

Minutes of Central England Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) held at Bull Street Meeting House and online on 23rd November 2024

Clerk: Rae Ritchie Assistant Clerk: Paula Button
Elder: Richard Pashley
Pastoral Friend: Alastair Dow

2024.118 Worship

We have observed a period of stillness during which we heard of the deaths of our Friends Mike Lane (COV, not in membership) on 25th September 2024, Carol Pratt (COV) on 24th October 2024 and Peter Shirley (SOL) on 7th November 2024.

We also heard read the first five paragraphs from 11.01 of *Quaker Faith and Practice* concerning the meaning of membership:

'The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net,' wrote Francis Howgill in 1663, 'and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in.'

Early Friends felt no need for formal membership; they were a community of seekers who recognised in each other a similar hunger, a similar quest. Seeking the 'hidden seed of God', they were prepared to recognise it wherever they found it.

The seventeenth century, however, was not an easy time to be a dissenter; and Friends, like many others, suffered ridicule, arrest, imprisonment, fines, distraint of their goods and death. In this harsh climate it required a degree of personal commitment to avow membership openly. This, combined with the recognition of a 'heavenly power' at work, was all that was required.

Today membership may not involve putting liberty, goods or life at risk but the spiritual understanding of membership is, in essentials, the same as that which guided the 'Children of the Light'. People still become Friends through 'convincement', and like early Friends they wrestle and rejoice with that experience. Membership is still seen as a discipleship, a discipline within a broadly Christian perspective and our Quaker tradition, where the way we live is as important as the beliefs we affirm.

Like all discipleships, membership has its elements of commitment and responsibility but it is also about joy and celebration. Membership is for those who feel at home and in the right place within the Quaker community. Membership is also a way of saying to the meeting, and to the world, that you accept at least the fundamental elements of being a Quaker: the understanding of divine guidance, the manner of corporate worship and the ordering of the meeting's business, the practical expression of inward convictions and the equality of all before God. Participation in the process that leads to admission into the community of the meeting is an affirmation of what the meeting stands for and of your willingness to contribute to its life.

Membership is fully open to people of all ages and abilities. Therefore, whilst it may involve a profession of faith, it may also be grounded in participation in the life of the meeting. It follows that the meaning of membership, as expressed in this section, has to be considered in a manner appropriate to the age and ability of the individual concerned.

2024.119 Representatives

The following Local Meetings are represented: BGR, BOU, BUL, COT, COV, HAL, HAR, KIN, SEL, STO, SUT, WAL, WAR.

The clerks welcome the following Attenders joining us today: Pete Doubtfire (BUL), Wilhemina Morton (SEL) and Ian Taylor (SUT).

2024.120 Future of British Quakerism Conference

Included in the papers is a booklet about The Future of British Quakerism Conference and includes seven items from a variety of sources:

- 1) Ten preliminary findings from the British Quaker Survey 2023. 4718 people, made up of 70% members and 28% attenders, completed this survey.

There are three reports and personal reflections from individuals from Central England Area Meeting who attended the conference as our representatives:

- 2) Future of British Quakerism Conference – report for AM – Lee Gunn (COV)
- 3) Reflections on Future of British Quakerism Conference – Donald Stubbings (BOU)
- 4) Reflections on Future of British Quakerism Conference – Rae Ritchie (HAR)

These give an overview of the weekend, important speakers, topics, activities and Friends' responses to all of these.

What's next?

- 5) The Minute from The Future of British Quakerism Conference 18 – 20 October 2024

The conference produced a minute which acknowledged the decline in numbers but also the positive opportunities that we have. The good news is we can go anywhere we are led. We are all ministers, all here to discern God's leadings. We all need to reconnect with the Spirit, we are not here in our own power. We need to set self aside, sometimes surrendering ourselves to discomfort, to leave ourselves open for transformation. We have to trust in the Spirit, the process and each other.

- 6) The penultimate item is an Update from Woodbrooke, particularly regarding resources and courses such as Becoming Friends, Equipping for Ministry and Simpler Meetings
- 7) Finally, there is an Update from Quaker Life drawing our attention to the wide-ranging support available to friends and meetings

We thank everyone who contributed to the content and the creation of this document.

2024.121 Minutes from Local Meetings

We have received the following minute from Warwick Local Meeting:

Minute 24/55 Nominations for Meeting Roles (including appointment of additional Pastoral Friends) for 2025 (part)

We are aware that Area Meeting (AM) on 22nd October was unable to appoint two of the Friends suggested, by us, to serve as Pastoral Friends for this Meeting. This was because the AM has not formally agreed that they can appoint attenders as Pastoral Friends. The AM was not made aware that one of the Friends, not appointed, had previously been appointed by AM as an Overseer / Pastoral Friend for the triennium 2022 to 2024.

We acknowledge that the way that the two Friends, who were not appointed, were informed, via the Area Meeting minutes, was clumsy and hurtful. We ask our Clerk to send this minute to the AM Co Clerks and to ask that that this minute is read out at the November AM. We ask this while wishing to be supportive to the Co Clerks in the challenging role that they undertake on our behalf.

The list of Friends, proposed to serve the Meeting from January to December 2025 has been circulated for consideration.

The Area Meeting Clerks wish to apologise for the confusion and hurt caused. This incident reflects the broader issues surrounding the status of attenders within Quakers and the need to clarify our position.

2024.122 Reflections on the Morning's Workshop

Before Area Meeting today, there was a Woodbrooke Where You Are Workshop entitled "Belonging and Membership" facilitated by Rhiannon Grant. The workshop began with a short period of worship followed by a reflection from Rhiannon on the nature of belonging and community. Rhiannon used the metaphors of relationships and marriage and of a sailing ship with passengers and crew being guided by the wind of the Spirit, which many of us found helpful and illuminating.

During the second part of the session, we moved into self-selecting breakout groups to reflect on different aspects of membership: practical, spiritual and technical. Each group considered three questions:

1. Practical
 - a. In practice, what's the difference between a member and an attender?
 - b. How does someone become a member? In your experience, what is involved in becoming a member and how does it feel to apply or not (yet) have applied?
 - c. How do we provide pastoral support to all members of the area meeting, both in local meetings and those who are on the unattached list?
2. Spiritual
 - a. In your experience, what difference does being a member or an attender make to your spiritual life?

- b. How does the decision to apply for membership (or not) relate to someone's spiritual journey?
 - c. What does our current membership structure look like from the point of view of the Inward Light, or God who is Love?
3. Technical
- a. Who should be at a meeting for worship for business at local or area meeting, and why?
 - b. Which, if any, roles and responsibilities in our community should require someone to be a member, and why?
 - c. If we changed our membership process – for example, inviting people into membership rather than waiting for them to apply – what other changes to our discipline might follow?

2024.123 Reflections on Membership and the Role of Attenders

During both the feedback from the smaller groups in this morning's workshop and the contributions during this meeting, themes included equality between members and attenders, trust between Area Meeting and Local Meetings, the sense of membership as a joyful and significant step in one's spiritual journey, the need to be a welcoming community and concerns about losing the essence of Quakerism if membership loses its importance. We have also heard a lot about the hurt and confusion that can surround the question of membership.

Among this wide range of views and experiences, there is a sense that we as an Area Meeting can trust Local Meetings to discern who in their meeting has the gifts and sense of responsibility to serve as Pastoral Friends. Therefore, if a Local Meeting feels that an attender is suitable to serve in a pastoral role, we as an Area Meeting will treat this nomination as we would the nomination of a member. We ask Warwick Local Meeting to share again the previous nominations of Pastoral Friends, as referenced in 2024.121 Minutes from Local Meetings.

This minute, as well as the previous two minutes on the Future of British Quakerism conference and the minute from Warwick Local Meeting, are part of ongoing discernment about the meaning of membership within the Religious Society of Friends. This is certainly not the end of the conversation but one more step along the journey we are all part of.

There is also a sense that we wish to be an inclusive Area Meeting that welcomes attenders who may be on a journey into membership or for whom membership is not part of their spiritual journey at this moment. At the same time, we are aware that our Area Meeting's Meetings for Worship for Business are not a public meeting in the same way that Meeting for Worship is. This raises additional questions around risk and confidentiality. The Clerks will continue discernment on this issue and will return with a response to a future Area Meeting.

2024.124 The Future of the Peace Hub: Next Steps

We have received a report from the Peace Hub Management Committee setting out their priorities for the project following a strategic review and they have produced the following possible goals:

- Working with & supporting other groups committed to peace & social justice, through outreach, inreach & networking
- Organising peace events & activities that build on this partnership work
- Taking people on a journey from passive to active in this peace work

The Committee highlighted their intention to lay down the drop-in model (i.e. close the Hub to the public) at the end of the year. They feel that freeing up their ability to meet people where they are and allowing the coordinator more flexible use of their work time will better help them achieve their aim of building an inclusive community active on matters of peace and justice. Specific areas covered in more detail were the co-ordinator role, a focus group and use of the building.

As an Area Meeting, we support these proposals and look forward to seeing how the new working arrangements develop from January 2025 onwards.

We thank the Committee for their report and for all the work they do. We note the Minute from Property Committee requesting ideas for the use of the window and ground floor space at 41a Bull Street. Please send any such ideas to Sarah Barker, Principal Officer. We also encourage Local Meetings to share the new peace and social justice volunteering opportunities with their meetings.

2024.125 CEQ Annual Accounts 2023, Forecast Accounts 2024 and Budget 2025 including proposals from R2R, WorkCare and CYPC

- a) We have received the CEQ Annual Report and Accounts 2023 from Area Meeting Treasurer, Anne Ullathorne. We note that there was a small surplus, as opposed to the operating loss the previous year, and that the Area Meeting balance sheet remains healthy but efforts to make our operations more effective and efficient are ongoing.
- b) We have also received the CEQ Forecast Accounts 2024 and Budget 2025 along with proposals from the CEQ Responding to Racism group, West Midlands WorkCare chaplaincy project and the CEQ Children and Young People's Committee. All three have financial implications for the 2025 budget.
- c) In response to specific points raised by the Area Meeting Treasurer:
 - Peacemaker grant: we note that this has increased by £3,000 but as the rental charge for using 41a Bull Street, which was paid to Peace Hub, has now been waived, provision for the cost of rent has been removed from the grant. This brings the grant to £26,000.
 - Peace Hub grant: we note that because of the changes in how it operates, the Peace Hub grant will now be £3,000, which its management committee is happy with.
 - Community Justice Group: we note that whereas CJG was previously a separate branch of CEQ with its own bank account, it is now a group with a ring-fenced budget within the CEQ General Fund.
- d) The subject of finances raises many difficult feelings, with competing priorities and strongly held views on many sides.
 - As an Area Meeting, we support the Treasurer's proposal for funding to BYM and WorkCare.
 - We ask the Treasurer and Finance Committee to incorporate the request from CEQ R2R into the budget for the year ahead too.
 - With regards to EcoBirmingham, the Area Meeting Clerks will share the previous minute about funding for this project with the Treasurer and Finance Committee to help guide this decision. If this minute isn't clear and precise about what was discerned, they are welcome to return to the next Area Meeting for further clarity.
 - With regards to the proposal for a Children, Youth and Families' Worker, this is new work that will require significant funding. It is also important work that finds broad support within our Local Meetings. We ask the Treasurer to bring possible funding options for this role to the next Area Meeting for further discernment.

2024.126 Membership matters

a) Deaths

We have received notification of the death of Mike Lane (COV, not in membership) on 25th September 2024, Carol Pratt (COV) on 24th October 2024 and Peter Shirley (SOL) on 7th November 2024.

b) Transfer Out Confirmation

We have received confirmation of the transfer out of Ruth Gaston (WAR) to Leicester Area Meeting.

c) Internal transfer

We have received notice of the transfer of Pete Duckworth from Coventry Local Meeting to Hartshill Local Meeting.

2024.127 Nominations

a) NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE SUGGESTS:

Georgie Thomas (BGR) to serve on Trustees Finance Committee from January 2025 to December 2027.

John West (BGR) to serve on Quaker Christmas Parcels from January 2025 to December 2027.

Ellie Rushton (BOU) to serve on Quaker Christmas Parcels from January 2025 to December 2027.

Jo Hallett (COV) to serve for another triennium on clerks' advisory committee from January 2025 to December 2027.

Judith Millington (HAL) to serve on Peace Hub Management Committee for a third triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Ian Neal (BOU) to serve on Peacemakers Management Committee for another triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Ted Raybould (COT) and Anne Giles (BOU) to visit Fiona Campbell on her journey into membership.

Rob Hooper (WAR) and Julia Furminger (STO) to visit Marion Doyen on her journey into membership.

b) APPOINTMENTS OF ELDERS AND PASTORAL FRIENDS

Bull Street Local Meeting suggests Barbara Forbes and Stephen Petter to serve as Elders for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027 and Wendy Burnett, Greg Coombs and Alastair Dow to serve as Pastoral Friends for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Coventry Local Meeting suggests Gyll Brown, Mig Kerr, Eleanor Nesbitt, Stella Roberts, Diane Stobbs and James Stacey to serve as Elders/Pastoral Friends for another triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Hartshill Local Meeting suggests Clare Barnett, Jane Carr, Daniel Keeler and Paul Hewitt to serve as Elders/Pastoral Friends for another triennium from January 2025 to December 2027. Pete Duckworth to serve as Elder/Pastoral for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Solihull Local Meeting suggests Donald Whitlock to serve as an Elder/Pastoral Friend for a third triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Stourbridge Local Meeting suggests John Lampen, Julia Furminger, Carole Pannell and Lynn Morris to serve as Elders from January 2025 to December 2025 and Judith Parkin, Rosalie Rider, and Tricia Bradbury to serve as Pastoral Friends from January 2025 to December 2025.

Selly Oak Local Meeting suggests Alison Ironside, Rajan Naidu, Barnaby Waters and Helen Waters to serve as Elders from January 2025 to December 2025.

Sutton Coldfield Local Meeting suggests Keith Hitchcock and Joanna Shirley to serve as Elders/Pastoral Friends for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027, Cathy Khurana to serve as an Elder/Pastoral Friend for two years from January 2025 to December 2026 and Fiona Waterhouse and Margot Williams to serve as an Elder/Pastoral Friend for one year from January 2025 to December 2025.

Walsall Local Meeting suggests Jane Stanley and Jim Green to serve as Elders/Pastoral Friends for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

c) APPOINTMENT TO AREA MEETING NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

Cotteridge Local Meeting suggests that their representation for 2025 be shared by the members of their local nominations committee, Cathy Tuckett, Janet Blann and Sarah Jones.

Harts Hill Local Meeting suggests Paul Hewitt to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Kings Heath Local Meeting suggests David Gough to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027 and Ruth Livermore to serve as an alternate on Area Meeting nominations committee for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Selly Oak Local Meeting suggests Alison Ironside to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027 and Stuart Morton to serve as an alternate on Area Meeting nominations committee from January 2025 to December 2027.

Solihull Local Meeting suggests Caroline Gibbs to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee for a triennium from January 2025 to December 2027.

Stourbridge Local Meeting suggests Rosalie Rider and Nicholas Paton Philip to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee from January 2025 to December 2025. Tricia Bradbury and Carole Pannell will be ex officio on this committee as safeguarding coordinators.

Sutton Coldfield Local Meeting suggests Cathy Khurana to serve on Area Meeting nominations committee for a year from January 2025 to December 2025.

d) RELEASE FROM SERVICE:

Donald Whitlock (SOL) from Elders and Pastoral Friends Support Group. We thank our Friend for their service.

2024.128 Friends Acting Under Concern

The Specialist Defence and Security Convention UK, or SDSC-UK, arms fair was held at Telford International Centre on 18th, 19th and 20th November 2024, with a day of activity on 20th. Our Friend Jo Hindley (COT) shared the following report:

An estimated 200 people from anti-arms trade groups including Quakers from across the Central England/Midlands, Gloucestershire, Cumbria, Manchester & Warrington, Wales and Cornwall; Birmingham Peace Hub; Campaign against the Arms Trade; South Staffordshire Palestine Solidarity; Drone Wars; Stop the War Coalition and Extinction Rebellion (www.tinyurl.com/STOPSDSC) gathered in fresh snow and bright sunshine early on Wednesday 20th November 2024 at the gates of Telford International Centre who were hosting a 3 day arms fair: the "SDSC-UK" (Specialist Defence and Security Convention UK, <https://www.sdsc-uk.co.uk/>, formerly the "3CDSE", Three Counties Defence and Security Expo) featuring:

- *Elbit Systems: manufacturer of bombs, mortars and drones, and Israel's largest privately held arms company*

- *L3 Harris: maker of surveillance, night vision and targeting equipment and supplier of bomb release mechanisms for Israel's F35 aircraft, which has been confirmed as being involved in the deaths of civilians in Gaza*
- *Ultra Electronics has been granted numerous arms export licences to Israel by the UK Government and has been involved in the development of the F35 warplane*

The day of creative protest included speeches, a Quaker Meeting for Worship, sharing food, the visitation of the XR Birmingham Peace Dove, a "die-in" outside the Telford shopping centre, and a dignified and profoundly moving symbolic ritual laying of shrouded infant "corpses" at the foot of an olive tree on a grass bank opposite and in direct view of the International Centre by Extinction Rebellion Red Rebels – in the gathered silence a single drum tapped an accompaniment and the names of infants aged under one year who have been killed by weapons deployed in Gaza were read aloud.

The police searched one couple racialised as white on suspicion that they might be planning to lock on to the gates, discovering only their packed lunch. No arrests were made.

The six people, including four Central England Quakers, who were arrested for chaining on to each other at the gates of the SDSC in November 2023 "attended" in puppet form as their bail conditions prevented them attending in person. Their trial set for May 2024 was postponed. It is currently scheduled for three days from Monday 20th January 2025 at Walsall Crown Court.

Friends are reminded that their support for those arrested at the event last year is still needed and that they can join the WhatsApp group for updates – contact Jo Hindley for the link.

Postcards to express opposition to the Telford International Centre hosting the arms fair are available from the Peace Hub.

2024.129 Priory Rooms Report

We have received a report from Jim Green, Clerk to the Directors of The Priory Rooms, about how the venue operated in the 2023 calendar year. A successful trading period meant The Priory Rooms was able to donate £60,000 to Central England Quakers, although increased costs, particularly of utilities, will impact profits in 2024.

The report outlines the relationship between The Priory Rooms and Central England Quakers, including the influence of Quaker testimonies on how the company operates, for example, donating surplus food to local charities. The report also highlights the important role that The Priory Rooms plays in raising the profile of Quakers to the 30,000 visitors who used the facilities over the year.

It is clear from both the report and the customer testimonies included in the papers that The Priory Rooms staff are a vital asset and we thank them, as well as the eight directors (all drawn from Central England Quakers) for their continued hard work and commitment.

2024.130 Fox@400 and Quaker Week 2024

There are no further events planned in Central England to mark George Fox 400. Woodbrooke courses related to George Fox 400 are listed here: <https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/fox-at-400/>. These include:

- George Fox and the Gospel of Mary: Transformed by Vision 3rd&10th December 7-8.30pm
- Story Weaving with George Fox: Christmas: Friday 13th December 7-8.30pm

A full list of events outside of Central England Area Meeting is available here: <https://fwcc.world/event/fox/>.

As the anniversary year of Fox's birth draws to a close, we have received a request from Ellie McCarthy, George Fox at 400 Co-ordinator at Quakers in Britain, who is undertaking an evaluation of the George Fox 400 project, including the outcomes of local events and use of resources. She has asked if all organisers of Fox@400 events within Central England Quakers can respond to a simple feedback form, available here: <https://forms.office.com/e/QN6zaA5LWS>.

The Area Meeting Clerks also ask Local Meetings to share their responses to the Fox@400 anniversary for inclusion in a future Area Meeting. Did your meeting organise an event or participate in any Fox@400 events? Has the anniversary year shaped the life of your meeting in any way? Has it inspired your meeting spiritually or encouraged any other action or reflection? Please share these and any other perspectives on the year with the office by Wednesday 5th February 2025.

The Area Meeting Clerks are seeking responses from Local Meetings to Quaker Week 2024 too. Again, did your meeting organise an event or participate in any Quaker Week 2024 events? Has Quaker Week 2024 shaped the life of your meeting in any way? Has it inspired your meeting spiritually or encouraged any other action or reflection? Please share these and any other perspectives with the office by Wednesday 5th February 2025.

2024.131 Area Meeting and Intervisitation Dates 2025

A calendar showing the dates and venues of Area Meetings in 2025 is available in the papers for this meeting and will also be shared with all Local Meetings, with a coloured version available for display on internal noticeboards. The calendar also highlights the four months in 2025 that have five Sundays, which is when the Elders and Pastoral Friends Support Group encourage Friends to visit another Local Meeting within the area.

The Area Meeting Clerks are aware that the dates of Area Meeting do not always suit all Local Meetings but hope that this explanation is helpful:

- Area Meeting is usually held on the fourth Wednesday, Thursday or Saturday of the month. The devotional Area Meetings in May and August are exceptions to this but they have no business so time is not needed to produce the papers in advance.
- The timescale for each Area Meeting with business is as follows:
 - First Sunday of the month: many Local Meetings hold their Meeting for Worship for Business
 - Wednesday following the first Sunday: deadline for items for Area Meeting to be with the office or AM clerks
 - Friday following the first Sunday: AM clerks meet in person to agree the agenda and the calling letter is emailed out
 - Wednesday following the second Sunday: papers are printed, posted and emailed out
 - By the third Saturday of the month: printed papers should have arrived with Local Meeting correspondents
 - Third Sunday of the month: papers can be given to the Local Meeting representative to Area Meeting. This gives Friends at least three days to read the papers before Area Meeting.

The Clerks aware that some Local Meetings hold their Meetings for Worship for Business on the second Sunday of the month. As the papers are not sent out until the Wednesday following the second Sunday, it may be possible for items from these Meetings for Worship for Business to go into the papers but it would be helpful for the office or the AM clerks to know in advance if something is expected. In these instances, please could Local Meeting clerks email the item to the office on the Sunday evening or first thing on Monday morning following their Meeting for Worship for Business.

2024.132 Thanks and Next Meeting

We thank Bull Street Friends for their warm welcome and hospitality.

We hope to meet again, should nothing occur to prevent, on Saturday 25th January 2025 at 2pm at Bull Street Meeting House. There will be lunch beforehand along with an Activities Fayre with information and representatives from a range of Central England Quaker committees, groups and branches such as the Community Justice Group, Peacemakers and the Christmas Parcels Committee.

This is an opportunity for Friends from across the Area Meeting to learn more about the wide range of activities undertaken in our name and the Area Meeting Clerks hope it will prove an inspiring and encouraging start to the new year. If your committee, group or branch would like to have a table but have yet to sign up, please let the office know.

The deadline for agenda items to be with the office is Wednesday 8th January 2025.

Signed in and on behalf of Central England Area Meeting

Rae Ritchie, clerk this time