

Exploring Quakerism with Newcomers *

The future of our meetings, indeed the future of Quakerism, may be largely dependent upon our perceptions about and the manner in which we nurture our children and our newcomers. As a member of the FGC Religious Education Committee, I have been blessed over the past several years to visit numerous meetings and hear of their enthusiasm and energy for children's programs. Less clear to me is our energy for nurturing those who come to us as adult seekers.

For many years I have worked with the education and support of new attenders at my meeting in Lake Forest, Illinois. My understanding of their needs and of what works and what doesn't is ever-evolving and continues to mature as I learn from each group of seekers. Following are several things I have learned thus far.

Integrating new people into the fabric of our meetings involves more than greeting them warmly on Sunday morning or mailing them copies of our newsletters. We need to make a commitment to their nurture, spiritual development and integration into our community.

At a Gathering afternoon networking session a Friend asked how I get new attenders to commit to continued class attendance. It is my belief that it is not the newcomers' commitment but mine that makes the difference. The seekers have already demonstrated interest by coming to our meeting. How do we demonstrate our commitment to them – to our future?

One way is to have a class that is facilitated (not taught) by a leader or team who demonstrate(s) Quakerism while exploring its nuances with the seekers. This program needs to continue throughout the school year (hence the commitment).

I have learned that it is important to meet at the convenience of all who plan to attend. My process for facilitating this begins at the rise of an early autumn meeting with the announcement that a class for F/friends who are curious about Quakerism and interested in studying our values and beliefs will begin soon. Anyone interested in attending this newcomers' class is invited to meet with me in a specified corner of the meeting room for 5 minutes to explore scheduling. We then set up a class day & time that works for everyone concerned, including me. This concept is in stark contrast to choosing a time, announcing the class, and hoping people show up. Meeting first to determine the best time for the initial class demonstrates our commitment to be inclusive and meet the needs of the attenders. At each class, we set up or affirm the dates and times of two more classes – accommodating everyone's schedule.

The class usually follows a normal school year. We try to keep the sessions open and flexible, announcing the week before one is to be held what our topic will be and that the class is open for additional attenders. Sometimes they are held monthly sometimes weekly or bi-weekly; flexibility is more important than maintaining a rigid schedule.

In our meeting, we use a manuscript written by Marsha Holliday called *Exploring*

Quakerism: A Study Guide, which was produced through the FGC Religious Education Committee and is available at Quaker Books of Friends General Conference.

One of the many things I like about the material we use is that it begins with the group's exploration of our experiences of God. We start by introducing ourselves and talking about our spiritual backgrounds and what led us to Quakers and to this meeting. I participate in this sharing. Usually, we discover that the class is a reflection of our community's diverse spiritual backgrounds, which I point out, adding any groups (such as "no formal religious upbringing") that may not have been mentioned during the introductions. We discuss chapter one and after that, we Worship Share about our individual experiences of God. This is important because the experience of God is foundational to Quakerism and it gives us an opportunity to learn about worship sharing by experience rather than discussion.

Because of the highly personal and confidential nature of these classes, I do not recommend having them at a time or in a place where other members of the meeting might casually walk in during the sharing.

I believe we need to spend more time assisting new attenders in their experiences of Quakerism and less time teaching concepts and history. For me, the latter is like inviting people to dinner and spending our time selecting a china pattern while forgetting to cook the meal.

To that end, as we progress through our material, we spend time on open-ended questions. We explore what people like and what they do best. I listen to their concerns and help them unpack their baggage from negative faith-based experiences. Our task is to assist new attenders in integrating seamlessly into our meeting tapestry or, occasionally, to discern that Quakerism is not really their path. We cover the nuances of Quakerism (speak only once in meeting for worship) as well as the local meeting's cultural etiquette and traditions (when do the children join us for worship) and how to navigate the physical spiritual home. (My class members learn the rules of the kitchen). We explore their gifts and our last class I bring in members of the meeting's committees to discuss the work of the meeting.

Let's spend our time cooking a luscious feast of welcoming for those who are curious about who we are. Let's lead them home to Quakerism by focusing on them and their needs while drawing the map to guide them through Quaker culture and tradition. This is also the map that leads to our future. Let's travel it together in peace and love.

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