

First time in a Quaker Meeting



Welcome!

We hope these notes will be of some assistance to people attending a Quaker Meeting for Worship for the first time.

The Meeting for Worship is central to the Quaker way of life. Quakers come together, normally on a Sunday, for Meeting for Worship, which is based on silence. The silence gives us an opportunity to move closer to God. It is an active, listening silence, which has been practised by Friends for over 350 years.

When moved by the Spirit, someone may give 'spoken ministry' to the gathered group. Ministry can take the form of a statement, a prayer, a quotation, a poem or a short scriptural reading. It is seen as a fulfilment of the silence rather than an interruption.

Other special-purpose meetings are also held in a spirit of worship, such as meetings for marriages and funerals.

We meet in silence because we believe that therein we may become aware of God's presence, and that deep silence is a condition for religious experience. This silence enlarges the lives of those present so that a communion of heart and mind is possible, a communion that achieves a unity based upon a respect for diversity.

We do not worship in isolation, we try to hold ourselves aware of all those gathered with us, uniting in a common purpose, so that the waiting and listening become an act of sharing.

The meeting proceeds

Meeting for Worship starts as soon as the first person enters the room and sits down. It helps if the meeting can settle a few minutes before the appointed time.

Go in as soon as you are ready. Sit anywhere you like, but if possible leave seats near the door and at the ends of rows for latecomers. Children may be present for a time at the beginning or at the end of meeting, but have their own activities in another room.

Seek to relax in the silence and enter into the spirit of the meeting. You may find this easy or you may be disturbed by the strangeness of the silence, by distractions outside or by your own thoughts. Don't worry about this. We all find it difficult to settle at times. When we return again and again to the still centre of our being, we can know the presence of God.

'Core to my being a Quaker is not
silence or ministry. It is waiting in
stillness with people, in a state of
receptiveness to God's will and love,
"gathered unto God".'

Annabelle Cameron 1998, *this we can say*, 2.10

'Silence and finding space to centre and find "that of God" is at the heart of my Quaker faith. The environment of a Quaker meeting gives me this space, and the communion with others that occurs here is spiritual nourishment.'

Anna Bell 1997, *this we can say*, 2.8

Try, if only for brief periods, to be quiet in mind, body and spirit. Bring whatever is pressing on your mind to the meeting. It can be a time of insight, revelation, healing or calm.

Nearly everyone at some time seems to want to find God in themselves, even those who find it hard to believe that God exists. Using a different image or concept such as 'spirit' or 'light' can be helpful.

There may be silence for quite some time, perhaps half an hour or more. But that does not mean nothing is happening. The silence may be broken if someone feels called to say something that will deepen and enrich the worship. Anyone is free to speak, pray or read aloud, as long as it is done in response to a prompting of the spirit that comes in the course of the meeting.

Listen with an open mind to what is said. Each contribution may help somebody, but our needs are different and can be met in different ways.

If something does not 'speak to your condition' or need, try to reach the spirit behind the words. The speaker wants to help the meeting, so take care not to reject the offering by negative criticism.

Each of us brings our own life experience to meeting. Some people will have a profound sense of awe and wonder because they know God is present. Others will be far less certain. They may only be ready to hold an awareness that their experiences in life point beyond themselves to a greater whole. Some will thankfully accept God's inexhaustible love shown in Jesus, the promise of forgiveness and the setting aside of past failure. Others will know their direction is a seeking to be open towards people in a spirit of love and trust. In the quietness of a Quaker meeting, worshippers can become aware of a deep and powerful spirit of love and truth transcending their ordinary experience. We seek to become united in love and strengthened in truth, so we can enter a new level of living, despite the different ways we may account for this life-expanding experience.

The meeting ends

The meeting ends when two appointed people (usually elders) shake hands. This action is also a signal for those present to shake hands with people sitting near them. Frequently this practice is followed by announcements of coming events and other comments.

Most Meetings for Worship serve tea or coffee after meeting, and this offers a chance for newcomers to make themselves known and ask questions. Feel free to speak to anyone, but you can also speak to the clerk or correspondent of the meeting for further information. Literature is available and books can often be borrowed.

While sitting in meeting for the first time you may find it helpful to re-read this leaflet.

More information and a list of Quaker meetings in Australia are available from the Yearly Meeting Secretary or the Quakers Australia website (see below).

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'That is the Quaker gift: to listen deeply, beyond listening, to the spirit that guides and is sure to lead us where justice and peace need our witness.'

Adrian Glamorgan 1997, *this we can say*, 2.18

