

Membership

What we have in common is not our ideas, but our selves.

Gusten Lutter, Mountain View Monthly Meeting, 2003

Introduction

The Religious Society of Friends is a community of faith based on individual and mutually shared direct and unmediated experience of the Divine. Friends worship and grow in the Spirit together, open and obedient to the Power within, by which we believe all may be guided. Friends welcome all visitors, inviting them to return frequently and become regular attenders. The Society desires to include in its membership all persons who find themselves in unity with its faith and practices or are committed to aspiring toward that unity. The meeting consists of its members and faithful attenders. We share ourselves without distinction; membership acknowledges a deeper commitment to the affairs of the monthly meeting.

Persons finding themselves in or seeking unity may apply for membership in a monthly meeting of the Intermountain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Membership signals a readiness to join in the common effort of the Society to seek and follow the Inner Light. This readiness involves some experience and understanding of that Light as it is known by Friends: a reality that guides and directs, gives strength to act upon that guidance, and brings unity with the Spirit of God. Membership in a monthly meeting also involves sustained commitment.

As members have responsibility toward the meeting, so has the meeting responsibility toward its members. Members are the immediate family of the Society, and although all those associated with the meeting fall under its loving care, it is for the membership that the meeting carries primary responsibility. Historically, this responsibility included provision not only of spiritual support but also of material assistance to members experiencing economic hardship. This custom continues in many meetings. A meeting's broad responsibilities to its members include, but are not limited to: mutual support, charity, guidance, empowerment, and forgiveness.

Ever since early Friends rejected the distinction between priesthood and laity, responsibility for the full range of meeting activities has rested with the membership. Meetings are enriched by members who take an active role in corporate worship, share in the work and service of the Society, and live in harmony with its basic beliefs and practices. Friends make a spiritual vocation a responsibility of all members. Membership involves a willingness to attend meetings regularly, both those for worship and those for business; to give service through committees and otherwise as the way opens; and to share in financial responsibilities. Responsibility for the meeting and its decisions resides with and is ultimately retained by the members of the meeting.

Throughout the history of the Religious Society of Friends, the community has been led by the Light shining through individual Friends, just as the Light of the community has called individual Friends back from what George Fox called "wandering in notions." Friends' suspicion of concretely formulated creeds, confessions, and doctrines comes out of respect for this dynamically unfolding experience and charges the individual and the community to challenge and test each other. This mutual discernment does not always work to perfection—sometimes we reach premature judgment; sometimes we fall into inertia. Nevertheless, by undertaking membership we agree to open ourselves—and our understanding of the Light—to the testing of the community. Likewise, when we accept individuals into the community we publicly acknowledge that their leading and measure of Light may open us to new understanding and action. As one applicant for membership said,

I feel very strongly that the spiritual life absolutely requires that we should not remain isolated. It is this deep need of getting out of a prolonged and dangerous relative isolation which urges me to be admitted among the Quakers. It is more and more clear to me that it is only in the bosom of a religious family, freely but strongly constituted, that the individual can render to the world the services it sorely needs. . . .

*Pierre Ceresole in a letter of application for membership to London Yearly Meeting, 1936.
as quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline
of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, section 10.29.*

Attendees and Membership

When I walked into the silence of my first meeting for worship, I knew I was home.

Sentiment expressed by many Friends

People are attracted to the Religious Society of Friends for many reasons. Some discover a community that supports their quest for a personal experience of the Divine, and others find a context within which to live out a life of discipleship. Many have had disappointing or unfulfilling experiences in other faith communities and find among Friends the freedom and support to explore their own leadings. Still others see Friends as a socially engaged and politically active community.

Meeting members are encouraged to get acquainted with attendees and to be available to them for mutual spiritual support and guidance. The meeting invites regular attendees to participate in its life. Attendees are encouraged to take part in the various activities of the meeting, to attend meeting for business, and at the discretion of the monthly meeting, to serve on committees. Attendance at regional (quarterly or half-yearly) meetings, Intermountain Yearly Meeting, and other gatherings of Friends can provide attendees with a deeper understanding of Friends than participation in just a monthly meeting typically allows. Familiarity with Friends' way of worship, manner of conducting business, organizational structure, finances, and major spiritual and historical writings, as well as Friends' periodicals and organizations,* enriches the quality of attendees' participation in and experience of the meeting.

The Religious Society of Friends values the presence and participation of all persons drawn to Friends. Attendees nourished through their involvement with the meeting, familiar with and enriched by Friends' basic beliefs and practices, and desiring to undertake some responsibilities within the meeting are encouraged to apply for membership. The meeting committee charged with membership should be aware of and responsive to attendees who appear to be approaching readiness for membership. Similarly, attendees who feel ready to consider membership may broach the topic with any member of the meeting or with someone on the committee overseeing membership.

You've been acting like a member for a long time. Don't you think it's time to make it official?

Barney Aldrich, Mountain View Friends Meeting

Preparing and Applying for Membership

Remember that moral and spiritual achievement is not what is required in an applicant: sincerity of purpose is. Complete agreement with all our testimonies is not necessary. It is important for the life of the Society that the applicant is broadly in unity with the views and practices of Friends. Many applicants have too lofty an idea of the Society, and of the quality of the lives of its members. They should be warned of possible disappointment.

Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 1994, section 11.17.

Membership in the Religious Society of Friends is held within a monthly meeting. The members of the monthly meeting welcome inquiries about membership and other matters concerning the Society. Friends encourage informal conversations as one step toward applying for membership. It is important that the meeting help newcomers understand the membership process and how it differs from that of other denominations.

As a person becomes acquainted with a particular monthly meeting and with Friends' ways by participating in the life of the meeting, he or she may feel led to consider membership. Preparation for membership involves regular participation in the life of a meeting over a period of time (often more than a year), including meetings for worship, meetings for business, committee service, and other activities. Additionally, attendees interested in membership benefit from a familiarity with written materials about the history and principles of the Religious Society of Friends; particular attention is invited to readings about Friends' testimonies and to the Intermountain Yearly Meeting's book of discipline, *Faith and Practice*. These preparations are assumed to accompany a prospective member's sense of being a part of the community as well as a strong spiritual persuasion.

A sense of readiness to apply for membership can come to an attendee in a variety of ways. One may discover that the faith and practice of Friends has become central to her or his life. Another may feel a spiritual leading that becomes increasingly clear and strong. A third may report a sense of having found the

right place, of being “at home” after long seeking. Others may identify with and feel a responsibility toward the meeting and the Religious Society of Friends.

The application procedure for membership involves several steps:

1. An applicant writes a letter expressing her or his desire to pursue membership in the meeting. Depending on the meeting, this letter is directed to the Clerk or to the designated meeting committee charged with overseeing requests for membership. This letter need be no more than a plain request to apply for membership. Customarily, an applicant also includes an account of his or her background and how he or she reached the decision to apply for membership. The request for membership is announced at the meeting for business following its receipt, and the letter may be read. The letter is turned over to the appropriate meeting committee (and eventually is archived).
2. The meeting for business or the meeting committee responsible for membership appoints a clearness committee to meet and talk with the applicant. Care should be taken to select discerning Friends who have a strong understanding of the meaning and implications of membership. It is helpful if the applicant knows at least one member of the committee. The applicant may request that certain Friends be appointed to the clearness committee; the choice, however, is ultimately made by the meeting for business or the responsible meeting committee. Members of the monthly meeting are invited to become better acquainted with applicants and to voice approval or concerns to the committee.
3. The members of the clearness committee meet with the applicant to explore his or her commitment to the faith and practice of Friends and to discern together the readiness of the applicant and the meeting. All visits take place in the spirit of a common, worshipful seeking for God’s will and guidance. Providing sufficient time allows opportunities for (a) the clearness committee to become acquainted with the applicant, (b) the applicant to ask questions, and (c) the meeting and the applicant to become clear about the request for membership. (See, at the end of this chapter, a list of suggested topics to be covered during clearness committee meetings.)
4. The clearness committee reports the results of its process to the meeting for business or responsible meeting committee. If the clearness committee feels that the applicant is not yet ready for membership, it may encourage her or him to seek wider experience with Friends’ beliefs and practices through additional reading; visits to other monthly, regional, or yearly meetings; and/or attendance at workshops or other activities. Membership itself is not as important as the spiritual growth of the prospective member. If it becomes clear that more seasoning is needed, the clearness committee will arrange to continue meeting with the applicant and will keep the meeting informed.
5. If it becomes clear to the applicant, the clearness committee, or both that membership is not advisable, the application may be withdrawn, and the meeting is informed. Regardless of the outcome, Friends endeavor to treat all applicants with gentleness and respect. Friends welcome continued attendance and participation in the life of the meeting on the part of the applicant, just as before the possibility of membership was explored.
6. If the committee recommends membership, it presents its recommendation and report to the meeting for business for approval. A decision regarding the membership may be reached during that meeting for business, or the report may be seasoned for one month with approval being sought at the next meeting for business.
7. Upon approval of an application for membership, the meeting minutes its acceptance of the new member, and his or her name is added to the membership records. Membership in the monthly meeting also confers membership in the regional meeting and Intermountain Yearly Meeting, as well as in the worldwide body of the Religious Society of Friends.
8. The meeting provides a warm welcome into the community for the new Friend.
9. Some meetings retain a tradition of having members of the clearness committee remain available to the new member for continued support and enfoldment into the community.

Children and Membership

From birth, all children of the meeting are under its care. Intermountain Yearly Meeting has no provision for *birthright membership*. Each monthly meeting has different ways of designating the children and young people in the community. In some, they are given the designation of junior or associate Friends either at birth or upon the request of their parents. *Birthright Friend* remains a term used by some in Intermountain

Yearly Meeting for children raised within the meeting. Regardless of the terminology applied to children in individual meetings, all children of the yearly meeting are equal and due the same consideration and care.

Meetings are responsible for helping young Friends assess their spiritual development, understand the faith and practice of Friends, and discern their relationship with and readiness for membership in the Society. Children and young adults may apply for membership according to the meeting's regular procedures. Meetings are urged to treat a young applicant with tenderness and care. The clearness committee is charged with ensuring that the applicant understands the meaning of membership and feels not only welcome but also prepared to participate fully in the life of the meeting.

Many young people wish to be acknowledged as part of the community of Friends for the purposes of support in conscientious objection to military service or upon application to Friends colleges, universities, or agencies. When these individuals have been under the care of the meeting and active in the community, demonstrating their unity with Friends' principles and beliefs, such written acknowledgment should be provided regardless of their official designation regarding membership.

Sojourning Membership

Membership is generally held in a meeting near the member's primary residence. Friends who expect to be residing temporarily near a different monthly meeting may ask their meeting for a minute of sojourn. This minute, written and signed by the home meeting's clerk, customarily outlines the reasons for and the probable duration of the member's sojourn. If the home meeting approves, a minute of sojourn is written for each family member and sent to the new meeting.

Typically, a sojourning Friend may participate fully in the life of the visited meeting. Meetings are encouraged to welcome sojourning Friends warmly and to extend to them the same care due a member. A sojourning membership terminates when the sojourner leaves the visited meeting. The clerk of the visited meeting notifies the home meeting of the sojourning Friend's departure, returning the sojourning minute to the home meeting. Friends who find that their stay will be prolonged should consider transferring their membership.

Transfer of Membership

Ideally, an individual holds membership in the meeting he or she regularly attends. Attending one meeting while holding membership in another can result in a loss to the individual and to the meetings involved. The member may not receive adequate support from either meeting. Likewise, the member may fail to assume the responsibilities of membership in either meeting. Although membership is based primarily on spiritual ties, it also assumes a willingness to share in the responsibilities of a meeting. When a Friend moves to the vicinity of another monthly meeting, the clerk of the original meeting should write promptly to the clerk of the new meeting recommending the member to its fellowship.

When a member desires to transfer membership, that member must request a letter of transfer from the home meeting. If the transfer is accepted, the receiving meeting sends a letter to that effect to the former meeting. A clearness committee can be offered or requested; clearness committees are available to anyone requesting a transfer.

Membership of Distant Friends

Occasionally, a person may seek membership in a meeting that is at some distance from their residence. When a meeting is willing to make a genuine, practical, and lasting commitment to maintaining supportive contact, membership may be appropriate. When a Friend who is a member moves to an isolated area, the Friend and the home meeting should try to locate a meeting in that area. Resources available to those living at some distance from a meeting include Friends' publications, webpages, the other branches of Friends throughout the country, and the Wider Quaker Fellowship. Attendance at the yearly meeting, retreats, the Annual Gathering of Friends General Conference, and workshops offered through Pendle Hill or Ben Lomond should be encouraged, as they can provide opportunities for fellowship.

Dual Membership

Monthly meetings within Intermountain Yearly Meeting vary in their acceptance of dual membership. Friends are advised to avoid contradictions and to maintain honesty and integrity in their affiliation with

any religious body or organization. Should a member of the meeting be drawn to join another religious organization, the use of a clearness committee is recommended.

Applicants from Preparative Meetings and Worship Groups

When an attender of a preparative meeting or worship group wishes to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends, he or she does so by applying for membership in the overseeing monthly meeting, following the procedure for membership outlined above. The responsible monthly meeting appoints a clearness committee, which includes people from both the monthly meeting and the preparative meeting or worship group, if possible. The responsible committee of the monthly meeting may ask the worship group or preparative meeting's responsible committee to comment on a membership application.

Most of the responsibility for membership applications rests with the overseeing monthly meeting during the early development of a preparative meeting. As the preparative meeting matures, its responsibility increases. Only a monthly meeting can accept members, however.

When a preparative meeting becomes a monthly meeting, the clerk of the new meeting sends the former overseeing meeting a list of all those desiring transfer of their membership to the new meeting. These transfers are made promptly, not needing to follow the usual clearness committee process.

Termination of Membership

Termination of membership in a monthly meeting simultaneously ends membership in the Religious Society of Friends. Termination of membership may be initiated either by a member or by the monthly meeting. Membership ceases formally when the termination is minuted by the meeting for business.

On the Initiative of a Member

A member may resign from the Religious Society of Friends by writing a letter to the clerk of the monthly meeting. Any member considering ending her or his membership is encouraged to request a clearness committee to examine the motivations for termination. Is she or he no longer in accord with the faith and practice of Friends? Has she or he not been involved actively in the monthly meeting over a significant period of time? When the monthly meeting minutes acceptance of the Friend's resignation, acknowledging that it is at the member's request, the meeting sends a letter to the resigning member that includes a copy of the meeting minute. Meetings are encouraged to send correspondence regarding termination of membership by certified mail with return receipt requested. Letters written in acceptance of a resignation customarily manifest considerate regard for the person leaving membership.

When a member resigns without seeking clearness, the meeting is not absolved from further care. Customarily, the monthly meeting appoints a committee to visit with or otherwise contact the Friend and inquire about the reasons for the resignation.

If a member resigns out of a desire to join another religious body, the monthly meeting will, at the request of the member, write a letter to the other denomination indicating that the individual is no longer a member of the Religious Society of Friends.

On the Initiative of a Monthly Meeting

A monthly meeting may remove from membership an individual who (1) exhibits a persistent lack of interest in or responsibility toward the obligations of membership, (2) fails repeatedly to reply to communications from the meeting, (3) cannot be located by conscientious effort, or (4) exhibits repeated disregard for Friends' principles.

Customarily, monthly meetings periodically contact long-absent members. Meetings need to keep in mind that some Friends may go through periods—sometimes prolonged—when their association with the life of the meeting is tenuous due to difficult life circumstances, illnesses, or other crises. Meetings should make every effort to clarify the circumstances of a member's absence as well as the relationship between the member and the Religious Society of Friends.

If the monthly meeting—after conscientious effort over an extended period of time—receives no response from and cannot locate a member, it may consider termination of membership for that person. If the monthly meeting unites regarding the termination, it minutes the circumstances and ends the membership. The monthly meeting sends a letter that includes a copy of the minute to the former member,

preferably by certified mail with return receipt requested. When the address of a member is unknown and the above procedure has been followed, the returned letter should be attached, unopened, to the meeting copy and filed in the membership record for former members.

If a Friend, by conduct or publicly expressed views, appears to be disregarding the faith and practice of the Religious Society of Friends or to be misrepresenting Friends so that the meeting or its undertakings are harmed by the person's membership, the concern should be communicated to the committee charged with ministry and counsel.

1. If the committee finds warrant in the concern, it can meet with or appoint a clearness committee to meet with the member and any other individual involved, seeking through a spirit of loving concern to understand the member's views and actions. This process must be handled with sensitivity and may need to be carried out in confidence. The clearness committee brings its findings and a recommendation to the originating committee. If the clearness committee finds insufficient grounds for removal, it is encouraged to make recommendations on how to facilitate reconciliation. If there appears to be no hope of restoring unity between the member and the meeting, the clearness committee recommends termination of membership. If action by the monthly meeting is recommended, a minute is sent to the clerk of the monthly meeting to this effect.
2. When the clerk places the recommendation on the agenda of the monthly meeting, a letter is sent to the person concerned, inviting his or her presence and offering time to speak in response to the minute. This letter, sent preferably by certified mail with return receipt requested, must be received in sufficient time to allow the person to respond in person or in writing.
3. The minute is read at the monthly meeting. The individual whose membership is under consideration may address the meeting regarding the proposed action and related circumstances. After adequate seasoning, no sooner than at the following meeting for business, the monthly meeting may unite in a decision. The individual concerned, if present, is asked to stand aside when the decision is made. The decision of the monthly meeting is minuted and sent to the individual, again preferably by certified mail with return receipt requested.

A monthly meeting or member may request assistance from a nearby meeting to help find clearness if problems arise regarding ending a membership. Procedures designed to promote clarity amid difficult circumstances are not intended to displace kindness and loving care for an individual's spiritual life.

A person whose membership has been terminated either by resignation or by action of the monthly meeting and who desires to rejoin the same or a different monthly meeting may do so by following the procedure outlined earlier for application for membership.

Record Keeping

Membership rolls should be kept current. Accurate accounting of new memberships and transfers, deaths, and removal of members should be recorded and reported in the yearly meeting census. Customarily, regular attenders are listed along with members in a meeting directory.

Suggested Queries and Topics for Use by a Clearness Committee on Membership

The test of membership is not a particular kind of religious experience, nor acceptance of any particular religious, social or economic creed. Sincere religious experience and right religious belief are both important, but develop in the course of participation in the activities of the meeting. Anyone who can become so integrated with a meeting that he helps the whole and the whole helps him is qualified to become a member.

Howard Brinton

Friends for 350 Years, Pendle Hill Publications, 2002, p. 154.

The queries and topics listed below often arise naturally in the course of a clearness committee meeting with an applicant for membership. They are intended to clarify any questions the applicant may have about membership and the workings of the meeting, to help committee members become acquainted with the applicant on a deeper level, and to enable the committee members to share about their spiritual lives with

the applicant. All clearness committee meetings are held in a worshipful manner of openness and caring. It may be appropriate to hold several meetings.

- What are some milestones along your spiritual journey?
- How do you expect membership in the meeting to contribute to your spiritual journey?
- How have you experienced and come to understand the Light?
- How do you quiet yourself and open yourself to the Spirit?
- How does the Religious Society of Friends meet your needs for worship and fellowship?
- How is Quakerism a “way of life” for you?
- How does your association with the Religious Society of Friends challenge you?
- What attracted you to Friends’ articulated faith and practices? Are there some that you find puzzling or disturbing? In what ways do the advices and queries speak to you?
- Which of the testimonies of Friends speak most strongly to you? Which testimonies challenge you most?
- How do you respond to the fact that Quakerism is rooted in Christianity but Friends differ in their views of Jesus and the role of Biblical scripture?
- How does the variety of religious language and expressions describing Friends’ spiritual experiences fit or differ from your own? How might differences between the views you hold and the views held by other Friends affect your spiritual life and the life of the meeting?
- How do you feel you can contribute to the meeting’s conduct of business?
- How do you envision the meeting supporting and contributing to your faith and spiritual development?
- How might you contribute to the faith and spiritual development of others in the meeting?
- How do you envision supporting the nurture and religious education of the meeting’s children?
- What is your experience with the wider family of Friends, including the regional meeting, Intermountain Yearly Meeting, Friends General Conference, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Friends World Committee on Consultation, and the American Friends Service Committee, among other groups?
- How do you know that you are led to make this meeting your spiritual home?
- What, in your experience, contributes to manifesting qualities of worship while business is conducted? What interferes with business being conducted in a worshipful manner? What is your experience of the process and outcome of decision making among Friends?
- What is your understanding of the financial practices of the monthly meeting?
- How do you anticipate that your membership in a Friends meeting may affect your family relationships?

Do you have any questions or other matters you want to discuss with us?

* For example, American Friends’ Service Committee (AFSC), Friends’ Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), Friends’ World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), or Friends’ General Conference (FGC).