

*Belonging: Quakers, Membership, and the Need to be Known*, by Emily Higgs, Friends Journal, April 2012

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What role does monthly meeting membership play in our understanding of faith and belonging? Can someone be a Quaker without being a member or attender at a monthly meeting? Religions world-wide face the challenge of navigating the relationship between core theological tenets, the power of faith, and the structures that contain and provide organization for the institution. Quakerism has historically struck a positive and organic balance among these dynamics, but it is not immune from the struggle to blend spiritual Mystery and organizational architecture. The Quaker practice of monthly meeting membership offers us a concrete example of this tension regarding how we define our belonging to God, to Quakerism, and to one another in blessed community.

I was raised Episcopalian, and while I was a member of a church and felt deep connections to that community, rarely did someone ask me to which congregation I belonged, and never to which diocese. With that as my context for the social etiquette of introducing one's religious affiliation, I have yet to become accustomed to the common practice within the Religious Society of Friends of becoming acquainted with other self-identified Quakers by asking them to which monthly meeting or yearly meeting they belong. Why do we do this? At best, do we ask in order to establish a geographical or even broadly theological context for this new person? Or, at worst, are we asking to distinguish between those who are members and those who simply want to identify with something? Are we trying to prove that we are well-versed in the Quakerspeak that so immediately establishes us as a unique and sometimes exclusive community?

Before going any further, I would like to note that for the sake of simplicity in this article, I am largely ignoring long-time attenders who have ingrained themselves in a particular monthly meeting but who have chosen for intentional reasons not to seek membership. While I have been liberal with my application of the word membership, there still are elements of this article which apply solely to official membership as an institution. The important element here is affiliation with a monthly or yearly meeting, and the ways in which we separate people with a meeting from those without a meeting.

I came to Quakerism at age nine and fell in love with it at age 12 by way of Catoctin Quaker Camp in the Baltimore Yearly Meeting camping program. It took me those three years to realize that silence every morning was part of a faith tradition and not a quirky part of the morning camp ritual. I began spiritually considering myself a Quaker when I was in high school, and then attended Haverford College because of its Quaker character, hoping to continue to surround myself with Quaker community.

My time at Haverford opened many doors for me. I found myself traveling among Quaker communities in Africa and becoming deeply engaged with multiple Quaker organizations and service agencies, including American Friends Service Committee, African Great Lakes Initiative, Alternatives to Violence Project, and others. While at Haverford I worked with several other

Friends to build up a new Quaker student community, which blossomed, grew, and continues to be one of the strongest Quaker elements of the college today, thanks to the hard work of its current students. These efforts to build Quaker community not only fed me spiritually but deepened my commitment to the Religious Society of Friends and to nurturing the leadership and spiritual foundations of Young Adult Friends (YAFs). At the same time, while I was becoming invested in the Religious Society of Friends in a rich and generative way that fit my needs and phase of life, I still was not connected to any monthly meeting.

My experience of college, post-college, and transient communities of Young Adult Friends is that our spiritual needs aren't always best met within the monthly meeting structure. This is a common sentiment within YAF communities, and the reasons for that pattern do not necessarily reflect poorly on the vibrancy or quality of monthly meetings. Rather, YAFs often do not live near their home meeting, and knowing that they might live somewhere for only a brief period, they may hesitate to spend a great deal of time putting down roots in a new community. In keeping with this general tendency, I attended monthly meetings around the world and worshiped actively as a Quaker for years but avoided membership—early on because I was so committed to our student community at Haverford and later because I did not stay in one place for more than a year at a time.

After a year working at the Quaker United Nations Office in New York, the way opened for me to come back to Haverford and continue the work I had begun as a student by serving as the Director of Quaker Affairs for Haverford College. Still, I resisted membership. During those years, I had several interactions with Friends that made me feel “less than” for not being a member. I was once told that I was, in fact, not a Quaker because I had no regular meeting. In another instance, at a 150-person Quaker gathering at which I was the only person without a meeting on my name tag, someone actually said that he was glad I was there, even though I was not “one of them.” I felt shocked, alienated, and embarrassed by these experiences and came away feeling that I was left out of the in-club of my own faith.

While these comments may have been more callous than your everyday membership conversation, I felt that they illustrated the dominant assumption that card-carrying membership is the most necessary essential of Friendliness. The centrality of membership to the structure of the Religious Society of Friends can be alienating to those for whom membership or having a regular worship community is not feasible. Since the group most often left out of this equation is Young Adult Friends, I find this pattern to be incongruent with our Testimonies of Community and Equality.

And yet slowly, in spite of holding my non-membership flag high, things began to change. Two things came into my life, almost simultaneously in that startlingly synchronistic way that reveals God has something planned for you, despite your convictions or stubborn woundedness.

First, my parents moved to Lancaster, Pa., and I occasionally attended Lancaster Meeting when I was home on Sundays and then more frequently, about two years ago, due to a family illness. Over several months, I learned that the meeting community had been holding my family in the Light in our time of greatest need. I was so moved that a meeting at which I was a new attender would reach out with such love. I felt lucky to be able to come to worship when I could,

and I was touched when the meeting offered me a laminated name tag—I felt more included in an established meeting community than I ever had before.

During this time, when I was marveling at how much the simple gesture of offering a name tag mattered to me, I attended a YAF Dessert & Discussion Night about the question of membership with Arthur Larrabee, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting General Secretary. The evening was organized by Sadie Forsythe, the yearly meeting YAF Coordinator (a position that no longer exists), to follow-up the YAF epistle that had been written at annual sessions in 2008, which questioned the requirement for meeting membership to serve on yearly meeting standing committees. While I went into the conversation that night prepared to share the grievances of feeling “less than” for not having a Quaker home to speak of, I was incredibly moved by the way some talked lovingly about membership, not as a stamp on your name tag but as a beautiful symbol of mutual accountability, commitment, and community.

I began to feel a rising and powerful need to be a recognized part of a meeting, to be spiritually grounded somewhere, and to be held accountable by a faith community. While my concerns still remained about the way membership is seen as the single most important way Friends identify one another, my understanding of what membership means began to broaden and to let a little Light in.

I found that I deeply craved the mutual responsibility and accountability of a monthly meeting; moving forward to become a recognized member of the Religious Society of Friends felt like plugging a hole in my life where Spirit had been leaking out. A long road led me to the place where I sought membership, and I am honored to have become a member of Lancaster Meeting. My request for membership was unorthodox: I was a transient young adult who did not live in Lancaster and was still relatively new to the community. Yet the meeting met me with open arms and received my request because they saw the deep desire for belonging and my commitment to Quakerism.

I am sure many Friends understand the delight I felt when I first put my name and meeting on my Quaker name tag. No one would ask me why it did not have the name of a meeting! I have been a member of Lancaster Meeting for almost two years now, and though I cannot worship there often, I feel loved and respected by my meeting. They understood and accepted me where I was, and they put my needs above the norms to which we often default. So while I cannot give as much time and service as I would like to Lancaster Friends, my understanding of how transformative membership can be has deepened.

Despite my joy in finally finding a spiritual home in Quakerism, I still firmly believe that membership as it is commonly structured is unfortunately inaccessible to the majority of transient young adults. I find myself surprised, time and time again, when I hear older Friends speak with urgency about the future vitality of the Religious Society of Friends and express dismay at the lack of young adults in their meetings. If Friends are committed to addressing these concerns and not simply wringing their hands, perhaps it is time to explore new approaches to membership with the needs of the younger generations in mind. If the monthly meeting structure is frequently less relevant to the “next generation” of Friends, then is it wise to use monthly meeting membership as the primary measuring stick by which we gauge the health and

vitality of our faith community? Quakerism is vibrant and thriving in many worship groups and Quaker colleges, to name two examples, yet our declining membership statistics fail to take these groups into account and thus paint a rather grim picture of our future. Perhaps we can envision a more optimistic landscape if we let go of our historical attachment to monthly meeting membership as the locus of all meaningful Quaker community?

Understanding that membership does not and cannot independently characterize a relationship with God, with the Earth, and with community, the YAFs present at the Dessert & Discussion night developed a number of important queries that speak to these concerns, hoping that they would reach monthly meetings:

1. What does membership mean to you, personally and as a monthly meeting?
2. What is the relationship between membership as a form and as an expression of stewardship, commitment, conviction, and service?
3. How do you welcome individuals fully into your community and recognize their gifts?
4. What is the essential function, intention, and reason for membership?
5. Is there a difference between being a Quaker and being a member of a monthly meeting?
6. How can we re-pattern the way we talk about our spirituality?
7. Quakerism is in its essence about one's relationship with the Divine; what role does membership play in that?
8. How can we examine and question the way we talk about membership and not challenge membership's importance in the life of the meeting?
9. How does the meeting community nurture and meet the needs of its members and attenders at various stages in life?
10. How can we value, connect with, and support community for young adults and others who do not fit neatly into meeting membership or other established patterns of belonging?

While many Quakers have different and varied experiences of membership within a monthly meeting, I hope that the story of my journey toward membership in the Religious Society of Friends will encourage some deeper reflection for us all on the way we welcome individuals into our communities by being inclusive, not exclusive, with the questions we ask and the comments we make. I pray that we might also find ways to confirm and hold up the importance of membership and the monthly meeting as a cornerstone of Quakerism, while also cherishing those who have not yet found a Quaker community but are unwavering in their commitment and love for the faith and practice of Friends.

I believe we are capable of valuing meeting membership as an institution and of affirming daily that we are so much more than what is written on our name tags.

