

MEMBERSHIP

Becoming a member is a public act of accepting God's gift of a spiritual home and family. In being recorded as a member, one accepts the support and practices of this community for spiritual growth and assumes responsibility for the activities of the meeting as well as its practical and spiritual maintenance. This is a spiritual community bound together by love in which there are mutual expectations for trust, open communication, forgiveness, participation, and perseverance in the face of differences. Membership does not mean that you have reached a particular level of spiritual accomplishment but it does mean you have decided to pursue your spiritual development in the context of this Quaker community.

The word "seekers" has often been used by and for Friends, but the word may have different connotations for seekers who are members and for seekers who are visitors. People visit us seeking a spiritual community with which they might feel in accord. Members have found a place in our community and are seeking ways to live out the spiritual gifts experienced there.

While some will have grown up in the meeting, others will come first as visitors, then as regular attenders, before deciding to seek membership.

Moving Toward Membership

Visitors to meeting should be welcomed, and care taken to help them understand and relate to Friends' ways. Study groups in which newer attenders mix with experienced members can help, as can easy access to Quaker books, periodicals, and pamphlets. Regular attenders should be invited to participate in the life of the Meeting — to observe and take appropriate part in our distinctive ways of worship, business, and committee work, and in our potlucks, work projects, and ministries. Membership in the Society of Friends is membership in the monthly meeting community. The best orientation to a meeting may be the opportunity to be with its members while they do what they care about.

Attenders may wish to discuss their spiritual goals and concerns with Friends before making an application for membership, or before feeling any clear interest in applying. Experienced Friends should be alert to this possibility, and make themselves available for such discussion. Attenders who find themselves nourished by their involvement with Meeting, comfortable with Friends' approach and testimonies, and interested in taking up the responsibilities of membership, should be encouraged to consider membership.

Sometimes long-time attenders act with the responsibility and commitment hoped for in members, and feel that they are members in all but name. A Meeting might gently encourage such attenders to join, as a matter of truth-telling and integrity. But occasionally committed attendance without membership is the right choice for someone, and should be respected.

Applying for Membership

An attender who wishes to join begins by making a formal request to the monthly meeting. Usually this takes the form of a letter, which often will describe the nature or history of the applicant's interest in Friends. The clerk of the meeting shares this request with the Meeting during a meeting for worship with an attention to business.

A clearness committee to visit with the applicant is either appointed directly by the meeting for business, or (especially in larger meetings) by the Meeting's ministry and counsel committee (or its equivalent). An effort should be made to choose discerning Friends; the applicant's closest associates will not always be the ones best suited for this service.

The clearness committee visits with the applicant in a spirit of expectant waiting and tender searching. Beginning and ending the visit in silent worship is appropriate, as is taking time, during the conversation, to center down and to seek guidance.

The clearness that is sought is two-fold: Is this the right step for the applicant? and, Is this the right step for the Meeting? Topics that may help shed light on this include the applicant's knowledge and expectations of the Meeting and of Friends generally, his or her religious background and journey, consonance with our testimonies, and degree of comfort with the variety found among Friends. The following sample queries may be used by the clearness committee to encourage exploration of these topics. No specific answers are to be expected.

- How does meeting for worship speak to your condition?
- What drew you to begin attending Friends Meeting?
- What do you consider to be central to Quakerism?
- Are there any features of Quakerism with which you have reservations or concerns?
- What changes have you made in your life as a result of your association with Quakers?
- Are you familiar with Faith and Practice and other Friends literature? What have you taken from them?
- Do you understand that membership in the monthly meeting brings with it membership in the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings?
- What is your understanding of the Divine? What is your experience of the Divine in your life?
- Illinois Yearly Meeting and many of the monthly meetings include both Friends who are explicitly Christian and Friends who are not; how comfortable are you with this variety?
- How will you live into our Quaker peace testimony?
- How do you understand the concept of community in light of Friends' testimony?
- What does the testimony of simplicity mean to you and what are the practical consequences of this to your life?
- What does it mean to live with integrity?

- How do you live the testimony of equality?
- In what ways do you see yourself taking on the responsibilities of membership in the meeting? For example: participation in meeting for worship, meeting for worship with an attention to business, committees, stewardship of meeting property and other resources, financial support.
- As Friends we see our spiritual development as a life long journey. Where are you on this journey and what do you think the meeting's role will be in your future spiritual path?

In some circumstances, a single visit with the applicant will be sufficient; in others, multiple visits may seem appropriate. Sometimes the committee will find it helpful to meet together before or after the visit. The clearness committee and the applicant should keep in mind that they seek a solid clarity and easiness about the decision, not any pre-determined result. At times, a solid clearness is reached quickly and easily; other times, clearness comes only after labor, but may be just as strong. Sometimes, the clearness that is reached will be that the time is not right for membership - that the applicant or the Meeting is being led to wait. Occasionally the clearness may be that membership in the Society of Friends is not the Spirit's leading for an applicant. If applicant and committee remember that the goal is the clearness that allows faithful action, then these outcomes can be seen as positive ones.

The clearness committee reports back to the body that appointed it. If this was the ministry and counsel committee the report is then forwarded to the business meeting with a recommendation.

The decision whether to accept a person into membership is made and minuted by the Monthly Meeting in its meeting for worship with an attention to business. Although the meeting for business needs enough information to make a faithful decision, personal information not directly pertinent to the decision should not be included in the report.

Membership of Children

Children in our midst, regardless of their membership status, should be treated as full participants in the life of the Meeting. Meetings do well to nurture all children and young adults in making informed decisions with regard to their membership, when the time is right.

Parents who are members may request membership for their children. Some monthly meetings consider children to be full members. Others consider them to be associate members. Still others offer parents the choice of either full or associate membership for their children. Associate membership differs from full membership in that it does not extend indefinitely, but must be re-affirmed by the individual at some later point. Meetings are responsible for continuing a caring relationship with associate members as they mature, and for encouraging them to apply for membership when they are ready, whether before or after the end of associate membership.

A request that a child or children be recorded in either category of membership may be made at the time of the child's birth or adoption, or at the time of the parent(s) acceptance into membership, or later. A child may be recorded at the request of one parent and with the permission of the other. Parents requesting full or associate membership for their children should intend to raise them as Friends within a meeting community. Parents may also choose to request no enrollment for the child, leaving the matter to the young person's own leadings, as he or she matures. Monthly meetings should adopt clear policies about the membership status of members' children for whom no request is made. The Meeting has a responsibility to see that children recorded in membership, along with other children among us, have opportunity to reflect on their commitment as they grow toward adulthood.

Monthly meetings are encouraged to respect and support parents' decisions regarding their children's welfare in these matters. Sometimes (especially when a family of Friends transfers from another meeting) this respect and support will involve wrestling with a category of membership, or a conscientious choice, not previously used in the meeting.

There is no minimum age for applying for membership for oneself. Some young people are ready for membership at an early age; others take longer to mature into a sense of clearness about their spiritual path. Associate members, and young people not recorded in membership, may request full membership for themselves using the procedure described above, at any age at which they feel a leading to do so.

Sojourning Members, Transfer of Membership, Isolated Friends

Friends living temporarily at a distance from their home meeting, and near enough to attend another meeting, should usually request sojourning membership in the meeting they are attending. Members who have moved permanently to another area should transfer their membership to their new meeting. These arrangements go beyond record-keeping, allowing the individual to be forthright and honest about his or her real commitments, and helping meetings care for members in a practical way. Either change is initiated by requesting a letter from one's previous or home meeting, to the new meeting. The request is considered by the home meeting in its monthly meeting for business and unless there is compelling reason, a letter recommending the Friend to the new meeting is prepared and signed by the clerk, and forwarded to the new meeting. Meetings generally treat Friends sojourning among them as members, but notify their home meeting when they leave the area. A home meeting drops a transferring member from its rolls when it receives confirmation that the new meeting has received him or her into membership.

Both members and persons interested in Friends sometimes live too far away from a meeting to attend regularly. The mere fact of living at a distance from one's meeting does not alter membership. Options for such persons include establishing a relationship with a meeting near enough to visit periodically, participation in Quarterly and Yearly Meetings and conferences of various kinds, and forming a small worship group with others of like

mind in the area. Many of the monthly meetings of Illinois Yearly Meeting began in just this way.

Termination of Membership

A person may ask to be released from membership in the Society of Friends, and should do so if he or she feels strongly out of accord with the faith and practice of Friends. This request takes the form of a letter to the meeting which may be considered in the meeting's ministry and counsel committee (or its equivalent). When appropriate, a clearness committee may be appointed to meet with the individual. The final decision whether to release the member is made by the meeting for business. In extreme cases a meeting may initiate this process without a letter requesting release, particularly if the member behaves in a way which conveys a false and harmful impression of Friends to the public.

A more common reason for termination of membership is a long term disengagement from the meeting. Every effort should be made to contact the individual before releasing him or her from membership. Meetings should explore such situations with real tenderness, taking however much time is necessary. Real life circumstances are usually ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Friends may drift away until their lives show no evidence of interest in continued membership, yet feel reluctant to break with the past - perhaps for sentimental reasons, but perhaps from a deep, if dormant, sense of calling. Some distance themselves after a conflict in Meeting and never fully return; others find that they are led to put their energy exclusively into another spiritual path, yet retain membership. Some Friends may need years to come to clarity about such issues. The underlying truth is often at least a little different from the explanations offered quickly and casually. Sometimes old wounds need to be healed before any real clearness is possible. There is much potential for hurt in inquiring into an inactive member's intentions - but there is also much potential for hurt in ignoring such situations.

When it becomes clear that someone no longer intends involvement with the Society of Friends, the integrity both of the meeting and of the former Friend will generally be best supported by releasing that person from membership. Friends recognize that faithful pursuit of God's leadings may engage us in outwardly different paths; ideally, a termination of membership can help the former member focus more clearly on the path to which he or she is actually led. The possibility of affectionate relationship with the meeting community, and with friends within it, is by no means terminated by such action.

Queries adapted from *A Guide to Clearness Committees on Membership* by Lake Forest Monthly Meeting.