

Being Quaker now

A different way of being open for transformation

The Swarthmore Lecture each year at Britain Yearly Meeting is immediately followed by the publication of a book which expands the Lecturer's theme.

The Lecturer in 2014 was the Quaker academic Ben Pink Dandelion. His book is

Open for transformation: being Quaker

Quaker Books. 2014. £8.00

Ben believes our Society of Friends in Britain has become a prey to secularism and individualism, which has left our faith diffuse and diluted.

He poses a number of questions and invites us all to engage with them in our Local Meetings. He challenges us to consider how we can retain an authentic encounter with the Divine, how we can become a transformed and transforming community, and how we can rekindle the Quaker vision.

He wants us to read carefully and apply what is in our 'red book' – *Quaker Faith and Practice*. He wants us to be rooted in a tradition that began in 1647, and to take the experiences of George Fox, Margaret Fell, and other early Friends as 'templates' for our own spiritual lives. He believes those of us who take a more relaxed, open and liberal view of the Quaker way, are in danger of destroying the precious jewel of Quakerism.

He presents his vision as the only right way in which we can be truly Quaker and open for transformation. There are many Friends who will find it difficult to unite with much of Ben's vision. Many of us are convinced that there are more ways than one in which we can be open for transformation, and be truly Quaker. My response to his lecture and book, having consulted a number of other Friends, is to offer a vision which builds on much of what we now have, of which Ben is so critical, and to share some of my experiences. I hope other Friends will offer their contributions to this search for ways forward.

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Being Quaker now

Ben Pink Dandelion sets out in *Open for transformation: Being Quaker*, a call for us Quakers in Britain to be clear about what we are, and what we are not, if we want our Quaker approach to be vibrant, cohesive, coherent and socially useful.

I think most of us want it to be all of those things, and Ben's book has the potential to encourage us to do a lot of reflecting as we seek to respond to his words. He poses a significant challenge to the views and practices of the majority of Friends in Britain, as he urges us to take seriously what is written in *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

He acknowledges that his view of Quakerism is a conservative one. Those who do not share his view he believes are in the wrong Society, and he is quite relaxed about us leaving. I expect there will be a variety of responses to his book if Friends really engage with its content.

In contrast to Ben's vision, I, like many others, have built my Quaker commitment on the broader vision of which he is so critical, which we believe is apt for where we all are now. As we consider these matters, and engage in conversations with others, we can explore various ways of being open to transformation. It is an opportunity for us all to grow in confidence as we articulate what it means to us to be Quaker today.

Ben takes us all to task, saying: "We have become collectively confused about the heart of our Quaker way, unable to articulate it clearly to newcomers, and unable to know what is and what is not part of it". Some of us wish to respond constructively to the challenge he makes. He calls us to "create a Quakerism which has that faith - not secular wisdom or easy fixes - at its centre." Some of us are very clear that the way of being Quaker, of which he is so critical, is very meaningful for us. We do not regard it as an easy fix.

He is inviting us, to read his book, and then to think through our responses to the issues he raises. At the back of his book he offers a programme for discussion groups with a number of questions. His questions are at the end of this essay, so readers can consider how they might engage with them in conversations with other Friends. It is important we take seriously Ben's criticisms in considering what it is we cherish, and what we wish to change. This exploration in discernment is one to which many Friends will no doubt contribute.

Believing

In his chapter "A 'transformed' community" Ben is critical of the current state of diversity of belief within Britain Yearly Meeting, in which liberal Quakerism is set "into a mould of being a forever-seeking church", doctrinally plural, "shifting from a clearly Christian Society to a plural one, and from a significantly theistic one to one

that is more diverse and wary of traditional forms of religious expression”. He notes that in the 2013 survey of British Quakerism just 57% of Friends said that they believed in God.

Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God – what religion really means* (Bodley Head 2009) argues in her Introduction that “Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart.” She also makes the case that “despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our religious thinking is sometimes remarkably underdeveloped, even primitive.” Furthermore she makes the point that “We have to unlearn a great deal about religion before we can move on to new understanding”.

In her final chapter *Epilogue*, she writes: “We have seen that far from regarding revelation as static, fixed and unchanging, Jews, Christians and Muslims all knew that revealed truth was symbolic, that scripture could not be interpreted literally, and that sacred texts had multiple meaning and could lead to entirely fresh insights. Revelation was not an event that had happened once in the distant past, but was an ongoing, creative process that required human ingenuity.” “Instead of clinging nervously to the insights of the past, they expected people to be inventive, fearless and confident in their interpretation of faith.” She also suggests “it is perhaps time to return to a theology that asserts less and is more open to silence and unknowing.”

Could this be what we are about? Is it not part of the challenge that faces us Quakers in Britain today? Ours is a faith expressed in practice, our spirituality largely in silence, and we are open to new light. We are in a period of transition, on our way to new insights, experiences, and ways of being. Ben feels we have lost our way, and he wants us to get back to the roots of our tradition. Is his prophetic voice right for this time? Do not most Friends think we are on a journey that begins with those roots, but that we have moved on beyond them? Does going back seem a realistic option?

Quaker Faith and Practice

There are things about our Quaker way of life and faith today that are ‘fuzzy’ because quite a number of Friends are unclear about how to express what they believe. They find it difficult to explain to enquirers what being Quaker means to them. Ben challenges to us to engage in conversations with each other to explore these issues. If Yearly Meeting agrees in the near future, the process of discernment for revising *Quaker Faith and Practice* will be a valuable means by which many of us will seek to reduce the fuzziness and become clearer ourselves about how we describe our experiences, our understanding, our hopes and our vision.

Ben insists our current book of discipline, the red book he metaphorically waved in his lecture, is very clear. For him the answer is for us all to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it, then act as if it is true, (and if it isn’t - to change it). Those who cannot accept what is written in it, he says are in the wrong Society.

If human beings were consistent, and lived by our own guidelines, this might be what you would expect of us all. However the history of the Christian religion (never mind other religions) shows us that a lot of people in all denominations have either sat

lightly to, or ignored, or contravened their books of discipline for 2,000 years. It may not be 'right' but it is very normal.

Most of us belong to our faith community because we want to be part of a culture, whose values, history, activities, purposes, behaviours, fellowship and support, we identify with. We are most likely to join such a community, not because we are inspired by the founder and his message, or because we subscribe to the foundation documents of the community, but because we have experienced the care, idealism, nurture, friendship and spirituality of people who are practicing members of that community now.

Most members of most churches would not be able to subscribe fully to all their church expects of them to believe and practice if they were to understand all the details of their discipline – which very few do. We tend to align ourselves with the general ethos of our church, rather than the nitty gritty of its requirements. This is inconsistent with our commitment to truth and integrity as Quakers, yet it is a very human failing. This is what Ben criticises us for doing.

The Roman Catholic church has a strict discipline, in which contraception, abortion, divorce, are just some of the practices officially barred to Catholics, yet the prohibitions are widely ignored by its members. I wonder how many British Catholics believe either Jesus or Mary physically ascended into heaven – and if so, where did they arrive? They may regard these ascensions as metaphors, but the language of their doctrines, hymns and prayers is rather concrete.

The 39 Articles of Religion prescribe parameters of belief and doctrine in the Church of England. I had to regularly subscribe to them when I was an Anglican priest. I did so in the sense that these were the standard statements agreed in the 17th century and they set the ethos of the church then; but as our understanding of theology had moved on, the ethos had changed too. Very few people took them literally. The Westminster Confession has been treated similarly in some Reformed churches.

As I listened to Ben's lecture at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath, I was struck by the fact it was the nearest thing to a clerical sermon I have heard among Quakers. His theme is a call to reform, to read again and apply what we should have been doing all these years. Most of us, he feels, have (to quote the Church of England Prayer Book of 1662) "erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us". He gave us all a right ticking off.

Templates or inspiration?

Ben wants us to be less diverse and more united in the language we use, the commitment we each make, the experiences we share with each other, how we organise our corporate life, and how we accept corporate discernment. In his Prologue he writes: "Every community draws its own boundaries and nurtures its life partly through being clear about what is allowable and what is not. Healthy

communities are the ones that do this well. As individuals, we give up some of our individual freedoms in order to be nurtured through community life. My sense is that in places among us this balance between individualism and coherent community has gone awry.”

I question whether tight boundaries are always an indication of the health of a community. Regimes with tight boundaries have been some of the most repressive in our history. A community with tight boundaries is not necessarily one that would offer a welcome to a returning prodigal son or daughter.

For Ben, the spiritual experiences of the first Quakers such as George Fox and Margaret Fell “give us templates to understand our own journeys.”

We can all draw inspiration from the experiences and teaching of early Friends, and look at how and why they challenged the culture and beliefs of their own time, and see what learning we can transfer from a very different age to our own. However, I wonder whether we can see their experiences as templates to be copied. That is what you do with a template, you reproduce an identical shape, an exact copy!

The 17th century was an era in which thought forms were very different from our own. The divine right of kings to rule was widely accepted! It was still dangerous to claim that the sun rather than the earth was the centre of our planetary system. It was a time when knowledge of how the Bible came to be written was limited: it was normal to take it literally, and to trust in miracles, divine direction, angels and powers – both good and satanic. For Fox, Jesus was the incarnate son of God, whose sacrificial death opened for us heaven’s gate, rather than as many of us today regard him, an outstanding religious teacher and an inspiring prophet.

The experiences of early Friends were wonderful, life-changing, and challenging to others. They felt powerfully led to direct and forceful confrontation with church people and judges of their day. George Fox often attended a service in the ‘steeplehouse’, and when it ended, he would then preach a different sermon, contradicting the parson. George used the scriptures, both Old and New Testament to provide proof texts in his contests with Anglicans, Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists. He and his fellows challenged cultural norms – hat honour, forms of address, refusal to pay tithes. Some Friends went naked in public places to make a statement. All these were done from a deep conviction that God called them to behave in these ways to declare their testimony.

Fox and his contemporary Friends had a concept of inspiration and guidance which made sense to them within their experiences and culture. They do not make as much sense to many of us today. His lifetime was a time of great ferment of ideas, of new thinking, but also of a naivety because of what they had not yet learned about how our world works. Many, like Fox, saw changes in the weather as indications of divine blessing or punishment.

Ben states: “Trusting in the Spirit to make matters clear as we worship together is fundamental to our way of faith...We try to build community upon earth as we imagine it may be in heaven.” Like other Friends, I am committed to building loving communities upon earth, but unlike George Fox, many of us do not expect a life beyond this one. Heaven - an ideal life, better than this, which we enter only after

death, and then only if we are judged worthy of it - owes as much to Plato, and to the influence of Zoroastrianism on Jewish thinking during Persian rule in Palestine, as it does to Jesus.

George Fox was a man of great courage, faith, love, prayer, determination, and graciousness. He walked with God as his guide, and felt led by God into almost everything he did, and for him, the whole of life was sacramental. He was a radical, and for some Friends his radicalism and graciousness, his emphasis on love as the test of true discipleship is the most appealing aspect of his teaching, and the community he founded. For him the true church is the invisible church, those who seek to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, whatever their beliefs. Friends have lived with and developed these ideas into our current practice.

Fox and early Friends were shaped and influenced by the culture in which they lived, as we are by our own culture. He was often naive in his arguments with opponents. Wanting to take the Society of Friends back to the practice of generations past seems to me to be unrealistic. We are where we are now. We need to find constructive ways forward from here. Do we really think we can put the genie of modern knowledge, freedom of choice, cultural and religious diversity, and independent opinions within our Society, back into a Jacobean bottle?

Original sin

Ben says, “sin and salvation are notably absent from our book of discipline”. For that many of us are grateful. We have no wish for Quakers to again regard ourselves as the “true church” as early Friends did, which Ben wants us to do. Instead, we welcome the fact that we see ourselves as a Religious Society that has been inspired and shaped by truth.

Ben states: “Over the centuries our theology has changed, but we are still in the practice of seeking personal transformation: of being broken and healed...” The concept of dynamic change through the spiritual life is one many of us seek to engage in daily. The concept of being broken and healed on the other hand, stems from a theological view of the human condition marred by original sin, a narrow and negative view of human nature. It has been part of Christian theology in the western church since Augustine’s time, 1600 years ago.

Jews and Orthodox Christians read the same book *Genesis* from which Augustine drew his doctrine, yet neither of them drew from it a doctrine of original sin. As Ben says, within our Society, “ideas of original sin have been replaced by a view of humanity as essentially good, or neither essentially good nor essentially bad.” I cannot envisage ‘original sin’ becoming once again a doctrine to which many modern Friends will feel drawn to commit themselves.

Being ‘open to transformation’ is certainly very much why I have been a Quaker for 15 years rather than a churchman as I was before. I found a whole new spiritual path of liberty and joy when about 30 years ago I encountered Matthew Fox’s book *Original Blessing* (1987). This is a healthy and strong element in understanding our human condition, and is a challenge to ‘original sin’. Too much of the theological teaching I was trained in, and delivered for some of the 37 years I was an Anglican priest, covered us with a blanket of sin. It has worshippers grovelling before God in

every liturgy, most of which begin with a corporate confession. The one I quoted from the Prayer Book is still used and still says “and there is no health in us”!

The doctrine accounts for a great many of the awful things done in the name of God and Jesus for which many of us have felt ashamed. The Magdalene laundries of Ireland are simply one recent example of how vulnerable folk have been punished for being born with ‘original sin’.

Revelation

How is knowledge, wisdom, insight, and discernment obtained? While we can indeed come to see things in a new light in Meeting for Worship – that is only one way in which we experience revelation.

Revelation can also be part of the ordinary experiences of life, for it is opening the mind to truth. It can come from learning, from research, from tests and trials, experiments, experiences and reflecting on those experiences. Revelation can come from relationships, from pain and joy, from love and loss, from repose and contemplation. Revelation can come to each of us from poetry, fiction, drama, and other literature, from music, from art, and from the observation of the natural world.

Advices and Queries number 7 reminds us that “Spiritual learning continues throughout life, and often in unexpected ways. There is inspiration to be found all around us, in the natural world, in the sciences and arts, in our work and friendships, in our sorrows as well as in our joys. Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come? Do you approach new ideas with discernment?”

Constructive change

In our Society, Friends sometimes tell those of us who have come to Quakers by choice, rather than birth and upbringing, that we must learn to adapt to Quaker ways. We do. I have found it a big adjustment, one that I have welcomed, and learned much about the Quaker ethos and tradition.

Convinced Quakers like myself now constitute the majority of Friends in our Society. We bring to Quakers different experiences and approaches, some hurts from the past, and much joy and relief in finding Friends. The Quaker way will inevitably be changed by our membership: it cannot be a static tradition. It embraces us, upholds us, and we seek to contribute to the Society by bringing whatever gifts and service we have. We also bring our perspectives, some of which value deeply what we find here in the Religious Society of Friends, but some of them also are going to challenge and change the Society.

Part of our conversations together about the way forward among Friends will be about what we cherish, and what we seek to change, as part of our work to draft a new five year strategy – or as Ben invites us to consider - a 10 year strategy for our Local Meetings. It will also be part of any revision of *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

The process of revising *Quaker Faith and Practice* will be a great learning exercise. Ben’s concern is that we do not pay enough attention to our book of discipline. Many

of us look forward to coming opportunities to discuss with other Friends much of this book, particularly the guidance on living the Quaker way. We cherish the varied contributions of experience, wisdom and insight from Friends since the time of George Fox, and they will undoubtedly remain as part of our inheritance from which we continue to learn.

Many of us have no wish to exclude from such a revision religious language we do not share, although no doubt we shall urge that new contributions should include some for whom traditional religious language no longer speaks adequately to our condition. Such different approaches to the Quaker way can surely sit well together. We may be speaking of similar spiritual experiences using different words. In which case we trust we will find a way to come to unity in accepting different religious 'languages'. Can we welcome accepting a role as a diverse 'rainbow' religious society, a 'multi-lingual community', journeying together in harmony?

On this Ben is very encouraging when he states : "We have learnt in the last decades, as we faced our diversity, an increased ease with a variety of religious language. We have moved beyond the Christocentric and universalist divide of the 1980s, its resolution expressed in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (2013:27.04) The leading exponents of each view found ultimately that they had more in common than they had thought, or rather: each view also incorporated the other.

"So we can do with the different ways we speak of our spiritual experience today; we can share what is beyond the material with greater confidence (*con-fidence*, with faith) because we can share the basic understanding that what the Religious Society of Friends is about is reaching into that supernatural space and being given an experience of encounter beyond easy naming. It is not about words, but what lies beyond the words. The words are outward forms; we are in the business of an inward spirituality in which we are transformed out of ourselves."

Many of us who also reach out to a 'beyond' which may be more a beyond within than without, do not necessarily describe it as 'supernatural'. We are more inclined to think it is an entirely natural experience, part of the wonder of the spiritual life shared with practitioners of many faiths and none.

The mystery of "God"

Ben writes that "From a rationalist perspective, we know that within the spiritual realm we can never really know God in any outward or linguistic sense. Words demean the depth or nature of the experience of God. God is a mystery, unknowable in an ultimate sense, an experience rather than a doctrine." In other places in his book Ben seems to regard God as a rather close and intimate friend, very much as the 'Presence in the room' depicted in so many reproductions in our Meeting Houses.

In the current discussion among Friends, there are three main views about the Divine. There are those for whom traditional concepts are vital; those who are unclear and avoid being specific about what they think; and those who explore a spiritual life within the Quaker way, but without God. Many for whom traditional concepts are crucial are puzzled and some are alarmed by those of us who have come to walk a Quaker way without either the traditional God, or any god at all.

Many Friends are content to use the traditional language about God in our book of discipline, without trying to explain or understand what they or others mean by it. There is indeed much confusion. The issue is complicated, delicate and difficult.

I am critical of those who share some of my views when they present them aggressively, rigidly, or impatiently with those who do not share them. I am equally unhappy when those of a traditional view will not allow others of us to be genuinely Quaker. We need to seek to understand each other.

I find the explanations of devoted theists among Friends as to what they mean when they used the word 'God' sometimes difficult to comprehend. However I recognize that all of us are on a journey of discovery, to find words that get as near as possible to our experiences and convictions, and we are all still looking for the right ones. I very much hope we can help each other, including those whose views we do not share.

A great difficulty that many of us have is that the name 'God' is encumbered with an inheritance of an anthropomorphic projection. This projection remains vivid in most of the prayers and hymns, old and new, which Christians use. Definitions and creeds do not help us much. The most detailed is the creed of St. Athanasius (*you can find it on Wikipedia*), it is a philosophical nightmare!

The anthropomorphic projection is humorously depicted in Rupert Brook's poem *Heaven for fish*, (the whole poem is well worth reading if you don't know it):

And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.'

A kind omnipotent figure is one aspect of this god, whereas the Jesuit writer Gerard Hughes depicts in *God of Surprises* (Darton 1985) his childhood experiences of this god as the 'Uncle George' figure who terrified him as a child. The God depicted in both the Old and New Testament is not only sometimes kind and compassionate, He – yes 'He' - is also judgmental. In the Old Testament he demands the destruction of people who are not his chosen people (Joshua 10.40 for example).

In the New Testament he intends separating sheep from goats, sending the damned to the place of perpetual punishment (Matthew 25.31-46). Why only the nice parts of this God seem to feature now, and why Satan and hell have largely disappeared from the stage is puzzling to some of us. Satan and hell were very real to George Fox: they are part of his template we do not wish to reproduce.

Part of the reasons why some of us have left this God behind, is that we have experienced the infantile dependence which such a projection can lead to in some Christian teaching. Our confidence lies more towards Dietrich Bonhoeffer's vision of the Christian tradition in 'a world come of age' in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (1953) where we no longer need a metaphysical God to answer the limitations of our human imagination. Bonhoeffer was critical of much religious teaching and practice,

and looked for the renewal of Christianity.

The Bible

All of us who value the Hebrew and Christian scriptures draw from them those aspects which we find fits our view of things, enlarges our vision, and feeds our faith, hope and love. Ben is critical of our 'supermarket religion'. Yet we are all selective - even the fundamentalists who tell us they believe every word of the Bible.

We find new riches in these scriptures when we recognise in them words that inspire and transform us, words with which we can articulate the highest and noblest of human behaviour or ideals, or words through which we can express a walk through the valley of the shadow of death and other paths of suffering. We distinguish between poetry, history, myth, wisdom literature, and religious propaganda. We do not regard these as revealed by God – though we acknowledge they are inspired by their author's experiences of the divine.

We know for instance that the content of the gospels was very much shaped by the experiences and concerns of the religious communities in which they were composed. They make no pretence at objective reporting. Some scholars think they were programmes of instruction for new Christians; others think the gospels were composed as sets of weekly readings through the year to parallel the Jewish Torah lectionary. Some see one or more of the gospels as having an anti-Jewish agenda, and others as a challenge to the Roman Empire. There are continuing debates about the purposes of each of them.

Research on understanding the content of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures has been channeled through perspectives shaped by the religious convictions of the scholars concerned. Some of those perspectives have been narrowed by looking at this material through orthodox Christian eyes, and some have included anti-semitic perspectives not always openly declared. Either way, their scholarship is now open to revision. See for example *Jesus of Nazareth* by Maurice Casey – an independent historian's account of his life and teaching. (T & T Clark. 2010) or *Who on Earth was Jesus?* by David Boulton (O-Books, 2008).

God and gods

Studies in the development of religious ideas amongst human beings from the dawn of history show a wide variety of gods no longer believed in or worshipped, from those of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and Scandinavia, to various Canaanite gods who feature in the Hebrew scriptures: El, Baal, Molech and Asherah amongst them, before Yahweh emerges as the sole god. He became the God of monotheism, common to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Hindu culture has a variety of manifestations of the one divine being, and Buddhists practice a deep spirituality which shapes their communities and society with much love and goodness, without reference to any god, as books by the Dalai Lama amongst others testify.

The history of religions shows us how political and cultural influences have played their part in our concepts of gods. The drafting of the Christian creeds owed as much

to the political power and influence of successive Roman emperors as it did to the spirituality and insight of their theologians.

Since George Fox's time we have had the speculations of the Enlightenment period, with the concept of deism – the creator who having created the universe has left it to its own devices, rather than the God who gave the personal and direct protection and prompting that Fox experienced. The challenge of increasing knowledge from science and other fields in more recent times has led some people, who have felt it so important to retain the concept of God, to refine their explanation of him so much that in their explanations he bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible.

These ideas include pantheism – god is identical to all that is created; and to panentheism - god is both in all that is created but is also distinct from it. This latter concept featured in the *Honest to God* debate of 50 years ago. Though all this is explored on theological degree courses today, not much of it gets to be creatively shared with people in the pews.

It is altogether too simple to think that in modern British Quakerism we face a straight choice between theism and nontheism. There are various nuances amongst us which we try to encapsulate in words. Many Friends prefer not to try at all. What we all have in common is the shared experience of a spiritual practice and mode of discernment that we give different explanations for.

The eminent New Zealand Presbyterian theologian, Lloyd Geering, in his book *Christianity Without God* (2002) argues that just as in the 19th century the Bible ceased to be convincing as the source of divinely revealed knowledge, in the 20th century the conventional ideas of God have failed. He links modern Humanism with the neglected Wisdom strand of the Hebrew scriptures. He envisages Christian culture as a living and evolving stream: a culture of faith without god, for it is the wisdom of the Christian tradition the world needs, not a supernatural saviour. This 'living and evolving stream' well describes the experiences of many of us.

Discernment

Ben writes: "Trusting in the Spirit to make matters clear as we worship together is fundamental to our way of faith." He also writes: "Understanding ourselves as a spiritual community led by God means that the community experience provides our only way of checking what is authentically divine...because Quakerism is built upon the collective discernment of what is 'of God'".

The idea that Quakers can only truly be Quakers if we are seeking the divine will is an idea many of us wish gently, politely, lovingly, and constructively to challenge. The idea that whatever intelligence may be behind the vastness of the universe can be on a personal line to my Meeting to direct the discernment of our small group, is beyond my imagination.

When I first heard some scientist on the radio say that the number of planets in the universe is more than all the grains of sand on all the beaches in all the world – my first reaction was that must be nonsense. When I came to realise the enormity of the universe, I was brought down to earth. The contrast between the vastness of all that

is, and the concept of a personal relationship with any intelligence responsible for it, ended there for me.

Like most Friends, I value deeply the Quaker process of discernment in meetings for worship for business, and have sometimes been impressed by the wisdom that has emerged that enabled us to find a way forward in a complex matter, when the earliest indications were that we might come to a different conclusion. I accept and respect that some Friends describe this experience as being led by God. I experience it and value it as part of the mystery of life. It may come from some 'beyond', but equally it may be a natural process we do not fully understand.

It is a unique form of discernment, which stems from those participating in it approaching the whole of life from what Ben describes as a "practised place of inward transformation". It is a very significant part of the joy of the Quaker way. What we engage with, whether it springs from a particular group dynamic, a heavenly realm, or a beyond that as yet we do not understand enough about to explain, I do not know. I am content to live with mystery, without trying to pin anything down with either a theological or psychological explanation. I value the experience – without needing to analyse it. That seems to me to be at the heart of the Quaker way: cherish the experience, never mind the explanation for it.

What is clear from our common experience is that the Quaker practice of discernment, done in right ordering, has the potential to be transformative. However, many Friends bear witness to their experiences that such transformation can come through a spiritual life that does not necessarily involve a relationship with the traditional concept of God. This is as true for us in the Christian tradition as it is for those in the Buddhist tradition. Later I describe some aspects of my own experience of a spiritual life that is not god-focused. It is from this practice that I can contribute to discernment in my meeting.

Mystical experiences

William James in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Longmans. 1902) explores mystical experiences. He concludes there are varieties of potential forms of consciousness, some of which are induced by spiritual disciplines, some by the effect of chemical substances on our bodies, some come to us out of the blue – from we do not know where. All of them can be life-changing. Ben describes the effect of such an experience on him as a young man on a Greyhound bus in America.

I had such an experience as a rebellious teenager: it transformed my view of religion and set me on a path to being ordained in the Church of England. The experience was wonderful. It is still difficult to describe in words. The result was akin to being in love in that in the immediate aftermath the whole world seemed different. I was seeing things as if for the first time, colours were more vivid, I regarded people differently, and I was walking on air. At the time, I firmly believed I had experienced God. Now I recognise it as a not uncommon experience for many people, and I regard it as a natural one. Many people never have such an experience, nor feel the need for one. It is certainly not a requirement of the Quaker way.

The mystical tradition in Christianity is one that Quakers have claimed to be our own. But currently we are in difficulties because we traditionally explain our mystical

experiences only by attributing their source to God. Friends use the word 'god' to mean all sorts of refinements, many of them very different to the classic concept of God sung and prayed about in churches. Even in those churches there are many people with very confused concepts of God, and some who continue to participate in services yet no longer subscribe to the church's beliefs – see *Christian Atheist – belonging without believing* (O-books 2011) by Brian Mountford, Vicar of the University Church in Oxford.

Those of us who prefer not to use the name 'God' are not, in my experience, seeking to lobby theists to change their language, but simply be honest to our own experience. We wish to express our quest for the spirit, and our Quaker way, in language which is meaningful for us, and not in language that carries for us old concepts that no longer speak to us.

Living with a Wild God (Granta. 2014) is Barbara Ehrenreich's "non-believers search for the truth about everything". Her final chapter of this autobiographical work, *The Nature of Other*, is an astonishing survey of the relationship between humans and the Other or Others. She suggests one "possible biological analogy for the relationship between humans and the Other or Others would be symbiosis."

She also says "There are other possibilities than 'creatures' or 'beings' of any kind. Science has always wrestled with the idea of an immaterial will, or agency, at work in the universe, and for centuries it was thought to be expressed through the 'laws of nature'. God might be dead, but he rules on, or so it was thought, through his immutable laws. At the smallest, quantum, level there are no laws at all, only probabilities."

"Since we have long since outgrown the easy answer – God – along with theism of any kind, we have to look for our **who** within what actually exists... Sometimes, out of all this static and confusion, the Other assembles itself and takes form before our very eyes."

A pilgrim community

I quote her words simply to illustrate how complex and wonderful to many of us are the spiritual experiences of engagement with the intricacy and delicacy of matter, and the joy and transformation which is available through a spiritual journey. The traditional concept of God simply no longer seems to work for many of us, to convey the breadth and wonder of which we are profoundly aware, and which we find breathes through our individual and community life. Life was much simpler for George Fox and early Friends: but in our journey, we have moved beyond the place where he stood.

The modern Quaker concept of us all being on a spiritual journey, in which where we were five years ago is perhaps a good deal different from where we will be in five years time, is one that many of us find liberating and beautiful. We are a pilgrim community, on the move, discovering new places, reflecting on new experiences, understanding things differently.

Ben expresses the concerns of some Friends who do not want to be on the move, and feel very unhappy with this idea, rather like many of the children of Israel on

their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exodus 16). It would be good if we could all relax about the language that others with different perspectives use in ministry in our meetings, and that they will allow us to speak ‘from the heart’ in language that fits our experiences. We can be a multi-lingual society as we journey in pilgrimage. Going back to some ‘ideal’ Quaker way is not an option: but moving forward in faith, in trust, in hope, love and joy certainly is.

Christian qualities matter more than dogmas

One of the main difficulties we face is, as Ben is concerned about, that we do so little to teach Quakerism. As we do not have a church hierarchy to lay down what is or is not an acceptable part of the Quaker way – it depends upon us all doing our part in articulating it and coming to discernment about what is right – or appropriate - and what is not.

Quaker Life has encouraged us to engage in *Sharing our Journeys*. This has been so very fruitful in many meetings. We do not learn from one another enough. There is sadly, an intolerant tendency amongst some Friends to be abruptly critical where they disagree with something said. Such a response challenges the wisdom of *Advices and Queries* (12), which encourages us to “Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God’s word for you, it may be so for others.”

Do we not all endorse the statement in *Advices and Queries* 2 that “Christianity is not a notion but a way”? As G.M.Trevelyan wrote in his *English Social History* (Longmans. 1944) “The finer essence of George Fox’s queer teaching, common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples, and to the ‘quiet’ Friends of later times, was surely this – that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas. No Church or sect had ever made that its living rule before. To maintain the Christian quality in the world of business and of domestic life, and to maintain it without pretension or hypocrisy, was the great achievement of these extraordinary people. England may well be proud of having produced and perpetuated them. The Puritan pot had boiled over, with much heat and fury; when it had cooled and been poured away, this precious sediment was left at the bottom.”

A paradigm shift

Many of us are Quaker because we seek to live out those Christian qualities, which matter to us much more than Christian dogmas. Gretta Vosper, a Minister in the United Church of Canada, presents Christians with a paradigm shift which has three challenges: An intellectual challenge; a practical challenge; and a spiritual challenge. In her book *With or Without God – why the way we live is more important than what we believe* (Harper. 2008) she writes: “What the world needs in order to survive and thrive is the radical simplicity that lies at the core of Christianity and so many other faiths and systems of thought – an abiding trust in the way of love expressed in just and compassionate living.

“Out of the multitude of understandings of religion, spirituality and faith; out of the varying views of the origins, nature and purpose of life; out of the countless

individual experiences of what might be called divine; out of it all may be distilled a core that, very simply put, is love.

“This core message carries its own authority. It needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right. Love is quite demanding enough as a foundation, sufficiently complex and challenging without the requirement of additional beliefs, unbelievable to many.

“The church the future needs is one of people gathering to share and recommit themselves to loving relationships with themselves, their families, the wider community, and the planet. Such a church need not fear the discoveries of science, history, archeology, psychology or literature; it will only be enhanced by such discoveries. Such a church need not avoid the implications of critical thinking for its message; it will only become more effective.

“Such a church need not cling to and justify a particular source for its authority; it will draw on the wisdom of the ages and challenge divisive and destructive barriers. Such a church, grown out of values that transcend personal security, self-interest, and well-being, could play a role in the future that is not only viable but radically transformative and desperately needed.”

She says further: “The spiritual realm of which I speak is no less connected to who I am than is my emotional and psychological dimension. It is integral to my structure, my experience of life. I know of no proof of God beyond personal experience, and I cannot acknowledge that proof as substantial. What I need to understand is how I may continue to develop myself spiritually, open myself to learning, and stay committed to living with integrity.

“I am not, in any way, attempting to wrest from anyone his or her sense of a relationship with God or Jesus. If that moves people to live lives of justice and compassion, I heartily celebrate it. They live with God and honour life through their belief.”

Most, hopefully all, Friends seek to take heed to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, and seek to bring the whole of our lives under the ordering of the spirit of Jesus. We respect and value those Friends who take heed to these promptings inspired by their trust in God. I have long worked happily and closely with people of different denominations, and different faiths. Many Friends are encouraged by belonging to our Religious Society which has people with different views, but a shared general ethos. We can regularly take part in a spiritual discipline together, can enjoy the fellowship and support of each other, and work together to cherish our common testimonies, even though we hold those different views.

In 2012, some Friends gathered at Woodbrooke for a consultation on the future of our Society. They produced the *Whoosh! epistle*, which contains these words: “We discern a growing confidence within the Religious Society of Friends that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for.

“Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation. This could be a ‘transition

moment' for British Quakers, as we discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times."

"Our Meetings are facing many challenges from a changing world and the pressure of Quaker business. We need to give ourselves permission to think positively, so that we can recognize our gifts and potential, and be open to transformation."

The ethical challenge

I am very conscious that the environment in which we live today is one in which sadly a lack of moral direction, integrity, honesty, plain dealing, and other behaviours that have been central to the Quaker way, are endemic. Recent inquiries, court cases and revelations have shown such behaviour to be widespread among every profession. Listing a selection of them simply reminds us of some of the disclosures we have been faced with in recent years: politicians, police, bankers, journalists, entertainers, sports stars, doctors, nurses, business people, social care workers, and many more.

How do we challenge false gods and false standards? How do we teach and train people to have a vision of working for the good of the community as a whole, to show respect and good manners, to care for one another, and to work co-operatively? There are no simple answers to these questions immediately, but Quakers have over 360 years challenged the values of people around them by a commitment to honourable behaviour. That commitment has always been based on a shared spiritual discipline focused on our Meetings for Worship.

One reason which drew people to trade and bank with earlier Quakers was they could trust them. As the *Whoosh! epistle* also states: "We are convinced that the UK would be a better place with 600,000 Quakers in it."

We can bring our contribution to share with people of other faiths and traditions to work together for the well-being of society as we seek to live out our Quaker life and spiritual discipline. This is a considerable challenge that faces us today, to reflect in our own lives, and encourage others to show in theirs what Paul of Tarsus describes as the fruit of the Spirit "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5.22,23)

In our hands

"Our present and our future is in our hands" Ben writes. "How we want to be Quaker and the degree to which we communicate that to others is up to us." He wants us to locate ourselves as part of a narrative which began in 1647, to resist the secularization we find in wider society, and to feel again the experience of being in covenant with God.

Many Friends do indeed locate ourselves as part of a narrative which began in 1647, but also accept a great deal of the secularization we find in wider society as the natural environment with which we have to work. We see the Quaker community as one type of yeast in the dough – to use Jesus' analogy (Matthew 13.33). I practice a spirituality which draws upon the great Christian and Quaker traditions, but which is a rather different covenant to the one Ben has in mind. It has as its heart the key elements of the Christian good news, of love and service to 'my neighbour', in which

Christian qualities matter more than Christian doctrines, and it is nourished by the wisdom of Friends over more than 360 years, and by a practice of prayer which undergirds it.

So now in response to Ben's challenge to articulate what being Quaker means to me I venture to offer my personal response. It is different from Ben's, though I share his concern that we may all be open for transformation.

Why are you Quaker?

1. I am a Quaker because the whole approach to life and religious practice of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is one I find myself very much at home in. It enables me to explore ways of being, believing and belonging, without trying to insist that I believe something I find incredible.
2. I found the people at my local Quaker meeting to be warm, friendly and welcoming – gentle, not over-powering – accepting and non-judgemental. In our Meeting for Worship we listen, some open to the Spirit, others open to the spirit, in a deep stillness, in which my spiritual life can grow and develop. I treasure that. For me it is Meeting for Worth-ship (the origin of the word 'worship').
3. I like the simplicity and informality at Quaker meetings, and the focus on important matters like social justice, spiritual growth, respect and opportunities for everyone, for practical help, and a good deal of openness to accept differences. Our priorities include a concern for peace, for equal opportunity, for economic and social justice, for the environment. I am encouraged by my fellow Quakers to have a deep concern for the sustainability of our environment, and to use our resources responsibly. There is no hierarchy: we are all equally able to contribute to our corporate life.
4. I like the fact that Quakers accept that each of us is on a spiritual journey of discovery, open to new experiences and ideas, willing to explore. We have a respect for people with different cultures, traditions and beliefs from ours, while remaining true to our Quaker ways. This is both supportive and freeing. I like that.
5. I have treasured *Advices and Queries* for more than 50 years – long before I became a Quaker. It encourages us to "Live adventurously", and to let our lives speak as we seek to be true to our values, and as we practice our spiritual life.
6. The Quaker Business method is a careful, patient, and truly consultative method of reaching decisions. Discernment is reached through a spiritual process, of listening to each other, and listening to whatever may be from a collective wisdom or 'the beyond', as we seek to unite in decisions, without taking a vote. In this process we truly listen to each other, very conscious that the wisdom we need may come from the voice of just one Friend.

7. I like the way we seek to help our young Friends. We draw together isolated individuals, or groups of young people between the ages of 18-30ish to some residential weekends each year, for social and spiritual gatherings, which include opportunities for overseas journeys, and for service within the British Isles and abroad.
8. The life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is the religious tradition I have known since I was a boy, and the one I seek to follow. I do so even though my beliefs are different from his, and different from the doctrines the churches declare are necessary to be regarded as genuinely Christian. Nevertheless I am willing to respond to his call “Follow me”. I can explore this tradition within the Religious Society of Friends, with encouragement from others even though they have different experiences and views from me.

What do you as a Quaker believe?

Quakers are different from other religious communities in the Christian tradition, in that instead of having a common set of doctrines (orthodoxy) we have a common practice (orthopraxy). We are an experience-based religion, not a belief-based one. I can speak for myself in telling what it is I have experienced, what I believe and seek to practice, within this tradition, not what others believe or experience, although I think my beliefs remain close to those shared by very many Quakers in Britain.

My beliefs are not identical to those of the earliest Friends because there has been an explosion of new knowledge and understanding during the 360 years of Quaker life, and modern education, living conditions, communications, and social conditions generally in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society place us in a different milieu from those of the earliest Friends. They related to the cultural environment in which they lived, as we do in our very different environment. I take seriously this new knowledge, and place my religious practice and understanding in the light of it.

I believe Jesus of Nazareth was an outstanding prophet and teacher whose original teaching has contributed to the values we call civilized over 2000 years. He inspires and challenges me to live a life of love and integrity, drawing on his imaginative poetry and parables, declarations and responses to questions posed to him, and to the conflicts he faced. I also draw on the wisdom and experiences of others who draw their inspiration from him. Our Society draws its inspiration from him.

I do not share the doctrinal propositions developed in the church. The doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement are examples of what I believe to be speculations, much shaped by Greek philosophy in the cultural conditions of the times in which they were defined.

I believe that the practice of a spiritual discipline in life is what strengthens and upholds my endeavors towards personal wholeness, mutually enriching relationships, community service, and responsible citizenship. Such spiritual discipline is nurtured at its best in communal activities such as our Meetings for Worship, shared fellowship and learning, recreation and creativity. We learn from each other, and we support one another. What is important is our shared spiritual

life. We seek to discern right or best ways of going forward through a corporate spiritual discipline which includes attentive listening to one another in our business meetings. Discernment emerges from this shared discipline.

Important sources of nourishment in this spiritual life are the advices of women and men who have explored their spiritual practice in great depth. Other important sources are the writings of the great religions of the world, particularly those of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. These are writings by people deeply committed to their religious traditions. Whereas some people revere them as the revealed word of God, I regard them as inspired and valuable, but inevitably flawed by the limitations of their writers, editors and translators.

I cherish the shared wisdom in our book of discipline *Quaker Faith and Practice. Advices and Queries* has been a spiritual guide for me for more than 50 years. I am grateful for the postscript to ‘the brethren in the north’ issued by a meeting of elders at Balby in 1656 that ‘these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.’

The focus of much religious belief, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or other faith traditions, is the concept of a divine being, a God or gods. Such concepts arise from hopes, fears, projections and experiences, of humans down the ages. Many such deities have long faded from the scene: but the God of the monotheists still captures the imagination and loyalty of the vast majority of the world’s population.

I respect those for whom such concepts are fundamental to their view of life, but I do not share them. I did in the past, but no longer. I am conscious there is much we do not know, and many mysteries remain. I am content to live with mystery, and remain open to fresh enlightenment in the future, as I walk in the Quaker way.

What difference to your life does being Quaker make?

I belong to a committed fellowship which is a form of an extended family. In this family I am challenged and encouraged, simply by belonging and taking part in our regular meetings, to regularly review my priorities and behaviour.

In Meeting for Worship, I seek to enter in the deep stillness from which spiritual nourishment is renewed. I am aware, awake, and listening. At one time I used to listen to the ‘beyond’, and then began to listen to the ‘inner voice’, as well as to whatever any of the other people in the meeting feel led to share with us. I find the emptying of my mind of clutter and busyness is a great well of renewal.

Sometimes, in such meetings, and at other times when I am alone, whether sitting, walking, cycling, or traveling, I make a practice of considering the wonder and awe of much of the world around me, and of people and their relationships, of the incredible intricacy of life, whether animal or plant. I find that instead of my former practice of offering worship to the deity, I reflect in awe at the wonder of all that is.

At other times I make a point of considering all the things for which I am thankful. These include aspects of life such as relationships, standard of living, comforts, cultural and social events, the opportunities for practical voluntary service. I value my home and garden, and the everyday things such as my spectacles (without which my life would be very much restricted). I don't exactly count my blessings, but I do take note of many things I would otherwise take for granted.

These spiritual activities, of awe and gratitude, are adapted from my previous spiritual practice when I focused prayer on God. I find myself liberated and renewed to practice these things now without reference to God.

Similarly I take time to review aspects of my life – self-examination. As Socrates is reputed to have said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. Whereas my earlier training was focused on the discipline of preparing for confession to a priest – which I hated doing – I prefer now to review behaviour, thoughts, and intentions both positive as well as those I criticize myself for, and I consider carefully any criticisms and compliments from others. This I find much more constructive and healthy.

Whereas I used to pray for individuals, causes, and issues, asking for God's blessing, guidance, practical help, or wellbeing – I no longer do that. I do consider all those sorts of concerns, and reflect on what action, if any, I can take. It may be to lobby and protest, it may be to get involved in some cause or action, it may be to write or phone, or to give money, or to raise awareness. I will also hold people and concerns 'in the Light' – in which I prefer a visual image in my mind rather than words. All these seem to me much more constructive approaches to the issues that concern me, rather than asking for divine help, which I no longer have any expectation of receiving.

This spiritual structure, based on the acronym ACTS which used to be helpful in the past, I have adapted. (They used to stand for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) Now the initials for me stand for Awe, Concerns, Thanks, and Self-examination. This together with the discipline of being open and listening, is part of the difference that being Quaker means to me.

This spiritual practice nourishes every aspect of my life in my family and among friends, and in service to the community in a number of voluntary activities, including service with my Area and Local Quaker Meetings, and further afield.

Quaker discipline and membership

An issue which Ben is much concerned about is modern Quaker discipline and membership. Some of the aspects of the Quaker way in years gone by that appeal to him, like the power of Elders to discipline members, led amongst other things to Friends being ejected from the Society for marrying a non-Quaker. The 19th century change from such practices seem to me very positive. I think few Friends would wish these days to have Elders throwing their weight about in that way. There is certainly a role for Elders to challenge, encourage, guide, and invite Friends to make changes

in their lives, but we have learnt a more sensitive, collaborative and consultative approach than some earlier Friends applied.

At Yearly Gathering at Bath in August, when the issue of Membership was considered I realised that a considerable number of people who attend Quaker meetings have not become members, because they don't feel it appropriate to "join the club" even though they are committed to the Quaker way. Some younger people in particular do not see what difference becoming a member would make.

As the common ground amongst us is our shared commitment to the Quaker way, as expressed in *Advices and Queries*, and in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, I wonder if we could find a way that is acceptable for all Friends, members and attenders alike, to share in some regular common act of commitment to our Quaker way?

Ben refers encouragingly to the practice of the Iona Community who hold an annual renewal of commitment. I know Methodists have an annual Covenant Service which means a great deal to many of them.

I would like us Quakers to consider whether we feel it right to consider a practice by which during a period of Meeting for Worship, we each make our commitment to the Quaker way. This could be done in a few simple words that express a desire to be challenged and inspired to express in our lives the wisdom of our community as expressed in our *Advices and Queries*.

This could possibly become the standard by which we are recognised as Quakers – and move beyond the current process of membership. This could be an event, either each year, or every three years (as we work with trienniums) for which we prepare with discussions about the content of *Advices and Queries*, or part of *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

For those new to Quakers, the 'membership visit' would still be a pastoral visit, testing whether the potential Quaker has a clear understanding and acceptance of what is involved in such a commitment.

All those who make such a commitment can then be considered Quakers, and our names recorded in the minutes of our Local and Area meetings. This would mean our membership was a living reality, regularly renewed, and would be meaningful to all of us who engaged in such an act of commitment to the Quaker way, and the Religious Society of Friends would acknowledge that we have made or renewed such a commitment.

The distinction between attenders and members would no longer apply. If need be, we could record separately those who are engaged with the Society of Friends but who feel unable at this present time, to make such a commitment. The test is – would such a regular event be as meaningful to us as members of the Iona Community and members of the Methodist Church find their covenant renewal is? I hope so.

It could also be an opportunity for each of us to review our service to the Quaker community, including how much we feel it right to give financially. The practice of inviting people to make a specific commitment of their service and financial giving is one which has strengthened the spiritual life of many churches. More than 20 years ago I wrote a book *Yours, Lord – a handbook of Christian Stewardship* (Mowbray, 1992) for the Church of England which covered a range of aspects of commitment to a shared vision. I believe this approach could be very helpful within Britain Yearly Meeting.

Sharing our visions

Sharing our visions of the way forward for Friends in Britain is a very positive activity to engage in. Ben has challenged us all to engage with being Quaker. The details of his conservative view will come as something of a surprise to many. He seeks to make clear the boundaries of membership of our Society, and be clear who is and who is not Quaker. This attachment to exclusiveness is one that was changed by discernment of London Yearly Meeting in the 19th century.

Whether we develop as an inclusive or an exclusive Society will no doubt be very much part of the discernment about Membership which Yearly Meeting has asked Meeting for Sufferings and Quaker Life to consider. Many Friends, young and old, will no doubt contribute to our Society's discernment on these matters at Yearly Meeting in 2015. We also have the opportunity to do so in considering the book of the 2014 Swarthmore Lecture.

This essay will, I hope, contribute to this discernment, as Friends consider ways forward for our Society.

What has been so attractive to so many of us, and clearly is so in the minds of those who discerned the *Whoosh! epistle* in 2012, is that, with the growing numbers of people who have rejected all claims to absolute truth, we have found a path for personal and social transformation in the Religious Society of Friends and we are ready to “discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times”.

On with our task!

Ben's Questions

From pages 101-109 of the book of the 2014 Swarthmore Lecture we are invited to engage with the following questions:

- Why do I come to meeting for worship?
- What do I celebrate about Quakerism?
- Where do I want the meeting to be in 10 years time?
- What's the next step I need to take?

We are invited to share our spiritual experiences in worship-sharing mode and respond to the questions:

- What is your experience of conviction and transformation?
- What have been the key moments in your spiritual journey?

We are then invited to respond to:

- What nourishes the life of our meeting?
- What does love require of me?
- What does love require of us?
- What can we give to our meeting?
- What resources do we have as a meeting?

The final stage is to consider:

- What do we need for meeting to work?
- What must we do? – what is essential, optional, can be laid down, done differently, or we want more of?
- Should we look at our meeting's list of nominations/structures and compare them with the list of responses to the previous question.
