

Communities of Friends

The Quaker way of life is one of community: Friends gather together for worship, for service, to support each other spiritually and in other ways, and to reach collective decisions on the issues which arise in community life. For Friends, religion is not just a matter of individual experience, but something we enter into together, acting as a body in our worship, our witness, and our business; holding each other in mutual care, love and attention.

This is not to discount the experience of those Friends who live at too great a distance from their meetings to participate regularly, nor to deny that each of us must come individually to a sense of what is right and true and essential in spiritual matters. But time and experience have proven the value of a close, responsive community in fostering individual spiritual growth, in testing and tempering individual leadings and individual understanding, and in supporting individuals as they are called to act or to suffer for religious principle. Worship in a gathered community is different in valuable ways from private devotion, and a coordinated group can accomplish far more in service and advocacy than individuals acting alone.

Effective functioning as a community requires some organizational structure, and Friends have developed a variety of modes of organization at both the local and the regional levels.

The local (or “particular”) meeting may be organized as a *worship group*, *preparative meeting*, or *monthly meeting*. (The differences among these are explained on pp. xx–xx.) Whatever its organizational pattern, the local meeting is where Friends typically find their primary spiritual home. The local meeting is where Friends gather most often for worship, where they have the most regular contact with one another, where they can most easily provide individual care and support for one another. Indeed, some Friends find that their entire involvement in the Religious Society of Friends is with their local meeting.

There is a strong tradition of local autonomy in Illinois Yearly Meeting, and local meetings order their own affairs as they feel led. But Friends community is not purely local, any more than spiritual life is purely individual. No local meeting is a denomination unto itself; we are gathered into larger, regional bodies and into the worldwide Religious Society of Friends just as we are gathered locally: for worship, mutual care, fellowship, and above all for service to God and to humankind. Larger gatherings provide support for local meetings and make coordination possible across meetings; they allow the pursuit of larger-scale projects than local meetings could accomplish on their own; they broaden the spiritual perspectives both of meetings and of individuals; and they provide an important unifying influence among Friends.

Regional meetings may be organized in various ways and for regions of various sizes. In some cases a monthly meeting may function as a small regional body, with more than one local meeting in its care (see pp. xx–xx below). Several monthly meetings may be organized into a *quarterly meeting*, or may hold other kinds of regional gatherings. *Yearly meetings* encompass a still wider area; Illinois Yearly Meeting includes local meetings throughout Illinois and neighboring areas of several other states. Various “umbrella” organizations promote communication, services, and cooperation among yearly meetings, and represent the Religious Society of Friends at the national and international levels.

The purpose and organization of these various kinds of local meetings, regional meetings, and other organizations will be described in turn.