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# Quakers

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The Society of Friends began in England in the 1650s. Quakers believe that there is something of God in everybody. They do not have clergy or rituals and their meetings for worship are often held in silence.

## Introduction

### Quakers - the Religious Society of Friends

Quakers are members of a group with Christian roots that began in England in the 1650s.

The formal title of the movement is the Society of Friends or the Religious Society of Friends.

There are about 210,000 Quakers across the world.



Quaker meeting at Gracechurch Street ©

In Britain there are 17,000 Quakers, and 400 Quaker meetings for worship each week. 9,000 people in Britain regularly take part in Quaker worship without being members of the Religious Society of Friends.

### The essence of the Quakers

Quakers believe that there is something of God in everybody and that each human being is of unique worth. This is why Quakers value all people equally, and oppose anything that may harm or threaten them.

Quakers seek religious truth in inner experience, and place great reliance on conscience as the basis of morality.

They emphasise direct experience of God rather than ritual and ceremony. They believe that priests and rituals are an unnecessary obstruction between the believer and God.

Quakers integrate religion and everyday life. They believe God can be found in the middle of everyday life and human relationships, as much as during a meeting for worship.

### What Quakers believe

Among key Quaker beliefs are:

- God is love
- the light of God is in every single person
- a person who lets their life be guided by that light will achieve a full relationship with God
- everyone can have a direct, personal relationship with God without involving a priest or minister
- redemption and the Kingdom of Heaven are to be experienced now, in this world

### Quakers want to make this a better world

Quakers work actively to make this a better world. They are particularly concerned with:

- human rights, based on their belief in equality of all human beings
- social justice

- peace
- freedom of conscience
- environmental issues - Quakers seek to live simply so as to reduce the burden on the world
- community life

## Holy Books

Quakers do not regard any book as being the actual 'word of God'.

Most Quakers regard the **Bible** as a very great inspirational book but they don't see it as the only one, and so they read other books that can guide their lives.

## Holy Days

Quakers do not celebrate Christian festivals such as **Easter** and **Christmas**.

## Worship

Quaker communal worship consists of silent waiting, with participants contributing as the spirit moves them.

## Are Quakers Christian?

Although outsiders usually regard the movement as a Christian denomination, not all Quakers see themselves as Christians; some regard themselves as members of a universal religion that (for historical reasons) has many Christian elements.

Tolerance is part of the Quaker approach to life, so Quakers are willing to learn from all other faiths and churches.

## Where the names come from

One story says that the founder, George Fox, once told a magistrate to tremble (quake) at the name of God and the name 'Quakers' stuck.

Other people suggest that the name derives from the physical shaking that sometimes went with Quaker religious experiences.

The name 'Friends' comes from Jesus' remark "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

## Beliefs

### Quaker ideas and beliefs

Beliefs are not just safe ledges in an uncertain reality, but rather handholds from which further heights can be reached.

### Eleven Quaker Scientists, 1989

Religion is living with God. There is no other kind of religion. Living with a Book, living with or by a Rule, being awfully high-principled are not in themselves religion, although many people think they are and that that is all there is to it.

### Bernard Canter 1962

There is no creed or formal set of beliefs that you have to hold to be a Quaker. This is because:

Quakers think that adopting a creed is taking on belief at second hand - they think that faith should be more personal than that and based on a person's inner conviction and on taking part in a shared search for the truth with other Quakers.

Quakers believe that faith is something that is always developing and not something frozen at a particular moment in history that can be captured in a fixed code of belief.

But it is possible to list many ideas and beliefs that are generally accepted by Quakers.

## Distinguishing Quaker ideas

Quakers believe that there is a direct relationship between God and each believer, every human being contains something of God - this is often called "the light of God". So:

- Quakers regard all human beings as equal and equally worthy of respect
- Quakers accept that all human beings contain goodness and truth
- Quakers do not accept value judgements based on race or gender
- Quakers welcome diversity

A written list of beliefs is considered inappropriate. Quakers feel people should follow their 'inner light' rather than external rules.

They believe that God grows and changes with his creation and believe that God continues to tell human beings what they should do.

They don't believe in sacraments (either as realities or symbols) or formal liturgies or ceremonies and also refuse to take oaths.

Quakers don't believe in a clergy, they feel that all believers can minister to one another. They emphasise the importance leading your own life well as an example to others (what a person does can be much clearer than what they say). They also practice worship in silence.

They are actively involved in social and political issues and believe in pacifism and non-violence.

## **Beliefs**

- Each person has an inner light (part of God's spirit) inside them - so there is a unity between all human beings
- Spiritual truth can only be known through direct revelation from God
- God continues to "talk" to people today
- Conscience gives a guide to conduct
- The Bible is not regarded as the only guide for conduct and belief
- Doubt and questioning are valuable tools for spiritual growth
- All human beings can have a direct experience of God - they don't need priests to help them
- There is good and evil inside all human beings, and all human beings can choose between them - everyone has the power to choose good over evil if they really want to
- Christ's life demonstrates the full truth of God
- Quakers do not agree on what happens after death. Some believe in an afterlife, some don't

## **Customs**

Quakers do not follow a creed, they acknowledge that words are not up to the job of precisely defining belief for a whole group of people.

They believe that individuals should take personal responsibility for their understanding of faith rather than just buying a package and that each individual should try to develop themselves spiritually.

Quakers do not separate religious life and secular life and feel that all life should be 'lived in the spirit'.

They also feel that religious belief must influence a believer's actions and everything that happens in life can inspire religious insights.

Quakers do not have elaborate religious ceremonies and rituals. They regard these as unnecessary; they sometimes call them *empty forms*. They do not have clergy.

Quakers believe that political and other action to improve this world is vitally important.

## Quakers and sacraments

Quakers neither practise baptism nor celebrate the **Eucharist**.

They don't regard some activities as more sacred than others, nor do they believe that any particular ritual is needed to get in touch with God, so they do not believe in the sacraments practised in mainstream Christian churches.

Instead of using 'holy' rituals, Quakers attempt to carry the sacred into every part of their lives. So, for example, they say that baptism should not be "a single act of initiation but a continuing growth in the Holy Spirit and a commitment which must be continually renewed."

## Life and death

Quakers have no collective view on what happens after death. They tend to concentrate on making this world better rather than pondering what happens after leaving it.

## Quakers and theology

In the early days Quakers were suspicious of theology... and many Quakers are still not keen on it, believing that experience is a better teacher.

Reasons for disliking theology include:

- Theology distracts people from looking for the 'inner light' and responding to it
- Theological ideas come from the teachings of churches that had distorted the original Christian teachings
- Theological teachings are used to control people
- Theology uses such difficult language that it hides God's truth from ordinary people
- Theological debate may give people a false idea of their own religious abilities; it would be better to spend time believing and living a good life

## Worship

### Quaker worship

Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence.

### Advice and Queries

## Introduction

Quaker worship is designed to let God teach and transform the worshippers.

Quakers call worship events *meetings for worship* rather than services.

In a Quaker meeting for worship a group of people sits in a room in silence for an hour. From time to time someone may speak briefly, but sometimes the entire hour may pass without a word being spoken.



Quaker meeting for worship ©

Quaker meetings for worship are open to everyone. Children are specifically welcomed.

## No liturgy

Quaker worship is very different to the **worship of most Christian churches** in that it doesn't follow a set liturgy or code of rules - a service has no structure, and no one leads it.

Quakers do without a liturgy because they believe that worship happens when two or three people come together to worship - nothing more is needed.

This belief comes from Jesus' statement that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

## Meeting for worship

Quaker meetings for worship take place in *meeting houses*, not churches. These are simple buildings or rooms.

A meeting begins when two or more worshippers come together to be in the presence of God.

They usually sit facing each other in a square or a circle. This helps them to be aware that they are a group together for worship, and puts everybody in a place of equal status.



Meeting for worship in Lincoln ©

Everyone waits in shared silence until someone is *moved by the Spirit* (i.e. has a strong religious feeling) to do something as part of their worship.

A person will only speak if they are convinced that they have something that must be shared, and it is rare for a person to speak more than once.

The words spoken are usually brief and may include readings (from the Bible or other books), praying, or speaking from personal experience. Each speaking is followed by a period of silence.

Quakers believe that God speaks through the contributions made at the meeting. Some people say that there is often a feeling that a divine presence has settled over the group.

The words should come from the soul - from the inner light - rather than the mind. Quakers know that even if the words they feel moved to speak have no particular meaning for themselves, they may carry a message from God to other people.

There may be no outward response to the contribution from other people, but if there is it will be something that builds positively on the previous contribution. Discussion and argument are not part of the meeting.

The meeting ends when the elders shake hands.

If pressed to say what they are actually doing in a meeting for worship, many Quakers would probably say that they are waiting - waiting in their utmost hearts for the touch of something beyond their everyday selves. Some would call it 'listening to the quiet voice of God' - without trying to define the word.

Others would use more abstract terms: just 'listening' (though no voice is heard), or 'looking inward' (though no visions are seen), or 'pure attention' (though nothing specific is attended to). The word 'inward' tends to recur as one gropes for explanations.

**Richard Allen**

## Quakers and silence

The silence in a meeting for worship isn't something that happens between the actual worship - the silence itself is part of the worship; it provides a space for people to separate themselves from the pressures and events of daily life and to get closer to God and each other.

The people who are present try to create an internal silence - a silence inside their head. They do this by stopping everyday thoughts and anxieties.

Quakers believe that if they wait silently for God in this way there will be times when God will speak directly to them.

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts

### **George Fox**

True silence ... is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.

### **William Penn, 1699**

A Quaker service is not a time of individual meditation, although the description above may make it sound like that.

It is important that the waiting in silence and the listening are done as a group. The people taking part are trying to become something more than just a collection of individuals; they want to become aware of being part of a 'we', rather than just a solitary 'I'.

## **Pastoral or programmed worship**

Some Quakers have adopted many of the practices of mainstream churches, and have pastors and use hymns in their worship. Their services are usually like **Methodist** or **Baptist** services.

There is a Quaker hymn book, called *Worship in Song, A Quaker Hymnal*.

## **History**

### **Quaker history**

Like many Christian groups, Quakers never intended to form a new denomination. Their founder, George Fox, was trying to take belief and believers back to the original and pure form of Christianity.

Fox was born in July 1624 in Leicestershire, England, and died in 1691, by which time his movement had 50,000 followers.

As Fox grew up he was puzzled by the inconsistency between what Christians said they believed and the way they behaved. He became a religious activist at the age of 19, and was imprisoned eight times for preaching views that annoyed the religious and political establishment of his time.



George Fox ©

## **Fox and social issues**

Fox got into political trouble because of his idea that there was something "of God in every person".

This was a revolutionary attack on all discrimination by social class, wealth, race and gender and it had worrying implications for the social structure of his time.

The political establishment did not take this lying down. Quaker refusal to take oaths and to take off their hats before a magistrate, and their insistence on holding banned religious meetings in public, led to 6,000 Quakers being imprisoned between 1662 and 1670.

## **Fox and religious issues**

Fox's aim was to inspire people to hear and obey the voice of God and become a community "renewed up again in God's image" by living the principles of their faith.

Fox believed that everyone should try to encounter God directly and to experience the Kingdom of Heaven as a present, living reality. He objected to the hierarchical structure and the rituals of the churches of his time, and rejected the idea that the Bible was always right.

But Fox went even further. He argued that God himself did not want churches. Churches were either unnecessary to get to God, or an obstruction (Fox often referred to churches unkindly as "steeple-houses"). Since believers should have a direct relationship with God, no one (priests, for example) and nothing (like sacraments) should come in between.

Not surprisingly, these views infuriated the mainstream churches, and Quakers were persecuted in Britain on a large scale until 1689.

## USA

Quaker missionaries arrived in the USA in 1656. They were persecuted at first, and four were executed.

However the movement appealed to many Americans, and it grew in strength, most famously in Pennsylvania which was founded in 1681 by William Penn as a community based on the principles of **pacifism** and religious tolerance.

## Quakers and slavery

The origins of Christian **abolitionism** can be traced to the late 17th Century and the Quakers. Several of their founders, including George Fox and Benjamin Lay, encouraged fellow congregants to stop owning slaves.

By 1696, Quakers in Pennsylvania officially declared their opposition to the importation of enslaved Africans into North America. Along with the Anglican Granville Sharp, Quakers established the first recognised anti-slavery movement in Britain in 1787.

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## Famous Quakers



Chocolate manufacturers Joseph Rowntree and George Cadbury were both Quakers

- George Fox (1624-1691) - founder of Quakerism
- William Penn (1621-1670) - friend of George Fox, founder of Pennsylvania
- John Woolman (1720-1772) - an American Quaker involved in the abolition of slavery
- John Dalton (1766-1844) - British scientist who invented the atomic theory of matter
- Edward Pease (1767-1858) - first Quaker member of Parliament
- Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) - British prison reformer
- John Bright (1811-1889) - British politician
- Joseph Rowntree (1837-1925) - Chocolate manufacturer
- George Cadbury (1839-1922) - Chocolate manufacturer
- Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) - physicist
- Paul Eddington (1927-1995) - actor
- James Dean (1931-1955) - actor
- Jocelyn Bell Burnell (born 1943) - astronomer, discoverer of pulsars
- Bonnie Raitt (born 1949) - popular musician
- Tom Robinson (born 1950) - popular musician

## Holy days Holv davs

Quakers do not celebrate Christian festivals such as **Easter** and **Christmas** (although Quaker families may mark Christmas as the secular festival it has largely become).

They believe the events celebrated at such festivals (e.g. the resurrection and the incarnation) should be kept in mind throughout the year.

Although Quaker meetings for worship generally take place on a Sunday, this is purely for convenience and not because Sunday is the Sabbath or a particularly holy day.

## **Ethics**

### **Quaker ethics**

Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.

#### **Advices and Queries**

### **Personal integrity**

Quakers try to live up to high standards of honesty, as set out in this series of questions:

Are you honest and truthful in all you say and do? Do you maintain strict integrity in business transactions and in your dealings with individuals and organisations? Do you use money and information entrusted to you with discretion and responsibility?

#### **Advices and Queries**

### **Work and business**

Quakers avoid working for companies that manufacture weapons or other harmful products (nor will they invest in such companies). They prefer to choose work that has positive benefits for the community.

They maintain strict integrity in business transactions and in workplace dealings with individuals.

### **Gender issues**

Quakers have always treated men and women as equals, and were pioneers in the movement for female equality.

### **Animal rights**

Quakers oppose blood sports, and do not approve of businesses that exploit **animals**, such as circuses or zoos, or the fur trade.

They object to experiments on animals for trivial purposes such as cosmetics, and are divided as to whether animal experimentation should be allowed for medical research.

...as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say we love God ... and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature ... was a contradiction in itself.

#### **John Woolman, 1772**

### **Gambling**

Quakers do not gamble.





Alcohol and tobacco are not forbidden

## Alcohol and tobacco

Quakers are not forbidden from using alcohol or tobacco (although these substances are banned from Quaker Meeting Houses), but most Quakers avoid them, or consume them moderately.

Many Quakers took an active role in the Temperance Movement of Victorian times.

## Sex

Quakers are non-judgemental about sex, which they see as a gift of God. Their attention is focused on the way in which it is used in human relationships.

Sexual activity is essentially neither good nor evil; it is a normal biological activity which, like most other human activities, can be indulged in destructively or creatively.

### Towards a Quaker view of sex, 1963

No relationship can be a right one which makes use of another person through selfish desire.

### Advices, 1964

## Homosexuality

The same thinking applies to the Quaker attitude to homosexuality.

An act which (for example) expresses true affection between two individuals and gives pleasure to them both, does not seem to us to be sinful by reason alone of the fact that it is homosexual.

### Towards a Quaker view of sex, 1963

Quakers were one of the first churches to talk openly about sexuality. Since we try to live our lives respecting 'that of God' in everyone we would want to treat all people equally. We feel that the quality and depth of feeling between two people is the most important part of a loving relationship, not their gender or sexual orientation.

### Britain Yearly Meeting

## Abortion

Quakers don't have a united view on **abortion** but regard it as a matter of individual conscience. Philosophically there is no Quaker doctrine of when a person becomes a person.

The movement has difficulty reconciling the principle of non-violence, which could argue against abortion, and the wish that women should be able to play a full part in society, which might sometimes justify abortion.

## Contraception

Quakers don't have a collective view on the rightness or wrongness of **contraception**. Many Quakers do use artificial methods of birth control.

## Euthanasia

Quakers don't have a united view on **euthanasia**. Some Quakers make 'living wills', requesting that if they become ill to the point of being incapable of living without artificial life support systems or inappropriate medical intervention, they be allowed to die naturally and with dignity.



Quakers at a peace march ©

## Justice, politics and society

Quakers are active in politics and in working for justice in the world.

This comes partly from their belief that there is something of God in every human being, and that they should respect the worth and dignity of each person, and partly from following Christ's own example of social activism.

At the centre of Friends' religious experience is the repeatedly and consistently expressed belief in the fundamental equality of all members of the human race. Our common humanity transcends our differences.

### Meeting for Sufferings' Statement of Intent on Racism, 1988

The duty of the Society of Friends is to be the voice of the oppressed but [also] to be conscious that we ourselves are part of that oppression.

### Quaker Faith and Practice

Quakers have played a part in:

- criminal law reform
- prison reform - particularly through the work of Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845)
- reducing poverty
- ending the slave trade
- ending the opium trade
- women's rights
- anti-racism
- human rights

and many other campaigns. Quakers are active in many charities.

## Oaths

Quakers will not swear oaths in court (or elsewhere) but will only affirm.

## Pacifism and violence

Quakers believe that **war** and conflict are against God's wishes and so they are dedicated to pacifism and non-violence. And from a practical point of view they think that force nearly always creates more problems than it solves.

We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world.

### Quaker statement to King Charles II, 1660

A good end cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil, that good may come of it.

### **William Penn, 1693**

War, in our view, involves the surrender of the Christian ideal and the denial of human brotherhood.

### **London Yearly Meeting, 1916**

Christ demands of us that we adhere, without swerving, to the methods of love, and therefore, if a seeming conflict should arise between the claims of His service and those of the State, it is to Christ that our supreme loyalty must be given, whatever the consequences.

### **London Yearly Meeting, 1915**

Many conscientious objectors (those who refuse to join the armed forces) are Quakers, but Quaker pacifism is not simply the refusal to fight: it includes working actively to bring about or preserve peace, by removing the causes of conflict.

Quakers, like other pacifists, are sometimes accused of being willing to give in to evil regimes rather than fight against them. They disagree, and say that they fight by non-violent means.

All forms of non-violent resistance are certainly much better than appeasement, which has come to mean the avoidance of violence by a surrender to injustice at the expense of the sufferings of others and not of one's self, by the giving away of something that is not ours to give.

### **Kathleen Lonsdale, 1953**

Quakers are not just opposed to war, but to all forms of violence. George Fox was personally opposed to the use of violence. He refused to defend himself when he was attacked and often, when the violence was over, had kind words or actions for his attackers.

## **Environment**

Quakers believe that human beings are stewards of the earth, and should care for it to ensure that each generation passes on to the next generation a world as good as or better than it received.



Quakers think that the environmental crisis is a spiritual and religious crisis as well as a practical one.

Quakers believe in protecting the environment ©

Quakers say that environmental issues are also a matter of social justice: they acknowledge that those living in Britain or the USA are largely insulated from the effects of environmental problems and that such issues have a much more serious effect on the world's poor.

The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.

### **John Woolman (1720-1772)**

Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of great strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effect your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?

## **Advices and Queries**

Richard J Foster set down some principles that Quakers can follow to live simple lives:

- Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status
- Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you
- Develop a habit of giving things away - de-accumulate
- Refuse to be propagandised by the custodians of modern gadgetry
- Learn to enjoy things without owning them
- Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation
- Look with a healthy scepticism at all 'buy now, pay later' schemes
- Obey Jesus' injunction about plain, honest speech
- Reject anything that will breed the oppression of others
- Shun whatever would distract you from your main goal

## **Marriage**

### **Quaker marriage**

Quakers strongly believe in the sanctity of marriage but also recognise the value of non-marital relationships and the single life.

Their weddings are very informal compared to **those from other traditions** and there is no priest or minister to lead the couple as they make their vows.

When a Quaker couple decide to marry, they make a commitment to each other in the presence of God, their family and friends.

Quakers believe that no one but God can join a couple in matrimony. They see marriage as more than a legal contract - it is a religious commitment.

The right joining in marriage is the work of the Lord only, and not the priest's or magistrate's; for it is God's ordinance and not man's...we marry none; it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses.

### **George Fox, 1669**

The couple promise to be loving companions and take each other as lifelong partners in a spirit of freedom and equality.

## **Quaker weddings**

Quaker weddings do not have to take place in registered buildings but they must be held indoors.

Most couples will book their local Quaker meeting house although some may choose to hold their wedding at home or another alternative venue.

A Quaker marriage is a community celebration and not just a ceremony for the couple. Therefore the style of worship at the wedding service must be acceptable to the wider community.

The wedding ceremony is usually held within a simple meeting for worship. It has no set order of service or sermon.

In most cases, the finer details of the ceremony are decided through discussion with the marriage registering officers and community elders.

A couple may decide to include readings and even a hymn. But music is, on the whole, rare.

If both parties are Quakers or regularly attend monthly meetings, they may marry in a Quaker marriage ceremony.

Couples who are registered as 'attenders' but not yet members of the Religious Society of Friends would be expected to have attended meetings for a number of months before making an application for marriage.

Where one member of the couple is not a Quaker, or **divorced**, two adult members of the Society must give written permission before the marriage can take place.

## Marriage preparation

The first step in the official process is a *meeting for clearness*. (Clearness in this context means helping the couple affirm their decision to marry.)

The meeting gives them the chance to discuss their relationship with other members of the community.

At least six weeks before the wedding date, the couple must make an application to the registering officer of the monthly meeting where the marriage ceremony is due to be held.

The monthly meeting must approve the application before the registering officer, who is recognised by law, makes arrangements for the public notices and other legal requirements.

The monthly meeting then holds a *Meeting for Worship for the Solemnisation of Marriage* to confirm that the wedding can go ahead.

Quaker marriages can be held at any time of day. Public notice of the wedding is posted on the door of the venue a week before the wedding.

## The wedding day

Guests are greeted by a door keeper when they arrive for the marriage ceremony.

The bride is not usually given away by her father. Neither is it customary to have a best man or bridesmaids.

The bride and groom will normally enter the meeting room together with friends and then quietly take their seats.

Sometimes they may come in when everyone else is seated. In the past, guests used to stand as the couple entered but these days this rarely happens.

The couple will sit next to a table with the Quaker wedding certificate and a pen.

## Wedding attire

Quaker worship and ceremonies are relaxed so the bride, groom and their guests will usually dress smartly but informally.

Some brides may choose to wear white but, in most cases, the outfit is kept simple.

Guests need to be careful to strike the right balance too.

Men, for example, may wear a jacket or tie, but will often dress more informally. Women may choose a skirt or other reasonably smart clothes.

## The ceremony

Like other Quaker meetings, the wedding service is mostly held in silence but anyone who feels moved by the Spirit can speak or pray.

Most ceremonies will follow the basic structure below:

- A volunteer, usually a Quaker elder, will stand to explain how the service will proceed.
- After an initial period of silence of about 10 to 15 minutes, the couple will rise and exchange their vows. The vows are handed down from the Quaker tradition and can be modified.
- Holding hands, the couple take it in turns to make declarations based on the following: "Friends, I take this my friend...to be my wife/husband, promising divine assistance to be unto her/him a loving and faithful husband/wife so long as we both on earth shall live." It does not matter which order the bride and groom speak.

- The Registering Officer calls upon the couple to sign the Quaker Marriage Certificate which records their vows. Two witnesses also sign.
- The Registering Officer reads the certificate aloud.
- There is a further period of silence.
- The meeting is terminated by two elders who shake hands, inviting the rest of the congregation to do the same.
- Members of the congregation sign the Quaker Marriage Certificate as a witness to both their presence and support for the marriage. The certificate, in the form of a scroll or a book, has no legal standing but it reminds the couple of their friends' happiness and hopes for the success of their marriage.
- After the meeting the couple and the two witnesses sign the civil register. Rings are often exchanged at this point.

## **Divorce and remarriage**

Divorced people may be allowed to remarry at the discretion of the members of the monthly meeting.

Quakers believe that those who are divorced need to be given the chance of a new start.

## **Blessings for same-sex couples**

The Quakers have welcomed same-sex unions for more than two decades, allowing local groups to celebrate same-sex commitments through special acts of worship.

In July 2009, at the Britain Yearly Meeting, Quakers agreed to carry out same-sex marriages on the same basis as marriages for opposite-sex couples.

...22 years after the prospect was first raised at Meeting for Sufferings we are being led to treat same sex committed relationships in the same way as opposite sex marriages, reaffirming our central insight that marriage is the Lord's work and we are but witnesses. The question of legal recognition by the state is secondary.

### **Minute 25, Britain Yearly Meeting 31 July 2009**

They will also formally ask the government to change the law to allow gay people to marry.

## **Funerals**

### **Quaker funerals**

A Quaker funeral has two particular aims: to thank God for the life that has been lived, and to help the mourners feel a deep sense of God's presence.

Because they are thankful for having known the dead person, Quaker mourners tend not to wear black.

The funeral can follow the normal silent pattern of Quaker worship, or it can include programmed elements. At a meeting following the silent pattern the contributions are likely to include memories as well as prayers or readings. A senior person will normally begin the meeting with a brief explanation of Quaker worship if there are many non-Quakers present.

In addition to the funeral there can be a "meeting for worship on the occasion of the death of our Friend".

Quakers can be buried or cremated.

## **Structure and clergy**

### **Structure of the Quaker movement**

The Quakers are organised through a series of *meetings*. While there are actual meetings the word is used here to refer to the groups of people who meet to look after particular functions. The meetings are named after the frequency with which a group meets.

The structure is organised at local level (Preparative Meetings), smaller and larger district levels (Monthly and General Meetings) and national level (Yearly Meeting).

Most local Quaker communities hold monthly business meetings.

The Britain Yearly Meeting is the body that represents the interests of the thirty thousand Quakers in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

There is no organisation that has worldwide authority over the movement.

## **Meetings for business**

Individual Quaker Meetings carry out matters of business and administration at "Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business". The whole of such a meeting, even the most nit-pickingly detailed section, is regarded as worship.

These meetings begin with silence. When the Clerk judges the time is right, he or she summarises the agenda before the meeting, provides any necessary background information, and lays the first item before the meeting.

People stand up to show they wish to speak, and are called by the Clerk. The traditional formula for raising an issue is to begin "I have a Concern..." When everything is said the meeting agrees a 'minute' (a paragraph or two) setting out the decision.

The decision is not based on a majority or a consensus, but on the "sense of the meeting". Once a minute has been drafted and read out members can suggest modifications.

Meetings try not to take decisions by a majority vote, or even by reaching a consensus; they wait until "the right way will open and we shall be led into unity."

The Clerk records the decisions and helps those taking part discern the will of God in the meeting, but he/she does not chair or lead the meeting.

## **Clergy**

Our own experience leads us to affirm that the church can be so ordered that the guidance of the Holy Spirit can be known and followed without the need for a separated clergy.

### **London Yearly Meeting, 1986**

Quakers don't have any clergy.

Some members may be appointed as elders because a meeting recognises that they have the ability to serve in a particular way. Appointment as an elder doesn't mean that the person is in any way superior to anyone else. Such appointments are for three years and can be renewed.

## **Find out more**

- **Christianity and the abolition of slavery**