

Some Practices and Terms

Quakers follow some practices and use some terms which can be confusing to newcomers. A brief description of some of these follows.

We Quakers refer to ourselves as Friends (with a capital "F"). The term originated in the 1650's with George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, and comes from John 15:15 ("...I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."). Today the official name of our faith is The Religious Society of Friends. The term "Quaker" originated as a derogatory term used by others, but it was accepted early on by Friends, and today is fondly used almost interchangeably with the term Friend.

Tradition leads us to call our groups "meetings" rather than "congregations" or "parishes," and we refer to our worship time as a "meeting for worship" rather than a "service." We would say we "went to meeting" when others would say "we went to church." We call our place of worship a "meetinghouse" rather than a "church."

Friends who come to meeting are either "members" or "attenders." Members, obviously, are those who have chosen to officially join the Religious Society of Friends, but alongside members are often found attenders who may have attended and been active in the meeting for years. Attenders are welcome in committees and all the activities of the meeting.

We meet weekly for regular worship. Reading Monthly Meeting is called a "monthly meeting" because we meet once a month to conduct the business of the Meeting. This monthly get-together is most commonly referred to as the "meeting for business," but formally it is the "meeting for worship with a concern for business." This more formal name relates to the conduct of the meeting. Those in attendance seek personal and collective spiritual guidance (a "leading") in forming and voicing their opinions. Decisions are made when a "sense of the meeting" becomes clear to those in attendance.

Votes are never taken in meetings for business, and there is never a distinction between majority and minority positions. A Friend may on occasion "stand aside" when he or she is not comfortable with the sense of the meeting and does not wish to impede a decision. A meeting's decisions on particular topics are documented in "minutes," formal statements of the belief of the meeting on those topics.

The meeting for business is a separate meeting from the meeting for worship. In Reading it takes place shortly after "the rise of meeting," a traditional term for the end of the meeting for worship.

Taking care of business is especially important to a meeting, because we, as "unprogrammed" Quakers, do not have any clergy or staff. Instead, our committees attend to the affairs of the meeting. Committees are coordinated by "clerks" who perform duties analogous to chair-persons in a secular setting. The "Clerk of the Meeting" presides over meetings for business. Committee meetings are conducted in

the same spirit as Friends' meetings for worship. Decisions are made when the committee is in harmony on a course to follow.

Monthly meetings gather together in groups called "quarterly meetings," who (you guessed it) meet quarterly to discuss issues of concern to the larger group. Likewise, quarterly meetings are collected together into "yearly meetings." Reading Monthly Meeting is part of the Caln Quarterly Meeting, and Caln Quarterly Meeting is part of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Historically, Quakers eschewed the use of various language elements they found objectionable. Among these were the days of the week and months of the year, whose names harkened back to Roman and Norse gods. Accordingly, many formal Quaker documents use the term "First Month" for January, and First Day for Sunday. Our term for Sunday school respects this practice and is called "First Day School."

If you come to meeting for the first time, don't be surprised that you do not see a collection plate. Contributions to the meeting are always welcome, but finances are never discussed in a regular meeting for worship. Annually, the meeting's trustees determine a "fair share" figure as guidance to each member and attender for making contributions, which are made directly to our treasurer.

And finally, just in case you were wondering, even though Quaker rhymes with Shaker, there is no connection. There is no such thing as Quaker furniture!