

Central England Area Quaker Meeting Report on
The Future of British Quakerism Conference
Including Further Resources

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Ten preliminary findings from the British Quaker Survey 2023

4718 people completed the survey (70% Members, 28% Attenders)

1. The average age is 66 compared to 65 in 2013
2. About 60% first attended before the age of 45, with around 18% first attending under the age of 18 and around 8% between ages 18-24
3. Most have been coming for more than a decade but 30% have started attending within the last 10 years
4. Almost ¼ of those who have come into membership did so between one and three years, while fewer than 10% joined in less than a year and around 12% did so after 10 years
5. 90% feel part of a Local Meeting, slightly less than 40% feel part of an Area Meeting, less than 30% part of Yearly Meeting, 10% identify with an online group and almost 40% stated other
6. Quakers identify as a (in descending order) spiritual person, religious person, humanist, agnostic, atheist
7. Quakers also identify as a (in descending order) Christian, Universalist, Non-theist, Buddhist, Pagan and other
8. More than 50% came straight to Quakers without being involved in any other spiritual group
9. Asked “Do you believe in God?”, just under 50% said yes, just under 20% said no, just over 30% said not sure and just under 10% didn’t answer
10. Attitudes to Jesus are mixed too: in response to the question “Is Jesus important in your life?”, more said no than yes but an even higher number said it varies – and half answered yes to “Are his teachings important to you?”



Future of British Quakerism Conference - report for AM – Lee Gunn (COV)

The Future of British Quakerism Conference was held at Yarnfield Park in Staffordshire from 18th to 20th October. About 250 people were there, most in-person, and others online. Several Friends from Central England took part, and as a relatively new Quaker I felt it was a particular privilege to be representing our Area Meeting. I learned a huge amount, and my knowledge (and appreciation) of British Quakerism has been developed far beyond my expectations. It was also good to meet a few younger Friends, including Yearly Meeting and development workers, as well as ‘weighty Quakers’.

On Friday night, results from the 2023 British Quaker survey were presented. Previous surveys, carried out every ten years or so, chose particular Meetings to research; this time, all Friends were invited to take part online or on paper, and 27% responded (over 4,000) – a huge response in survey terms. The results are wide-ranging and illuminating, and together with information from the ‘tabular data’ on members and attenders, they provided a useful backdrop to the sessions that followed.

Keynotes

There were two contrasting ‘keynote’ sessions on Saturday morning, from Ben Pink Dandelion (Woodbrooke) and from Paul Parker (Recording Clerk, Britain Yearly Meeting). Ben emphasized that our collective mystical faith underpins everything we do as Quakers, and that though Quakerism is generally seen as low in detailed theology, it cannot exist without a theological core. Paul suggested that the world needs us, and we need to be generous with our faith; welcoming is more important than setting boundaries, and we can only thrive if we are open to everyone who wants to come with us; also, for some Friends, witness comes first, and faith follows.

Both speakers spoke about issues with Quakerism today. Numbers have dropped, though not as much as some had expected. Possibly more worrying are indications that many Friends feel burdened with buildings, structures and roles. There is low identification with Area Meetings (and even lower with Yearly Meeting). We might be becoming a church you can only fully belong to if you are retired; we tend to be sheepish about outreach; and we are making slow progress in diversifying our community.

In contrast, Paul assured us that obstacles can be removed, and Ben urged casting away what we can’t cope with. ‘Green shoots’ were identified, including new structures promising to release energy. Non-traditional online communities are developing. About 90 local meetings have grown, often with younger people. We have made a start on welcoming minority groups, some appreciating the safety they feel with Quakers. Also, our commitment to peace and climate justice is undimmed.

Workshops and leadings

Later on Saturday, we divided into workshop discussions on resources, membership and belonging, theology, ‘a confident Quaker voice’ and equality, diversity and inclusion. After dinner, Rhiannon Grant from Woodbrooke presented leadings from these sessions.

She spoke of burdens, conflict (not prominent here, but very apparent elsewhere), anxieties about our religious position, about change, and about diversity (and our lack of it). We are not good at speaking openly about problems, nor about our

spiritual life. Beyond all of this, we live in a troubled society challenged by climate change, health and social issues, technological developments, and more.

Our practice involves discerning reality as a communal activity, based on eternal principles and a responsive, co-creative element – with ‘some sense of the mystical’. Though some think of non-theism as making us incoherent, the non-theist network follows the same process, and receives guidance in the same way, as more traditional Quakers.

Rhiannon used the metaphor of a hang-glider for dealing with changes; jumping off a cliff involves a leap, and trust; to land safely relies on skill, and the right equipment. Fresh inspiration might mean making Meeting for Worship more accessible, more do-able, with released energy; letting go of middle-class norms; and finding new metaphors and language, being actively involved in dialogue. If we can support our communities so that they are stronger, people will be more interested in joining us.

Young Friends General Meeting met in Brighton that same weekend, and they sent blessings. They hoped that we can become unafraid to explain ourselves; and for simplicity and renewal.

Many Friends responded to the leadings with questions and reactions, including one who urged us to ‘get on with it’; as a Quaker dealing with changing structures in his area, he is exhausted with the work involved. Another Friend emphasized that nurturing is needed when change-movers move ahead of change-haters. Finally, the question was asked: Why are we trying to create a future for Quakerism, what is precious about it? A personal answer was given: it is the practice we have inherited and we are part of.

Final session and minute

A Meeting for Worship for Business was held on the final morning of the conference. Ministry was full and wide-ranging, and resulted in a minute, which is to be made available online, together with further resources.

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Reflections on future of British Quakerism conference – Donald Stubbings (BOU)

Held 18-20 October 2024: a partnership between Quaker Life and Woodbrooke.

I am not sure what I expected. 64 of 70 area meetings were represented either in person or online. In her opening remarks Rachel Swancott of Quaker Life referred to the Manchester Conference of 1895 that had produced significant change and has led, to some extent, to where and who we are today.

Shena Deuchars presented the partial results 2023 British Quaker Survey. This was followed by Ben Pink Dandelion - Open to Transformation? and Paul Parker - Visualising Quaker Futures. Thereafter we had workshops. I attended Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - Justice and Welcome. Rhiannon Grant brought together all these strands including those from Young Friends meeting in Brighton who were also discussing these issues.

It is clear we are at juncture where we need to make significant decisions about our future. We need to be clear about who we are. 50% identify as Christians. The

dialogue about whether we remain primarily Christian with porous boundaries or whether we somehow become more amorphous is something that needs clarification.

Being clear about who we are also affects how we think about meeting for worship. It should be crucial to our life and not an optional extra. In meeting for worship do we have an encounter with the divine and thus be open to transformation? Are we practical mystics engaged with the world? And then there is the question of how we become Quakers – what learning materials do we use, how well do we know our theology, what induction processes do we use?

If we are to do outreach it needs to be primarily towards a young population otherwise our numbers will continue to decline. 86% of people who come to meeting for worship came because they were invited; only 2% came for the first time because of marketing materials. A Friend spoke about his meeting where two ladies were constantly inviting people into the meeting and the meeting grew. When they died the meeting has gradually become smaller.

Our structures are bureaucratic and need simplification. Do meeting houses add to the spiritual life of the community? If not they probably have to go. We may have to let go of many things we hold dear. And we need to embrace change. 10% of those who completed the survey identify as belonging to an online Quaker community. I was taken by one comment: How we reduce the costs have different answers from how we increase “sales”. Need to focus on the second and not on the first.

It seems to me the change we are looking for is something everyone needs to be involved in. I could say much more but the transcripts and slides of the proceedings will be available and I hope most Friends will read them. There is a lot to digest. We finished the conference with a meeting for worship for business and produced a minute.

Reflections on The Future of British Quakerism conference – Rae Ritchie (HAR)

Having written these reflections, I'm beginning to sense that the biggest challenge to our future is internal and is spiritual. We are in danger of losing the radical spirituality that is the core of the Quaker way: the direct encounter with the divine as we each understand this. Lose this and we risk:

- a) becoming too fixated by intellectual and philosophical debates about the nature of the divine to listen to how the spirit is moving us to act in the world today
- b) losing recognition of the specific historical context in which Quakerism as a movement emerged. The structure and organisation of the Society of Friends, and even the language used to describe their experiences, emerged in seventeenth-century England, a deeply Christian society. We don't live in seventeenth-century England now.

Four elements of the conference at Yarnfield Park have led me to these conclusions.

1) The focus on age

There was much discussion about the age profile of British Quakers, which is now 66 (up from 65 in 2013), and requests to compare this with other churches and voluntary bodies.

I'm wondering if our age demographic is really such a barrier to becoming welcoming and inclusive communities? Or is it easier for us to focus on this rather than how overwhelming white and middle class we are?

2) The disconnect between discussions about children, young people and families and the reality

Asked what he would do if he was given £1 million to use as he wished, recording clerk Paul Parker didn't hesitate in saying he'd spend the lot on children and youth work. Throughout the whole weekend, there was lots said about the need to welcome and support children and families in our meetings. Throughout the weekend, there was also a toddler present because his parent couldn't attend unless they bought him along – and no provision for children had been made.

Again, this led me to wonder whether we as a Society *really* want to welcome and support children and families. If the answer is yes, are we willing to do what it actually takes to make this a reality? Could a parent of a two-, seven-, 12- or 17-year-old who regularly attends one of our Local Meetings centre down in Meeting for Worship or an Area Meeting for Business trusting that their child was being spiritually nurtured in the same building at the same time?

3) Entrenched views not open hearts

The opening session focused on the results of the 2023 Quaker survey, but the Q&A that followed showed that some attendees had come along with very fixed opinions about the future of British Quakerism, expressed in strident declarations of catastrophic failure and terminal decline.

To misquote Isaac Pennington, are willing to give over our own willing? Are we all open to the movings of the spirit and the possibility of renewal and regeneration? Some of the attitudes expressed at the event suggest that some within the Society are not.

4) Spiritual conservatism

One of the themes of the weekend was outreach. How can we do a better job of sharing the Quaker way, both individually and collectively? Many people said they found it difficult to talk to others about Quakers. One asked Paul Parker how to explain Quakers when, given the divergent views among us, we can't even state what we believe. Parker replied that we can simply tell people we believe every person can have a direct encounter with the divine, however they understand that.

The implication of the question was that we need a more overt statement of theology. This niggled me at the time and has niggled at me since. As Quakers, we've never shared a fixed statement of beliefs. Yes, we have traditionally been a Christian church, reflecting our origins in seventeenth-century England. Today England is very different. How we understand and talk about the divine is going to be different to how Fox and his contemporaries understood and talked about the divine.

If we move in the direction of trying to fix our beliefs and insist that we all must sign up to a certain vision of the divine, we lose the central tenet of Quakerism: that we each have a direct encounter with the divine. This made Fox radical in his day, and it makes us radical in ours. It's a feature of the Quaker way, not a flaw.

Similarly, part of the radical spirituality of Quakers is that every day is equally sacramental. So why do we largely all meet on Sunday mornings? Again, it's a product of the circumstances in which we have existed as a Society. Meeting on Sunday mornings was convenient. But is it still? For many people, both within the Society and outside, it isn't. We need more Meetings for Worship at other times and on other days. Not every Local Meeting can offer this flexibility, but surely as an Area Meeting, we can make such provisions?

We can have Meeting for Worship at any time, in any place. It's a feature of the Quaker way, not a flaw.

One final point of note: there were at least eight members of Central England Quakers online and in-person at the conference in different capacities. Speaking to some of them since, there was frustration that the discussion didn't go further and break new ground in terms of what we can do to nurture a healthy future for the Society. At the same time, there is also a sense that in some ways we as an Area Meeting are ahead of the curve on these issues – that we've already spent time threshing the challenges and some of the solutions, for example, with the Woodbrooke day in May 2022 and the resultant "What does love require of us?" Special Working Group, whose recommendations our Trustees are now working on.

What's next?

There will be a follow-up meeting for conference delegates in January and we will report back again after this.

In the meantime, there is a resources page for the event that all Quakers are invited to explore, although it is password protected as it is currently intended only for those who attended the conference and the wider community of Quakers in Britain. For details about how to obtain the password, visit www.woodbrooke.org.uk/FoBQ. The resources page contains:

- The Future of British Quakerism Minute (included below)
- Update from Woodbrooke (included below)
- Update from Quaker Life (included below)
- British Quaker Survey 2023 – Preliminary Results – survey paper and presentation slides
- Open for Transformation? – Ben Pink Dandelion – recording and transcript
- Visualising Quaker Futures – Paul Parker – recording and transcript
- Looking for Leadings – Rhiannon Grant – recording and transcript

The Minute from the Future of British Quakerism Conference 18 – 20 October 2024

Preamble

To inform our discernment, over the weekend we heard contributions from four Friends. The first was Shena Deuchars, who talked us through the initial results of the British Quaker Survey, distributed to Friends in Britain in 2023.

We then heard a moving and inspiring talk from Ben Pink Dandelion. He shared with us his discernment on who we are as a people following a spiritual path, all seeking encounter with the Divine. He reflected on his 2014 Swarthmore Lecture, 'Open for Transformation': Being Quaker.¹ Looking to the future, he spoke about how we might grow and flourish and encouraged us to tell our stories and be able to speak our truth as Quakers, using our own words, and to share this widely.

Next we heard from Paul Parker, our Recording Clerk, with more thoughts on the reality of where we are as a Religious Society in terms of numbers and resources, both human and financial. Again we were asked to think deeply about how we can grow our own strength of conviction, and share it to enable growth in our local meetings, area meetings, and Britain Yearly Meeting.

We all attended workshops in the afternoon. A summary of what happened in these was brought to us on Saturday evening by Rhiannon Grant, as she reflected back to us what we had heard so far, in her session on Looking for Leadings. We were moved by the analogy she gave of being at the edge of a cliff and feeling the movement of the wind – a precarious situation, but what if we had a hang glider? If we jumped off the cliff supported by a hang glider, the wind would be our power and the hang glider would hold us and guide us. What might our hang gliders look like? What if we surrendered to transformation, took a leap, and trusted the Spirit?

Over the weekend we shared our worries and hopes. There was a sense of positivity and realism. On Sunday morning we held a worship sharing session focusing on the next steps. The following minute captures the ministry heard in this session. We ended the weekend with a final Meeting for Worship.

Sunday morning session on Next Steps

About 250 Friends gathered, some at Yarnfield Park, some online. We came together to seek the will of God, looking for leadings on the future of British Quakerism.

The figures in the Britain Yearly Meeting Tabular Statement are not encouraging. If we carry on as we are, we'll dip under ten thousand members in a small number of years' time. We are seeing small meetings closing, and many are struggling. Looking ahead, to continue as we are is unsustainable. The recent British Quaker Survey suggests three quarters of us are over sixty, and nearly two thirds are over seventy. Even if lots of new older people keep joining us, that can't last - and numbers seem likely to fall further before they rise. Will we find ourselves losing our geographic spread?

We can't talk about the future without making sure we sort the present and we must ground everything we do in worship, seeking God's guidance.

¹ Ben Pink Dandelion (2014) Swarthmore Lecture at University of Bath 2014. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRO-lGD9emM&t=65s>

We have heard of the importance of doing what is easy and possible, in small steps – a shared lunch after meeting, Friends House cards with contact details and Quaker badges are examples.² When we let our lives speak and take action, it can have unexpected and positive consequences, which help us grow.

We can be sowers of seeds. Let us not keep our precious seeds in our pockets.

Young Friends General Meeting held at Brighton on 18th to 20th October shared with us their hopes and blessings for the future of British Quakerism:

I hope for discipline, integrity, radical acts for our vulnerable communities

I hope we are connected joyfully and lovingly

May we do the work for systematic change

I want to plant a seed of simplicity and renewal

May British Quakerism in the future actually make significant positive change

May there still be a world to live in

I'm hoping for a more diverse space where trans and nonbinary people are included

I want to plant a seed of spreading awareness and being unafraid of explaining what Quakerism is, and is to us

May future British Quakerism stop having committees about committees

May British Quakerism in the future grieve and let go of what it needs to, in order to flourish and grow

I want to plant the seed of doubt in our current methods of operation and business

I want to plant a seed of listening and compassion

May British Quakerism continue to be a source of comfort and inspiration

I hope that Quakers of the future will continue to embrace change and seek to improve

I hope that Quakerism continues its history of building a better world for real

I hope that we continue to act from a position of love and care

May Quakerism change to love more

I want to plant a seed of love and hope

We value our children, our young people, and their parents, and we must find ways of showing them this in future. Can we find new ways of supporting and nurturing our meetings and events so that they may fully include and welcome our younger Friends? More Youth Development Workers have been suggested.

Let us remember the commitments we have already made to do Quaker work in the world, and make sure we tell people what we are doing.

Transition to a new future is going to be challenging and exhausting. We need to love and support those involved and those grieving for the loss of what they hold dear.

² Gold cards: These cards give six answers to the question 'What do Quakers say?' as well as providing details of how to obtain a free information pack. Also available in Welsh. Packs can be requested from quakercentre@quaker.org.uk or requested by phone 020 7663 1030.

We need to provide adequate practical support. We are reminded of resources we have used in the past, Becoming Friends and Equipping for Ministry. It has been suggested that the Simpler Meetings Project and the Quaker Meeting Houses Heritage Project might be useful.^{3,4}

We need to make space for conversations, to share our stories, and listen to one another on those things about which we disagree. Are we feeling brave to share deeply, to listen to what we may find difficult, to hear the meaning behind the words?

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 trust in the Spirit, the process and each other.

³ Please see 'Updates from Woodbrooke' for more information about Becoming Friends, Equipping for Ministry and the Simpler Meetings Project.

⁴ The Quaker Meeting Houses Heritage Project is a national survey of Quaker meeting houses. It covers properties still being used as meeting houses. It also covers those still owned by Quaker meetings, but not used specifically as meeting houses. <https://heritage.quaker.org.uk/>

Updates from Woodbrooke

Over the course of the conference, we heard various references to Woodbrooke resources and courses which Friends were keen to be updated on, namely Becoming Friends and Equipping for Ministry.

Becoming Friends

We currently have two iterations of Becoming Friends available:

1. The course – 8 weeks, open to individuals and small groups of Friends from a single meeting (this can be arranged with our admin team and the meeting would be expected to arrange space for that group to get together outside of the course sessions.) Dates are being set for the course in 2025 before the end of this year.
2. Woodbrooke Where You Are – Either in person or online. Generally, it would be over eight or nine months with a course tutor presenting the material and then the meeting arranging study/conversation groups in between these sessions. A Moodle page would be provided with resources.

Our hope is to have a version of the offer equivalent to the original study pack, with purchase of access to a website with printable resources and videos etc. These resources will be available in 2025. Meetings can then make the decision, dependent on resources and capacity, to go for one of these options:

- Send individuals (or a small group) on the course and support them in line with the meetings capacity (financially and with Eldership support)
- Pay for access to the designated website and download and organise the resources and sessions themselves
- Organise a Woodbrooke Where You Are with a Woodbrooke Tutor who accompanies the meeting for the best part of a year and is on hand to answer questions

Equipping for Ministry

Our Equipping for Ministry programme has been under review and we are now looking to launch the new programme, with participants starting learning in September 2025. Promotional materials and course content information will be made available in the first half of 2025 via our newsletter, website and social media as well as via 'Quake!'.

Simpler Meetings

In 2021 Woodbrooke held a series of sessions led by Jonathan Carmichael who was the member of staff at Britain Yearly Meeting responsible for the Simpler Meetings Project. These sessions looked at various ways of simplifying aspects of our Quaker communities and we will be revisiting those sessions in 2025. The sessions will be in our brochure and on our website towards the end of 2024.



Update from Quaker Life

We would like to draw your attention to the wide-ranging support available to Friends and meetings from the Quaker Life staff team.

The daily life of Quaker worshipping communities is supported by a staff team who work across Britain to help them to be thriving, inclusive, and all-age.

Local Development Workers based in different parts of Britain, work with Friends in a group of area meetings. They are available to individuals, local Quaker meetings, area meetings, and other Quaker groups. Their role is to make sure that Quaker communities are able to thrive. They support Friends to become the church we envisioned in [Our Faith in the Future](#).

Quaker communities could use this document to review what is happening in the meeting or to plan for a programme of events and activities.

Contact details can be found here: [Local and children & youth development | Quakers in Britain](#).

19 Area meetings are committed to joining with others to fund Children and Youth development workers to increase opportunities regionally for children, young people and families to find their place within Quaker communities. Read about the [pilot project](#) here and contact Kirstyp@quaker.org.uk if your Area Meeting would like to fund this important work.

Events

- [Yearly Meeting wide children and young people's events](#)
- [Giant Online Children's Meeting](#) 1st Sunday each month

- [Quaker Parent Worship with Woodbrooke](#), second and fourth Monday of month
- [Children's reading monthly sessions | Quakers in Britain](#)

Networks

1. Monthly Zoom Networks to support the provision of work with children and young people throughout BYM
2. Termly zoom meet ups for Area meeting children and young people's work advocates
3. Young Adult group coordinators group contact Melc@quaker.org.uk for further details

Accompany Friends and Quaker meetings directly in their exploration of making work more multi or intergenerational

See: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/all-are-welcomefinal> and

Suggest training team <https://www.quaker.org.uk/children-and-young-people/work-quaker-setting/training-opportunities>

Resources to support those people-

- Sign up for [Journeys in the Spirit](#) newsletter and resource for ideas and information for children's meeting
- See back copies here:
<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/resource-categories/journeys-in-the-spirit>
- Sign up for [Rising Up Britain Yearly Meeting](#) for information and support for Young Adults

General support: supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk

Outreach: outreach@quaker.org.uk [Outreach network session - evening | Quakers in Britain](#)

Prison Chaplains: chaplainsupport@quaker.org.uk [Chaplaincy network session - evening | Quakers in Britain](#)

Property: propertysupport@quaker.org.uk OR friendstrusts@quaker.org.uk [Meeting House Matters | Quakers in Britain](#)

Youth Children & Families: cypadmin@quaker.org.uk

