

# Making Quakerism Available, Teachable & Experiential.

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*Talk for Friends' General Conference's consultation on spiritual deepening at Pendle Hill.*

*Simon Best*

What I'm going to say comes from my experience as a Friend from Britain Yearly Meeting. There will be lots of similarities and of course some differences but I hope some relevance in what I say for your context because we're talking, at heart, about the same faith, the same practice and the same Spirit.

I feel really blessed to be here with you and to have been invited to speak to you. I wanted to start by saying that I'm envious of American Quakers. I'm envious for two main reasons.

Firstly because the variety of Quakers – not because it means that you can pop down the road to a different meeting because other than in certain cities I imagine you have to travel hundreds of miles to find a different branch of Quakerism but it gives you the opportunity to dialogue with those other traditions and to learn from each other. Even if it is challenging I think that seeing that there are other groups calling themselves Quaker, especially when they recognise, appreciate and celebrate the Quaker way in a different way to us means that there is real examination of what it means for us, it brings a potential for richness and for deepening. In Britain we rarely dialogue with anyone; past or present, in our own meetings or beyond.

The second reason I'm envious of American Friends is the way in which you recognise, and nurture, people's spirit given gifts and ministry. This isn't necessarily about having pastors or paid ministers but I know that many Monthly Meetings and Yearly Meetings still recognise and record and release people for ministry. The practice of recording ministers was stopped in Britain in 1924. A decision taken to ensure equality and that we didn't develop what might be seen as spiritual hierarchy, but it has done us no favours because we no longer release people to fulfil their ministry and we don't recognise their gifts. The Religious Society of Friends is a priesthood of all believers; each of us has a ministry. We need to recognise and nurture these ministries not because any one is 'better' than another but because, in our community we need to be aware of each other's gifts so they can be utilised in the service of the meeting.

In Britain we are diffident at accepting and owning our gifts about saying that we're good enough to be anything or do anything. Over the last 100 years Quakers in Britain have got less Quaker and more British. You will know the stereotypical middle class Briton: reserved, reticent and quiet. I don't think that's actually the Quaker way – it's not how George Fox was, it's not

how Elizabeth Fry was, it's not how George Cadbury was. It's not how we should be. We should be assertive and up-front about being Quaker – about what we have experienced in worship, about what we've found in our communities and about the life it leads us to.

## **What are the challenges?**

I want to tell a story that I think encapsulates the challenges we face as Quakers and give some ideas about how we might address them.

Many of you will have seen the slogan that has been used by meetings in both Britain and the US



When I first saw the posters I thought it was brilliant. A week later I was having a Meeting for Worship with four other Friends, all of us aged about 30, in a basement flat in Bristol and realised that it wasn't brilliant and it wasn't even true. Before and since I have become increasingly aware that the Religious Society of Friends is not simple, it is not radical, and it is certainly not contemporary.

We are not simple. We have complex organisations, not just at the centre but at all levels. Meetings are struggling with bureaucracy and as a result placing large demands on the personal time, commitment and energy of members, and drawing this away from growing our meetings spiritually.

We are not contemporary, while I believe strongly that Quakers have a message for today the way it is presented does not fit with the society in which we live.

We are not radical, in a time of global crisis we are not overtly counter cultural in our social action and our engagement in the world.

I acknowledge that, of course, there are exceptions but I'm referring to the overall trend of liberal Quakerism. So what can we do to address this and to make the Quaker way highly available, teachable and experiential?

### **Firstly – availability:**

Today we face a challenge of how we can communicate the Quaker message of transformation in today's digital age without reducing it to soundbites or acronyms. Friends have always had a problem in that human language cannot adequately express our spiritual experience but we've always tried to. How can we do this now?

Firstly – and importantly we must use all the words we have at our disposal and not reduce the complexity of Quaker testimony to four or five words on a badge or a bumper sticker. Yes 'SPICES' as American Friends refer to it, or 'STEPS' which is used in Britain is a useful hook but by expressing testimony as a list – it becomes just that, a list of values we try to tick off rather than an expression of our encounter with the divine.

Secondly we can use modern methods of communication - some Friends complain about 'Quaker branding' and using marketing terms in Quaker contexts because it is not communicating in a counter-cultural way but using modern methods is not the same as diluting our message. The early Friends used the methods of their time – publishing tracts and preaching in big public meetings – to express and communicate their faith.

The public preaching and the printing presses of seventeenth century England are today's blogs and podcasts and twitter. We can use social media to communicate our counter cultural message (if we are sure we have one). In fact it is the essence of being in the world but not of it – using ways the world will understand to express something very other worldly. If people can't access the message we have for the world then they won't hear it. I don't doubt that if George Fox had been around now he'd have had a twitter account. He might not have liked it very much, but he'd have had one!

Does every Quaker meeting have a twitter and a facebook account?

Twitter is an incredibly powerful and effective method of communicating – last year Quakers in Britain used this poster for its national outreach week. I'm sitting in the back row.



One day someone, not a Quaker, took a photograph of it and tweeted it – with a statement about how it wouldn't attract them to meeting. I don't know this person, I've never met them and I don't follow them on twitter but within 45 minutes of them tweeting this pic in London it'd had reached my timeline in Birmingham and I was able to reply, say I was the guy in the poster and engage him and three other people in a conversation about Quakers and what we were really like.

How many people here own a smartphone? How many of those under 40 own one?

In the US population overall 70% of US teens 13-17, 79% of those aged 18-24 and 81% of adults aged 25-34 have smartphones and 69% of those aged 35-44 own one, and for those of you concerned that this ownership is pre-dominantly amongst white people with a middle to upper income – ownership is actually higher amongst coloured and hispanic people and there's no major difference between the different income brackets<sup>2</sup>. In the United Kingdom 81% of those aged 12-17, 89% of those aged 18 to 24 and 81% of 25 to 34 own a smartphone<sup>3</sup>

To what extent do we make use of this?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2013/ring-the-bells-more-smartphones-in-students-hands-ahead-of-back.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/06/05/smartphone-ownership-2013/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.deloitte.com/view/en\\_GB/uk/industries/consumer-business/consumer-review/index.htm](http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_GB/uk/industries/consumer-business/consumer-review/index.htm)  
<http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Nearly-Half-of-UK-Consumers-Will-Use-Smartphones-This-Year/1009956>

There is an app which is famous (or perhaps infamous) amongst the gay community, it's called Grindr. It uses geolocation to enable gay men to connect with other gay men nearby them. It shows who is close by and enables you to see those who are online, you can set preferences – age, height, weight, what you're looking for and tribes (effectively interest groups), you can add favourites, you can chat to other people.

Rather than buying lots of lawn signs or printing lots of leaflets and books how about we invest in an app that does something similar for Quakers – something that when you were visiting a new town you could find Quakers nearby and connect with them – for worship, for study, for witness. I might find myself on a Tuesday evening in Cincinnati turn on the app, find a nearby Quaker or three and suggest we meet together for worship, or I might find myself in Washington DC for a week and want to find out if there is a peace witness I can join. I am part of a meeting in Birmingham – we might, for example run a monthly bible study group which we're happy to open to any Friends. I might be messaged by someone visiting the city from Philadelphia and invite them to join us one week. Use wouldn't be limited to Quakers – it could be an outreach tool as well enabling people to find out not just where their local meeting is but also about Quaker activism or to meet a local Friend for coffee and find out more about who we are.

That brings us to what I think is the most important way of communicating: ourselves – but only if we use it and tell people. Most people come to Quakers through meeting another Quaker. We need to be prepared to tell people that we're Quakers and why we're Quakers. If we volunteer

The second way of being highly available comes from the realisation that in the society we live in going to church, or going to meeting, is no longer the most important thing for people – there are many competing demands and calls on our time and conflicting engagements. We are not going to succeed in changing people's lives, or make them give up other commitments (work, leisure, social, job and family) to come to meeting on a Sunday morning.

Meetings need to meet the needs of different types of people, rather than forcing them to fit into the current Quaker model. We need to engage with them, exploring issues and undertaking activities they are interested in, with approaches that are relevant and at times that are accessible.

I'm sure that your meetings do more than just gather for meeting on a Sunday and a cup of coffee afterwards but how much do you judge the success of activities, like Quaker Quest, First Day School, Quaker Summer Camps, that are connected with your Quaker meetings in terms of the effect they have on attendance at the traditional Sunday morning meeting for worship? In Britain they are often seen as secondary to what happens on a Sunday.

Imagine that Quakerism is like a carton of orange juice. I might go to Arthur and ask 'do you want to try some OJ?' and give them a taste and ask them if they like it. How ridiculous does it sound if I was then to say – I'm sorry you can only get this once a week at a time that I decide. If that doesn't work for you then tough." What we should be saying is "You like this? You'd like

some more? Great! What time works for you?” Meetings need to make themselves accessible to those who want to come when they want to come – The times, places and ways individuals engage with the Quaker community and the wider community need to change – how we worship, how we learn, how we witness, how we reach out.

We need multiple points of entry to the Quaker way and to the Quaker community– we can’t rely on people becoming Quakers because they’re born into a Quaker family or they read a Quaker book or even that they met a Quaker and were inspired to find out more.

In the 1640s and 1650s the radical groups of seekers from which the Religious Society of Friends emerged were being church in very different way to that which their society was used to. They met in barns and fields, George Fox preached in pubs and people’s houses. Society was changing; there was growth of social justice and both anti-establishment and anti-elitist thinking. The Quaker movement resonated with that. What Quakers have to say may still resonate with society today but the way we say it, the way it is presented or ‘wrapped’, no longer does. People who are seeking are positive and, because of Quakers social witness and peace work, those who are unchurched often have positive experiences of Quakers. This group is fertile soil for engagement. Other churches are seeking to address this and to engage with society in different ways, to ‘be church’ in different ways, ways in which local congregations are allowed and enabled to work out the best way for them to reach new people.

We might still have meeting for worship on a Sunday, we might also have it on a Wednesday evening and we might also have events for families including education and semi-programmed worship on a Saturday morning, a parent and toddler club on a weekday morning, we might have a study group on a Thursday evening and we might engage in all sorts of social action – supporting young homeless people, campaigning against fracking. We might only do one of these and not meet on a Sunday. What is fundamental is that we all see these flexible expressions as part of our communal life. I don't event think we need 1,000 people to do this. We can decide to do it with 100, or with just 10.

Some of you might have heard of the concept of ‘Liquid Church’ articulated by a British theologian called Pete Ward.<sup>4</sup> Liquid Church is about being ‘church’ in different ways, at different times that fit with today’s society and the way people live now. In this context church is not about the building – it is about both the collection of people who gather together and also about their mission, social action and evangelism (and I know many Quakers will be uncomfortable with at least two of those words). Quakerism started as a ‘liquid’ faith and became solid with the settling of Monthly Meetings and codification of our faith and practice. As a church we need to become liquid again.

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<sup>4</sup> Ward, Pete. 2002. Liquid Church. Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press.

We need to evolve as a church from one that is focused on what happens on a Sunday morning to one that is relational and network based, with different activities that seek to meet the needs of different people and where all these activities are seen as part of the meeting, as part of how the meeting is a church.

Although importantly in changing how we express our engagement with the Quaker way there is also a need for people to make a commitment. Being a Quaker and being part of a Quaker community is not a leisure activity. It is demanding and these demands can be retained while our expression of the Quaker way changes and becomes flexible. Our lives can still be 100% Quaker even if we don't go to meeting every Sunday.

It's not about making Quakerism a faith where "anything goes" – as is expressed in this advert for British Quakers from a few years ago.

# Thou shalt

*decide for yourself.*

No one telling you what to believe, just the  
peace and quiet to work it out for yourself.

I want to return to my orange juice analogy – you invite some people round and there's a jug of juice on the table and some person says "that's great but I'm going to add some milk" and another guest said "I want to put coffee in the jug" and a third person said "I'm going to pour in some maple syrup" then it'd no longer taste like orange juice – in fact it'd taste pretty disgusting. We have preferences for whether our juice has pulp or is smooth, or is with added calcium but it's still at essence the same thing. If we're going to thrive as Quakers we need to be clear about who we are and what we are here for – that's not the same as not welcoming people it's about saying "this is who we are, come and join us and find out more" It doesn't mean rigidity or having a creed it means following divine guidance and living that out.

Members of a meeting may not often, or even ever, all meet at one time under one roof. That is not important. What is important is that we are a religious community where our values are rooted in our faith and our faith is explicit in our action.

## **Secondly – making Quakerism teachable**

I think we often expect people to learn Quakerism by osmosis – we expect people to pick up the rules of Quaker practice without telling them why things are the way they are. Do we really understand – and could we explain – the way that we make decisions as Friends? Or what our understanding of testimony is? Or why we worship the way we do?

So how can we teach Quakerism rather than relying on people catching it? I'm in the business of Quaker religious education and I think resources and courses and projects all help but at the core of all of these I think a great way of teaching about Quaker faith and practice is through stories. Stories of past Friends, stories from the Bible, the stories we tell with our own faith lives, stories of the history and development of our Religious Society, stories of our meetings, stories about what we do and why we do it. Stories can help us discover who we are as individuals and as Quakers. They can encourage us, challenge us, move us and make us laugh. We can tell stories in a whole variety of ways – using words, music, pictures, conversation, video and lots more. For a resource that provides a range of activities for 'Telling Our Quaker Stories' in a variety of ways suitable for all ages please see <http://www.quaker.org.uk/journeys-youth-15>

One thing that I've learnt through my involvement in Quaker religious education is that one size doesn't fit all, one education programme doesn't fit all meetings, one course doesn't fit all Quakers. Making the Quaker way teachable is about making it appropriate and clear. A programme that has been running in Britain Yearly Meeting for several years that seeks to do this is 'Becoming Friends' – initially designed for those relatively new to the Quaker way it's been used by a range of Friends to deepen their understanding of Quaker faith and practice. It's arranged in a series of eight units exploring the following topics:

- Advices and Queries Exploring the living, questioning approach of Quakerism.
- Deep Roots and New Growth Finding out about the roots and history of the Quaker faith, and our commitment to ongoing change.
- Experiencing Quaker Community Introducing the ways that Quaker meetings are organised, nurtured and led.
- Faithful Diversity Exploring the diversity of beliefs among Quakers, and how we live with this in the modern world.
- Faith in Action How Quakers try to embody our beliefs through our witness in the world
- The Sacred in the Everyday Exploring the Quaker understanding that all times, places and people can be sacred and how this affects our everyday lives
- Silence and Waiting Exploring the Quaker experience of worship, silent waiting and spoken ministry
- Speaking of God Exploring Quaker experiences of God, and how we try to hear where words about faith come from

Becoming Friends gives

- flexible learning materials, accessible online or on paper
- options for working alone & with others, using a variety of approaches
- a choice of learning units & activities to suit a wide range of interests & learning styles
- the chance to work at their own pace & for a length of time that suits their interests & availability

A key element of Becoming Friends is that meetings are asked to appoint a 'Becoming Friends Companion', an experienced Friend whose role is to help the newcomer find out more about Quakerism through sharing their own knowledge and experience, and helping to arrange conversations and interactions with other Friends

You can find out more information about Becoming Friends by visiting:  
[www.woodbrooke.org.uk/pages/becoming-friends.html](http://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/pages/becoming-friends.html)

### **Thirdly – making it experiential**

There are two elements to making Quakerism experiential.

The first is to make sure that the Quaker way that people experience is the same as the one we profess. That sounds obvious but I think it is also easier said than done. How often does what we say about Quaker community correspond to what people who walk through our doors actually experience? There are all sorts of aspects to this:

- How we welcome people
- How we nurture them
- How we live with conflict in our meetings
- How we engage with and serve the community around us

Making Quakerism experiential is about living it – it's about being clear about who we are as Friends and what we are here for – and saying that. It is about discerning our mission, acting on it and making that known. Mission is not about conversion it is about who we are, what we do and why we do it. In these days of strategies and targets and objectives we need to have one aim: to listen to the guidance of the spirit and one intended outcome: a Religious Society of Friends that speaks to and for its time and place in the world.

Being a Quaker is a 24/7 faith and we have to live it as such. Our worship, our faith, our practice, our life as a community, our action in the world are indivisible. If part of that is missing we don't have a full Quaker experience – of course there will be some people for whom they put an emphasis on one element rather than another and will do it in different ways, that's part of the richness but the indivisibility is shown to me by listening to people who do Quaker peace work speak about how they wouldn't have the strength to do it if they didn't have a personal spiritual

practice to ground that witness in or a community to support them. One thing that I have done with some participants on Woodbrooke courses exploring Quakerism is ask experienced Friends – if you were on trial could you be convicted of being a Quaker? What evidence is there in your life to convict you? We need to make the experience of everyone show that they're guilty of being a Quaker.

The slogan on the front of the brochure for this event: Strength to lead, Faith to follow – really struck me.

In leading we have to ask ourselves whether we prefer our tradition to be living or dead? Do we favour good feelings and togetherness over the unknown, and possible separation from those who're currently in our meetings? Are others ready to follow Quaker leaders? Are we ready to seek out and recognise leaders that haven't yet emerged and who might not be in positions of organisational authority?

Being faithful is about following God. If we want spiritual deepening, if we want the Quaker way to be available, teachable and experiential then we need to focus not on what we want the Religious Society of Friends to be, not on what it has been, or what it might be but on what God is calling us to be.

**Simon Best**

**7<sup>th</sup> March 2014**