carefully to see who is and is not contributing, with the aim of including the voices of all those directly involved. (20 minutes)

4. **Where do we want to go?** A period of silence begins this step, followed by worship sharing time in which people reflect on the question, "What do I want to do next?" Again, the facilitator or one of the elders may be asked to take notes, as a clerk might record the central points of ministry offered to a meeting for worship for business. (20 minutes)
5. **Closing.** Ask the group if they want to share a record of this process with others – for example, with the local meeting. If they do, agree the details of this. Remember that this group has no decision making power – individuals involved can decide to act differently in future, but anything affecting the wider community must be taken to them for decision. Finally, allow the meeting to end gently. If the group has relaxed together, people may be able to stay for a brief social time. If emotions are still high, people may want to simply leave – if one person chooses this, others involved should also go promptly rather than continuing conversations in their absence. (15 minutes)

Next steps

Be sure that on concluding the Meeting for Listening any further steps needed have been identified. It may be necessary to allocate tasks to be completed before another meeting or step in an ongoing process.

If the issue being considered was contentious and there are participants whose feeling have been hurt by the issue or the process of the meeting, it is wise to think about how those people can be supported. You may need to hold some further one to one or group discussions to explore matters that have been raised as part of the issue.

Avoid making the assumption that everything is alright. People may not feel able to voice their feelings or emotions in a way that others can interpret. Silence may not indicate contentment and while Quakers can be very content in silence, it is important to recognise that when there is hurt it may suggest the opposite.

Resources

This leaflet is currently in development and will be available freely when published. For more copies email qlnetwork@quaker.org.uk.

Other relevant publications can be downloaded from the Britain Yearly Meeting website:

www.quaker.org.uk/pastoralcare

You can find other paid for publications in the Quaker Centre Bookshop at Friends House, London or using the online bookshop

www.quaker.org.uk/shop

Guidance on Data Protection

dataprotection@quaker.org.uk
www.quaker.org.uk/dataprotection
020 7663 1161

Guidance and advice on Safeguarding

www.safe@quaker.org.uk
www.quaker.org.uk/meetingsafety
020 7663 1103

Quaker Life: eldership, oversight and pastoral care

qlnetwork@quaker.org.uk
020 7663 1007

Friends House,
173 Euston Road,
London NW1 2BJ

Courses on eldership, oversight, the spiritual life of meetings and pastoral care

Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, 1046 Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LJ

www.woodbrooke.org.uk or
enquiries@woodbrooke.org.uk
Telephone: 0121 472 5171
Fax: 0121 472 5173

Contact details

Oliver Waterhouse, Assistant Head of Ministry & Outreach
qlnetwork@quaker.org.uk
020 7663 1007

Quaker Life, Friends House
173 Euston Road
London
NW1 2BJ

