

## ON THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Lloyd B. Swift, Bethesda Meeting  
Reprinted from *Friends Journal*, July 1/15, 1986, pp. 11-13

There are a great many different ideas concerning the meaning of membership in the Society of Friends. There are those who feel that formal membership should be dispensed with so that Quaker meetings, like the gatherings of early Friends, would be essentially self-selected groups of people who feel comfortable worshipping and working together without any formal rite of group acceptance. Others, while acknowledging the pragmatic value of recording members for various statistical and other purposes, see no need for insistence upon formal membership as a prerequisite to serving the meeting as an officer or committee clerk. Still others feel strongly that our meetings are best served by a careful and formal system of taking into membership those who have demonstrated an understanding of our history and our testimonies and by carefully reserving the leadership roles in the Society for those so selected.

It is difficult to know when in the history of the Society of Friends the recording of membership started. Early on, of course, it was necessary to know who was associated with Friends so that those who suffered for Truth could be assisted and their sufferings recorded. But there is little evidence that a high degree of uniformity or formality was early attained in the keeping of such records.

At a considerably later date when formal membership had become well established, meetings seem to have spent a greater amount of their time and energy in determining who should be removed from the membership rolls for any one of a number of sins against good order than in seeking out and winning those who should become members. Indeed during the so-called period of quietism there were probably fewer members taken in as a result of conviction than were raised up within the Society as "birthright members."

A birthright member posed, of course, few of the problems to the meeting which attended upon the conviction of a non-Friend. Typically brought up in the bosom of a tightly knit Quaker extended family and given a "guarded" education at a Friends school, a birthright Friend, unless she or he elected to marry out of meeting or otherwise fell victim to the temptations of the world, moved directly and easily into the life of the meeting. It was, rather, the convinced Friend who, because of an alien background and lack of the benefits of Quaker upbringing and education, was a potential threat to the continued good order of the Society and whose conviction needed to be sounded to the depths to assure its sincerity.

When I was a child growing up in a Philadelphia orthodox unprogrammed meeting, it was often said that the Society of Friends seemed to discourage people from membership by the seriousness with which the step was viewed and the complexity of the procedure followed. The committee appointed to examine the candidate's clearness for membership took its responsibilities very seriously. The process appeared to be one of requiring the candidates to prove the sincerity of their call to membership.

In those days the relatively rare occurrence of a non-Friend being sufficiently drawn to the Society to request membership was the occasion for a serious, formal, and frankly rather

intimidating procedure to assure that the prospective Friend was in tune with Friends' testimonies and ready to enter into the responsibilities of membership. And even after acceptance into membership the convinced Friend may sometimes have felt possessed, like the naturalized citizen, of a second-class passport.

All that has, thank God, changed a great deal. With the decline in the Quaker as in the general birthrate, the Society has fallen in numbers of those coming from established Quaker families. The general secularization of society has offered Quaker young people a wide field of alternatives to continuing in the traditions of the family. And an increasing number of persons of all ages have felt drawn to the Society of Friends from a variety of religious backgrounds or from none at all. As a result, we have in the second half of the 20th century, perhaps for the first time since the 17th century, the phenomenon of lively and vigorous Friends meetings composed almost exclusively of persons who have come to Quakerism as adults. In addition, the activity of a vigorous missionary movement in some branches of Quakerism has resulted in the establishment of large yearly meetings in East Africa and Bolivia and of smaller Friends groups in many other places around the world, groups which are composed almost exclusively of first- or second-generation Friends.

Our procedures for membership still carry some of the baggage from the earlier period. The process of the clearness committee for membership and the procedure that the application, once recommended by overseers, is held over from one meeting for business to the next, smack a little of the earlier view that it is necessary somehow for seasoned Friends – mostly birthright – to be generally assured of the suitability of this newcomer before she or he can be accepted into the tribe.

I think we need to strike a happy medium between the blithe and rapid acceptance into membership of anybody who chooses to apply and that historic Quaker method of making such a big thing of the formalities of commitment and of the responsibilities of membership that some who should have joined were discouraged from doing so. I think that most of our meetings are, in practice, anxious to have congenial people join our fellowship as active attenders and then, in due course, as members – and that we generally give less attention to the “clearness” of the prospective member than was formerly done. I *fear* that in this process, however, we have had a tendency to preserve our (somewhat cumbersome and possibly demeaning) procedure while glossing over the *substance* – which relates to the prospect's understanding of what it is she or he is getting in for.

We all need to be clearer about what it is that we are seeking to have people join. A Quaker meeting, to be clearer about the meaning of membership, needs to be clearer about the kind of organization it is.

We use a number of phrases to describe our meetings: *group of seekers, fellowship, community of faith, beloved community*. The word which seems most commonly to come to mind is *community*. Baltimore Yearly Meeting's provisional *Faith and Practice* contains these headings: “The Meeting as Spiritual Community,” “The Meeting as Caring Community,” and “Fellowship and Community: Within the Local Meeting.”

In the introduction to his Pendle Hill pamphlet *A Place Called Community*, Parker J. Palmer poses some hard queries concerning the nature of community:

How can I participate in a fairer distribution of resources unless I live in a community which makes it possible to consume less? How can I learn accountability unless I live in a community where my acts and their consequences are visible to all? How can I learn to share power unless I live in a community where hierarchy is unnatural? How can I take the risks which right action demands unless I belong to a community which gives support? How can I learn the sanctity of each life unless I live in a community where we can be persons, not roles, to one another?

Later in the pamphlet, Parker Palmer specifically considers the Quaker meeting as a community:

The core of the Quaker tradition is a way of inward seeking which leads to outward acts of integrity and service. Friends are most in the Spirit when they stand at the crossing point of the inward and the outward life. And that is the intersection at which we find community. Community is a place where the connections felt in the heart make themselves known in bonds between people, and where the tuggings and pullings of those bonds keep opening up our hearts.

The Society of Friends can make its greatest contribution to community by continuing to be a *religious* society – I mean, by centering on the practice of a corporate worship which opens itself to continuing revelation. ... Community is simply too difficult to be sustained by our social impulses. It can be sustained only as we return time and again to the religious experience of the unity of all life. ... Community happens as that of God in you responds to that of God in me. And the affirmation that there is that of God in every person must mean more than “I’m OK, you’re OK.”

*Community* – the word shares a root with *common*. To have community, I believe, we must have a shared element of commonality.

When I was considerably younger, Gladys and I worked as missionary teachers for the Congregational Christian Church, now the United Church of Christ. I was not a member of that church – I have been a Quaker all my life – but I worked in their Near East Mission and took an active part in the corporate life of that mission. The Near East Mission had a very special problem in that it was working in Turkey, a secular state, and in the Muslim world, a situation in which there were two firm prohibitions against proselytizing – that of the secular state, and that of the Muslim faith. As a result the Near East Mission, like some Quaker institutions, adopted the principle of “let your lives speak” and worked through educational, medical, and publication work to exemplify Christianity. It is not surprising that I was not the only Quaker who found work in that mission attractive!

What is perhaps surprising is that I, one of the Quakers in the Congregational midst, at one point got so fed up with the constant discussion of what it really was that we believed and what it really was that we were trying to do, that I suggested, half seriously, that we write down a

statement of beliefs and goals and let those who could not subscribe to it leave the mission for other fields! Was I advocating a creed? In no absolute and ritualistic sense. But I was advocating that the group attempt to record their common characteristics which might serve as the basis for community.

And I guess that's about where I come out on this matter of Quaker membership. The Society of Friends has historically stood and now stands for certain testimonies which are the common heritage of the Society and the common ground of our community. We must admit of differences in the interpretation and the application of these testimonies, but we must also have a fairly clear conception of what they are. To be a member of the Society of Friends means, I believe, to subscribe in sincerity to the concept that there is a loving God who is the founder and the ruler of the universe and that there is that of God in each human being; that we are called to seek this element of God in all, even our enemies; that this belief leads us to renounce war and violence as acceptable means of attaining ends, however good; and that it also leads us to work for the material and spiritual welfare of all humankind. For most Quakers the kind of life that complete obedience to the inward Light of God would bring has been illustrated most perfectly in the life of Jesus, and we look to him for our example of perfect humanity combined with perfect godliness.

For me, membership in the Society requires that the prospective member understand and subscribe to these central realities of Quaker belief. I accept that there are branches of the Society where most of the members can subscribe to a much more orthodox evangelical statement of Christian theology and can accord to the Scriptures a level of authority with which I am uncomfortable. If this Christian orthodoxy or fundamentalist approach to the Bible should lead them to conduct actions that deny that of God in fellow human beings or negate the continuity of revelation, then they would not meet my criterion for membership in our Society. If it does not so lead them, then I am glad to call them fellow Quakers. I accept also that there are Universalist Friends who would have our Society accept those who do not find their primary religious inspiration in the Bible and the life of Jesus. If such persons attest to the indwelling God in all persons and the reality of continuing revelation, then I feel they also are Friends.

And what of the process of preparing persons for membership? Perhaps when someone has indicated a desire to be on the mailing list, we should give that person a year's membership in the Wider Quaker Fellowship and to one of the Quaker journals, so that selected Quaker literature will regularly come into the home. Religious education, including an introduction to Quakerism, should be available on a reasonably regular basis for attenders. And when an attender has been with a meeting for a year or two, I see nothing wrong with an invitation to membership, perhaps including a special educational opportunity, more directly aimed at preparation for understanding the joys and responsibilities of membership. Then when a Friend has applied, been recommended by overseers, and accepted by the meeting, I believe there should be something more than a bare minute to celebrate the full acceptance of another soul into our community of faith.

It has been said that Quakers do not have sacraments or, to put it another way, do not celebrate the ordinances of the church. In respect to baptism, communion, and the other sacraments recognized in their various numbers by various churches, this is true. But if one accepts the definition of a sacrament from the catechism as "the outward and visible sign of an

inward and spiritual grace,” then we do have such ordinances and among these certainly is membership. My own monthly meeting’s paper on membership states that “membership is an outward sign of a person’s inward commitment.” I think that fits pretty well with the classic definition of a sacrament. And why not? We Quakers are much given to stating – sometimes perhaps without enough thought of what it means – that “all life is sacramental.” As we have not abolished the clergy but rather abolished the laity, so perhaps ideally we have not abolished the sacred but rather the profane. Acceptance into membership thus becomes a substitute for baptism into the faith and, as such, necessarily has an element of sacred ritual about it. I would hope that we could, in our treatment of membership, even while following a careful procedure, emphasize this positive, sacramental element.