Religious Education (4-14-2018)

*Monthly meetings have a continuing responsibility to foster understanding of the beliefs and practices of Friends to members, attenders, and children under their care, enhancing full participation in the life of the meeting.* - Southeastern Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice 2013, p. 203

Religious Education is important for everyone who participates in a Friends meeting. Each individual is on a spiritual journey which continues throughout life, and everyone needs the opportunity to continue the search with others. Meetings can support them by providing a First Day School program for children from infancy through high school as well as an adult religious education program. Most meetings have a committee or committees to plan and coordinate these programs (see ‘Religious education committee’, pp. xx–xx).

Children’s Programs

Children’s religious education programs will vary depending on the size of the meeting and the number of children. In a large meeting with lots of children, the children may be divided into appropriate age groups and classes designed for their respective developmental stages. In smaller meetings or meetings with few children, it may be necessary to have a multiage group. In this latter situation the program needs to be designed to maintain the interest of all the children. That may mean having older children assist their teacher(s) by acting as mentors for the younger ones.

It is important that every meeting, regardless of size, be prepared to offer religious education to children every Sunday, even if there are none who attend regularly. Friends’ experience is that meetings that are not prepared for the arrival of children are unlikely to keep those whose families do attend. Meetings without children are advised to consider having a box of materials that can be used with any children who come to meeting. An adult can use the materials to provide an instant opportunity for the child(ren), even when that opportunity was unexpected.

The children’s religious education program may begin with the very youngest children learning how to share, manipulate materials, listen to stories, and sit quietly in meeting for worship. As the children get older they need a more focused program that helps them to understand Quaker faith, testimonies, and practices; the Bible; other religions; supports them in exploring moral and religious issues. The program should be set up in a manner to ensure they have a grounding in Quaker faith and practice before they finish high school, a grounding that includes being a part of the meeting for worship on a regular basis. Curricular ideas can be obtained from appropriate yearly meeting committees and staff, Friends General Conference, the Religious Educators Collaborative, someone involved with children’s religious education in another monthly meeting, or other sources as appropriate.
The selection of teachers for First Day School is a weighty matter for any Friends meeting. While most adult Friends do not feel they are experts in teaching, it is important for the children to experience a variety of members as teachers, and for adults and children in the meeting to get to know each other. Meetings are encouraged to be sure the teachers are not always parents of the children (See Monthly Meeting Religious Education Committee on pp. xx-xx.) and should support teachers in their own spiritual growth and grounding in Quaker faith and practice.

It is important to create an environment that is welcoming to the children. Whoever is responsible for leading a class is encouraged to be sure the classroom is inviting, and that it has been prepared before the participants arrive. Children will be happy to see materials ready, and to be in a space that makes them feel important and welcomed. The teachers need to pay attention to how the children react during class in order to determine whether it would be a good idea to take a different approach or even change topics.

Adult Programs

There are a variety of ways to approach adult religious education programs. They may occur before or after meeting for worship or at another special prearranged time. Their purpose is to help members and attenders become more spiritually grounded, to provide the opportunity to share spiritual journeys, to reflect together on how our faith guides our daily lives and to facilitate the spiritual growth of the meeting community. The program will therefore focus on Quaker faith, testimonies and practices; the Bible; writings by Quakers; and/or other matters that arise out of spiritual concerns. A session may consist of a discussion of a pamphlet or book, a time devoted to worship-sharing around a query, a presentation by one individual who has had a unique experience or has studied a particular topic, or the sharing of spiritual practices. Friends have found that such programs help them deepen their experience of the Divine and strengthen their connection with one another.

Adult education programs should be of interest to newcomers. In order to facilitate inquirers and new attenders learning more about Quakers, a meeting may also want to periodically host special introductory classes.

Retreats and Intergenerational Programs

In addition to the educational opportunities for children and adults, a meeting may want to have special times to gather. These may involve a day of shared activities around a specific topic or spiritual practice, or they may be retreats that last a weekend at a place away from the meeting house. In either case, the meeting may choose to invite someone from outside the meeting to be a facilitator; alternatively, a meeting committee may take on that responsibility. Retreats can be for adults only, designed for a specific age group of children in the meeting, or intergenerational. Other all-meeting activities are also encouraged, one example being a picnic to celebrate the beginning of First Day School in the fall or to mark its end in the late spring. A meeting could participate in a peace vigil or other sort of demonstration based on Quaker
testimonies. In every situation it is important first to have a discussion about how the event relates to our Quaker principles.

Programs beyond the Local Meeting

Many Quaker organizations provide opportunities for individuals to continue their spiritual journeys. Friends may participate in workshops and worship sharing at the annual sessions or special weekend workshops offered during the year by the yearly meeting. Retreats and workshops on a variety of topics are available through Pendle Hill Retreat Center in Pennsylvania. Other regional, national and international Quaker groups (see section on Wider Quaker Organizations see pages xx-xx) also provide opportunities for individual Friends and meetings to grow spiritually.

Queries

How does our meeting provide for the religious education of children and adults?
How do we recognize and nurture the gifts of children and adults in our meeting?
How does our meeting prepare adults and children for worship and for living in a manner consistent with the principles of the Religious Society of Friends?
How do we share our spiritual journeys with each other, including our children?
How do we help our children participate in all aspects of the meeting community?
Does our meeting conduct background checks and mandated reporter training for teachers and other child care workers?
Does our meeting encourage individuals to participate in events beyond the local meeting?