

Queries For Seekers

In considering the move from visitor to attender to member in the Religious Society of Friends, there are queries seekers may ask themselves. Some of these queries may fit your “condition,” some may not.

- Am I aware that no one will *urge* a seeker to join. Am I aware that, as in all Quaker processes, Friends wait *as the way opens*?*
 - Do I recognize that Friends rely on continuing revelation, rather than on an established creed?
 - Am I ready to declare myself a *Quaker* both to my faith community and to my non-Quaker friends and family?
 - Do I realize that becoming a member is a way station on the journey of spiritual maturity rather than a one-time action?
 - Will this sense of commitment and belonging enhance both my spiritual journey and that of my meeting?
 - Am I becoming more aware of the movement of the Spirit in corporate worship?
 - Do I appreciate that membership calls me to nurture others, as well as being nurtured?
 - Am I willing to commit myself, and those ministries with which I am gifted, to the Meeting community?
- Am I becoming familiar with the *Faith and Practice: A Book of Christian Discipline* of my Yearly Meeting?
 - Am I prepared to bear cheerfully my part of the meeting’s work — spiritual, social and financial, as fully as I am able? Do I realize that all in the worshiping group are responsible for its spiritual and community life as well as the stewardship of its physical premises?
 - Am I becoming versed in the Quaker method of conducting business?
 - Am I beginning to understand that *sense of the meeting* is neither consensus nor ecclesiastical authority, but the group’s discernment of the working of the Spirit?
 - Am I growing into understanding that a Meeting for Worship for Business searches for unity — not uniformity?
 - Have I consulted with my family members as to whether they wish to be included in this new relationship with Quakerism?
 - Am I appreciative that being Quaker is a life-long process, enriched by active practice and participation?
 - Am I appreciative that members of the Religious Society of Friends hold in trust the important and unique religious perspective of Quakerism?

*As the way opens, a Quaker phrase indicating spiritual clearness to move forward to an action. Sometimes such action needs further seasoning before it can move forward in its original or changed form.

The Process of Joining

If you decide you wish membership with us, write a letter to the clerk of your monthly meeting expressing the reasons you are moved to join the Religious Society of Friends. A committee of clearness will be appointed to meet with you. Under Divine Guidance, all gathered will discuss understandings of the implications of membership and of *being* a Quaker. This is not a catechismal examination for anyone, but merely a time for mutual exploration. When there is a shared discernment that the new relationship will foster growth for both the seeker and the meeting, the Clearness Committee will report its findings back to the Meeting for Worship for Business. The next step and its timing will depend on your particular yearly meeting’s *Faith and Practice: A Book of Christian Discipline*.



Membership Brochure Working Group
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Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Religious Society of Friends
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A Quaker Path

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY FROM VISITOR TO ATTENDER TO MEMBER



We welcome you as you visit among us. We hope that you will continue to participate in our faith community. After you have been worshiping with us for a time we may begin to refer to you as an attender (so that you will receive regular notices, etc.). At some time you may desire to have a more formal relationship with us. Perhaps the comments here will help clarify the meaning of membership in the Religious Society of Friends. This pamphlet explains paths from Visitor to Attender, and possibly, to Member.

Welcome

As we enter the meeting room, we settle into silence for worship. All are invited to speak out of the silence when led by the Spirit. Worship closes with hand shakes, after which, anyone present will be happy to answer your questions.

History of Membership in the Religious Society of Friends

From its beginnings in 1652 in England, the Religious Society of Friends wished to return to the teachings of Jesus. Friends identified their religion as *Primitive Christianity*, affirming a direct relationship with God. Until the 18th century, when formal membership was instituted, a *member* was any man, woman or child willing to profess the new, radical, liberating faith. Many suffered imprisonment, loss of property or even life, fines, and ridicule for “crimes” such as openly attending meeting for worship, refusing to swear oaths or to pay tithes. After the Acts of Toleration were passed in 1689, the most violent of the punishments ceased. Debilitating fines for the non-payment of tithes were still levied until the late 1700s.

As England moved into the industrial age, social services were still administered by a person’s religious denomination. Conscious of the consequences of suffering, Friends took special care of their members. One result of this care and concern for their members was that many, with no other involvement in the movement, claimed to be Friends. To counter this drain on Friends’ limited resources, formal membership was recognized in 1737, to be granted only by the applicant’s monthly meeting. At that time, *birthright* membership was instituted to protect the children of needy Quaker parents.

During the rest of the 18th and most of the 19th centuries, Quakerism became a fairly closed society, and not many came into meetings from the “world.” Those who did usually came in through a prospective marriage and were called *attenders* until they were ready to join. Those who became members as adults were called *convinced Friends*. Quakers still use this term today for it indicates, not a “turn around” as in conversion, but an experiential awakening. Honoring this conviction, Quaker parents frequently do not register their minor children as full members at birth, but may list them as junior or associate members. Quaker parents feel that each child should make the choice of religion when ready.

Membership

A British Friend, Don Rowe, describes his spiritual journey on his path leading to membership:

When the boys were born it triggered something of a crisis. We both felt that we wanted for them something that we both had — the rootedness of a strong faith community. We decided to try the Quakers once more and that was it. This time I was ready for the silence, the space, the trust and the respect that people who see themselves as seekers have for each other. . . .

I found to my surprise that, in so many ways, I was already a Quaker, although it was several years before I applied for membership. What is the point of getting married when you are already in a committed relationship? Well, as it was pointed out, there are responsibilities which Attenders cannot really take on. How like me to fall for this kind of argument! Actually, once accepted for membership I was glad that I could at last say without qualification *I am a Quaker*. It did make a difference; more than ever I felt responsibility not only for our own meeting *but for the Quaker tradition* — which, in one sense, I think we hold in trust for present and future generations.

Queries & Membership

Queries are questions Friends ask themselves to promote spiritual discernment, and are not expected to be answered by a “yes” or “no”. Their use is to stimulate a deep and continuing examination of the spiritual challenges presented by living an integrated life. Prospective members may find this approach helpful to their consideration of the membership decision.

Friends have assessed the state of this religious society through the use of *queries* since the time of George Fox (the 17th century founder of Quakerism). Rooted in the history of Friends, the queries reflect the Quaker way of life, reminding Friends of the ideals we seek to attain. From the Christian tradition, Friends have taken as a standard the life and teaching of Jesus, not only as recorded in the New Testament, but even more importantly as revealed inwardly, as we seek God’s truth and its expression through our lives today. Friends approach queries as a guide to self-examination, using them not as an outward set of rules, but as a framework within which we assess our convictions and examine, clarify, and consider prayerfully the direction of our lives and the life of the community.

Faith and Practice, A Book of Christian Discipline, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997.

Queries are a Quaker discipline for stretching our aspirations.

Faith and Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends: A Quaker Guide to Christian Discipline, Pacific Yearly Meeting, 1985.

Queries for the Meeting’s Clearness Committee*

The Committee may wish to consider the following queries in preparation for meeting with an applicant for membership.

- Have I welcomed this friend into our faith community?
- Do I listen and respond sensitively to the inquirer’s need and desire for information?
- Have I examined my own understanding of membership, including:
 - ♦ The primary purposes and rewards of being a part of a religious community?
 - ♦ Whether I am ready to examine my own spiritual journey and able to share it willingly?
- Am I willing to accept, non-judgmentally, the inquirer’s expressed thoughts?
- Am I willing to discern the best course for both the inquirer and the Meeting?
- With others on the committee, am I able to convey to the inquirer that membership is based on participating as fully as able in:
 - ♦ Meeting for Worship?
 - ♦ Meeting for Worship for Business?
 - ♦ The support and work of the Meeting?
- If I have a stop concerning this new relationship, can I lovingly share my concern with both the committee and the applicant?
- Am I aware that Friends, as we honor *as the way opens*, need to remember that way may not be open just now, and further preparation may be invited?
- Am I giving the applicant an opportunity to develop a growing understanding of Quakerism?

*Committees for Clearness aid Friends in being obedient to the leadings of the Spirit and enable a Meeting to support and nurture its members in building and deepening the spiritual community. These committees are used for membership, marriage, and other concerns.