

Children, Religious Education & the Small Meeting

Every meeting, whether large or small, wants to create a loving space that is welcoming to all and provides an opportunity for people of all ages to grow spiritually. Small meetings sometimes face a special challenge in providing First Day School for their children. Teachers cite the disappointment they experience when, having prepared an exciting lesson, they arrive at meeting to find one child present with whom to share the material. Children without the companionship of other children are similarly disappointed. Ideally we would love to see all our families faithfully bring their children to meeting every week, and we would certainly like each meeting to have enough children for a successful First Day School. When this situation cannot be created, however, meetings have found various ways to move outside the norm of weekly classes to provide Quaker education for their children.

Monthly Multi-Age Sleep-Over

A tiny New England Meeting responded to the challenges of size by organizing a monthly sleepover for Quaker children and some of their friends. The gathering varied in size from month to month, averaging eight participants. Starting out with a group of kindergarteners through fourth graders, the sleepovers continued until the young people were in junior high and high school.

A regular but flexible routine helped the program run smoothly. Late Saturday afternoon the children arrived at the home of a meeting parent, where they prepared dinner together, ate, and cleaned up. After dinner the host-parent facilitated half an hour of meditation and relaxation and an hour-long educational program, followed by worship sharing. After Sunday breakfast everyone went hiking together. They then packed up the car and the Quaker children joined their parents at meeting, where they had supervised play.

The host-parent established yearlong themes, such as spiritual practice, Quaker testimonies, or world religions, which lent coherence to the program. One year other members of the meeting contributed by sharing aspects of their spiritual journeys or by describing ways in which they had lived out their faith. For the children the most important aspects of the monthly gatherings were “being part of a loving, supportive community,” and “having a safe place to talk about ideas and concerns.” The host parent appreciated being able to be a First-Day School teacher without having to miss meeting. She came to “look forward to these gatherings as a time of rejuvenation and reconnection with the vital energy and tremendous compassion of children and teenagers.”

Heart's Desire

Faced with the challenge of small numbers and teacher burnout, religious educators and parents from a meeting in a university town came together to consider what an effective religious education program would require from the meeting as a whole and to draft a statement of their heart's desire for the children.

1. For our young children to become active participants in the life of our small meeting.
2. For our children to develop a quiet center in this world of short attention spans and fact-paced media; to live Quaker principles daily; have a sense of belonging to a wider Quaker fellowship; and develop compassion for others. In *Friends and their Children* Harold Loukes notes that Friends want their children "to develop inner resources and a strong life philosophy so that if and when their outer world goes to pieces around them, they can still live within themselves."
3. For our children and for newcomers to feel a sense of friendly welcome, warmth, and peace.

The meeting referred frequently to these goals as it strove to find ways to work within limitations of number and space. In order to be able to have enough children for each First Day School session, Friends tried offering a planned lesson only every other week. This experiment worked well. Parents made an effort to have their children attend on the specified Sundays with the result that a critical mass of children was usually present. On the second and fourth Sundays, childcare was provided; alternatively some parents included their children in meeting for worship.

For continuity, teachers designed lessons around monthly themes. They also established routines so that children would know what to expect when they arrived every other week. These included: candle time to reflect on a query appropriate to the age group; a story that fit the lesson; and hands-on activities to reinforce the lesson. To cope with limited space, teachers organized listening walks and other outdoor activities during pleasant weather.

Inter-generational activities on and off the site have also been part of the meeting's faithfulness to its heart's desire. These included: family worship; berry picking and preparing shortcake for a pot luck; an Easter egg hunt at a member's home; carol singing at a nursing home; a visit to an orchard; and a meeting Christmas party in rented space.

Joint Weekly Sunday School

Friends in a small urban meeting have their children attend Sunday School with the children of the Unitarian Church where the meeting worships. Although Unitarians teach a majority of the classes, Quakers teachers take responsibility for a number of lessons. With the teaching load thus limited, the small meeting benefits from having its teachers participate in worship more often while its children receive weekly religious education.

Even in this fairly large, weekly Sunday School, teachers face the problem of erratic attendance. They have responded to the challenge of providing continuity by choosing a

theme for each month and having each weekly teacher present the theme using a different media, including music, painting, drama, or journalism, depending on the gifts of the teachers and the nature of the month's theme.

Children and Worship

Having the children participate in the full hour of meeting for worship is an option for meetings, whether large or small, and whether or not they offer weekly religious education at another time. A Friend whose children had this rich experience encourages meetings to consider it:

First, we are keeping [the children] from ever really experiencing the full and wonderful weight of the gathered meeting when they leave after 15 to 20 minutes or come back in for the last 10 minutes. How are they going to learn what worship is? Second, kids are able to sit for an hour quietly. I know this from personal experience. My children and all those of my meeting were able to do that, and we didn't have a table of activities. The idea was they were to join us in worship and be with us in community. They learned very young how to settle in. Many times as toddlers and youngsters they brought in books . . . and of course we came with Cheerios for the very young, but often they would begin by reading and then sit quietly. . . . We found that the children's very presence was a wonderful ministry; on rare occasions they even shared vocal ministry. [At] home they would share with us from time to time what they thought about in meeting, and it was good for me to learn from them too. If we don't expect that our kids can benefit from an hour of worship then it's really true they won't.

In other words, parental and community expectations can make meeting for worship an integral part of a child's life. When asked whether she had minded attending a whole hour of meeting for worship as a child, the 27-year-old daughter of this writer responded that sometimes she was bored, but it is where she learned she was a part of the community, where she learned to center, where she learned she was loved.

Traveling for Critical Mass

A group of families from small, isolated mid-western meetings gathers once a month in a centrally located meeting house. With a critical mass of children present, the meeting is able to provide one to three multi-age First Day School classes. A pot luck lunch and other Quaker activities are also part of the gathering. While the host meeting appreciates being able to offer monthly First Day School, it also welcomes the presence of more adults in worship. In order to participate, families from other meetings drive up to two hours each way. The parents' willingness to devote almost a full day to meeting demonstrates to the children how very much their parents value them and also Quakerism.

Other Opportunities

Meeting large numbers of Quakers the same age can be a transforming experience for children from small and isolated meetings. The youth programs at yearly meeting sessions and the annual Gathering organized by Friends General Conference are wonderful resources. Some yearly meetings offer retreats or other activities for children and teens between annual sessions, and some quarterly and regional meetings organize programs as well. Parents might also want to investigate opportunities provided by Quaker camps.



While activities organized by other Quaker groups can certainly contribute to a child's religious education, it is also vitally important for a meeting to interact with its children. A Quaker youth worker suggests that meetings who feel unable to initiate a First Day School program consider offering just three events a year that involve children, that are memorable, and that carry a message. The point is that an inability to provide weekly First Day School can be a starting place for creative thinking. Nurturing the spiritual life of our children provides rewards and blessings that will extend to the entire meeting community.

Resources

www.fgcquaker.org/religious-ed/, the web page of the Religious Education Committee of Friends General Conference (FGC)

Lighting Candles in the Dark, by the Religious Education Committee of FGC

Lighting Candles In The Dark Study Guide: Questions And Activities For Teachers And Parents, Children 2nd Grade–High School, by Donna Bisset, Robin Wells & Marlou Carlson

Lives That Speak: Stories of Twentieth Century Quakers for Young People, by the Religious Education Committee of FGC

Opening Doors to Quaker Religious Education, by Mary Snyder

Quaker Values: A First Day School Curriculum for Children Ages 9–11, by Marsha Holliday

QuakerBooks of FGC Catalogue: Picture books in the QuakerBooks catalogue are great for making a quick lesson for a small class. A “Lesson in a Bag” might include a book, some open-ended questions designed to stir contemplation, and art materials for creative response to the story. The *QuakerBooks of FGC Catalogue* is on line at www.QuakerBooks.org. To order a paper copy phone 1-800-966-4556.



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