



Some Thoughts on Identifying and Welcoming Newcomers to a Quaker Meeting

Identifying Newcomers

Friends who want their meeting to grow recognize the critical importance of making visitors feel welcome. First, of course, it is necessary to know who is a newcomer. While those in small meetings will be immediately aware when a first-time attendee is present, Friends in medium and large meetings often need to take active steps to identify newcomers.

Some meetings meet this need by asking first-time attendees to rise and identify themselves during the announcements after worship. Although this practice does succeed in making newcomers known to everyone in the room, many new attendees feel uncomfortable being singled out in that way. When a clerk or greeter mistakenly assumes that someone he or she does not recognize is a first-time attendee, as sometimes happens, this discomfort is compounded.

The ways in which different meetings identify newcomers has been the subject of discussion in advancement committee meetings and the Quaker Outreach Forum, an Internet mail group for Friends interested in advancement and outreach. A New Jersey Friend commented:

How are visitors greeted? Pay close attention next time someone visits. Are they singled out to introduce themselves, but regular members and attenders don't introduce themselves? Would you feel comfortable in this circumstance? There are many other questions we can ask our-selves, the basis of which are: 'Are you doing to others as you would have them do to you under the same circumstances?'

Although Friends certainly do not wish to make visitors feel uncomfortable, unfortunately discomfort

has at times been the by-product of asking newcomers to be the only ones to identify themselves.

Various meetings have found other ways to identify and meet the needs of newcomers. In one, the greeter learns names at the door and introduces new attendees at the appropriate time. In a small meeting where it is easy to know who is new, the people immediately to the left and right of a newcomer take the responsibility for introductions. Friends in another meeting place name stickers and pens at the end of each bench. Newcomers create a name tag that will be noticed during the social hour because regular members and attendees have reusable, printed tags.

A number of meetings ask everyone present to introduce themselves. In an Iowa meeting with anywhere from 15 to 30 people in attendance, all join hands to form a circle after worship. Everyone is encouraged to express joys and concerns of a personal nature as introductions proceed around the circle.

On a recent Sunday in a Virginia meeting with about 50 people present, the clerk stood up after the handshake, gave a brief announcement and stated: "After worship it is our custom to ask everyone to rise and introduce themselves as we proceed around the room. Announcements are made at the same time." Those present heard everyone's name; they found out that one newcomer had just moved into the neighborhood; they learned where other visitors were from; they listened to announcements from four Friends; and they heard personal notes of celebration from two Friends. This joyful round of community building took less than 15 minutes.

The children in that Virginia meeting, who attend the last few minutes of worship, relish being part of the introductions. In a Boston meeting where children

attend the beginning of the worship hour, they eagerly return with their teachers 10 minutes into the announcement period to introduce themselves to their community.

The practice of having everyone introduce themselves also has other benefits. Friends who do not remember names easily have another opportunity to hear them. Friends who cannot figure out which adults belong to which children have a good chance of solving their problem. Friends whose name is unusual or difficult to say get to have everyone hear the correct pronunciation. Most important, visitors are identified and made part of the community at their very first meeting instead of being singled out in a way that suggests they do not belong.

What if the meeting is just too big to have everyone participate in introductions? One large meeting asks members of Ministry and Counsel to introduce themselves. Newcomers, who have just a few names and faces to remember, are then encouraged to approach them during the social hour with any questions they may have. The clerk of another meeting welcomes newcomers, announces that members of Ministry and Counsel will be holding red mugs during the social hour, and encourages newcomers to approach them with questions. In these ways newcomers needs are recognized and responded to.

Welcoming Newcomers

Although we all like to think that Quakers are a welcoming bunch of people, sadly those in advancement hear over and over from Friends and inquirers who visited a new meeting with great anticipation only to find themselves staring at a coffee cup during the social hour. One such report appeared on the Quaker Outreach Forum:

My wife and I recently attended a meeting a good distance from home. I recognized three people as we arrived at the start of meeting. At the rise of meeting, as is their custom, a large circle is formed and we each gave our names. Then, 'as is customary' the circle broke up and people attended to their business. I stood alone in the center of the room for about 25 minutes.

Then we left. No one had welcomed us. Is there any doubt why this is a small, struggling meeting?

Another Friend recalled how important an initial welcome felt when he was a first-time attendee.

If the local meeting is not a welcoming place with something to offer, all the advertising in the world won't help. . . . And what is being offered must be from that meeting. My quarter and yearly meeting might be wonderful organizations filled with great people, but if I did not feel truly welcome when I first went to my meeting, I would not have gone back.

Many people come to a Quaker meeting for the first time not only seeking a place to worship, but also hoping to make friends and become part of a community. If they do not feel welcome, they will not return.

In some meetings a welcoming atmosphere develops spontaneously. Although no organized procedure exists for tending to newcomers, each person in the meeting takes responsibility for seeing that new attendees receive thoughtful attention both before and after worship as well as on subsequent visits. This laissez-faire approach works for those particular meetings.

Elsewhere, creating procedures and assigning specific tasks is essential. An Ontario Friend describes how his meeting, which once ignored newcomers, turned completely around.

My meeting has about 40 active worshipers, with 20 to 30 on a given Sunday. I recall the days when we were 'pre-occupied' with our own news and even meeting business and left visitors talking to their coffee cup. . . . A few years ago our Ministry and Counsel took notice of the need to be welcoming to visitors as though it was our home. So the experience is quite different now.

Ministry and Counsel established a few formal steps for greeting visitors: they make sure that someone is willing to arrive early and greet newcomers; and the clerk gives visitors the opportunity to ask questions about worship ahead of time and makes the pamphlet "First time in Quaker Meeting" available. Interestingly, once Ministry and Counsel raised the issue, developed these procedures, and followed through, the meeting culture itself changed. Now Friends spontaneously approach new attendees during the social hour.

In one New York State meeting, a member who attends regularly greets every newcomer. Then she takes these several steps:

- While engaging a visitor in conversation during the social hour, she asks whether they have any questions about Quakers, and tries to learn about their interests.
- If she happens to know someone in the meeting with similar interests, she introduces them.
- When possible, she invites newcomers to an upcoming meeting event.
- She hands each visitor a packet of Quaker materials put together beforehand.
- She makes certain that each visitor signs the guest book.
- A week later she sends every visitor a personal letter in which she thanks them for coming to the meeting, and invites them to phone her if they have any questions.
- When newcomers return, she makes it a point to remember their names, to greet them, to ask how they are doing, and to say she is glad they came back. She again makes an effort to introduce them to other people during the social hour.

Although some may feel that it is not necessary to shower so much attention on newcomers, this meeting is growing rapidly, faster than any other in its yearly meeting. One reason these procedures work is that the Friend who takes newcomers under her wing is warm, outgoing, and tremendously enthusiastic both about her task and about Quakers.

Of course, there are many ways to make newcomers feel at home and to reinvigorate a meeting that has ceased to be welcoming. Surely Friends never intend to make visitors feel unwelcome, but we can become so wrapped up in greeting each other and taking care of Quaker business, that we forget simple hospitality. If Friends could respond to new attenders in the same warm, generous spirit with which they care for guests in their own home, all reports of lonely visitors staring into coffee cups would quickly come to an end.