

# Yearly Meeting Reflections

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## Preparation Day

How Quakers became organised: the history of the new *Quaker Handbook*

BY DAVID JAMES

This article arose from the team which facilitated the preparation day before Yearly Meeting 2023. We wanted to focus on Yearly Meeting itself and on the new edition of our *Quaker Handbook*. A question was raised about the origins of both of these, in Aotearoa and among early Friends in Britain. I undertook to provide some information, and this is the result. It was developed as notes for a talk, so the style is rather condensed.

### Early days

Early Quakerism was based completely on individual spiritual experience. The early leadership was overwhelmingly from the North, drawn largely from Yorkshire and the 1652 country of Westmoreland and shared much common background. As Quakerism became a national movement, leadership moved from village society to the cities. There it encountered a much wider range of social backgrounds and beliefs, and experienced a sometimes bewildering diversity.

Crisis erupted in 1656. George Fox was in prison. James Nayler in London, widely regarded as Fox's substitute, was surrounded by enthusiastic and sometimes disruptive followers and something of a personality cult. That year of 1656 was also believed by many to be the year when Jesus would return and take over the government of the world. Millennial beliefs were widespread, held by such figures as Oliver Cromwell and Isaac Newton. For example, here is Cromwell speaking to the opening of the Little Parliament of 1653: "Why should we be afraid to say or think that this might be the door to usher in the things that God has promised; . . . which He has set the hearts of his people to wait for and expect . . . You are at the edge of the Promises and Prophecies." So Nayler's ceremonial entry into Bristol on horseback in October 1656, echoing Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, put a match to a well-prepared bonfire. Was he claiming to be Jesus returned? Or was he symbolising the experience of being totally filled with the Christ spirit? Nayler and Quakers in general came under fierce attack for blasphemy, led by Parliament. Friends needed to deal with the crisis and develop a framework that would enable them to survive.

In September 1656, the Elders of Balby had already set out in an epistle "to the brethren in the North" 20 advices<sup>1</sup>. They begin with holding regular Meetings for Worship and how to deal with Friends who "walk disorderly", and then move on to marriages, births, the relief of poor or imprisoned Friends, and being good citizens and good members of the community of Friends. In fact, this is the first draft of what was to become, in course of time, our *Quaker Handbook*.

So what had been a movement simply of individuals responding to the Spirit as they experienced it began to have to balance that against the collective experience of their Meetings and of the elders. (See the *Quaker Handbook*, 3.1.1, para 2.) It was a pivotal moment and helps to explain why Quakers have persisted when many other movements of the time withered and died. Those others either failed to develop any authority beyond the individual member, or alternatively imposed a harsh authority which encouraged rebellion. That is why this postscript to the Balby epistle remains so much loved: *Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.*

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1. 3.-That if any person draw back from meetings, and walk disorderly, some go to speak to such as draw back; to exhort and admonish such with a tender, meek spirit, whom they find negligent or disorderly. And if any, after admonition, do persist in the thing not good, let them again be admonished and reproved before two or three witnesses; that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every thing may be established. And if still they persevere in them, then let the thing be declared to the church: and when the church hath reproved them for their disorderly walking, and admonished them in the tender and meek spirit, and they do not reform, then let their names and the causes, and such as can justly testify the truth therein, and their answers, be sent in writing to some whom the Lord hath raised up in the power of his Spirit to be fathers, his children to gather in the light, that the thing may be known to the body; and with the consent of the whole body, the thing may be determined in the light.

4.-That as any are moved of the Lord to speak the word of the Lord at such meetings, that it be done in faithfulness, without adding or diminishing. And if at such meetings, any thing at any time be otherwise spoken by any not of the light, whereby the seed of God cometh to be burthened; let the person or persons in whom the seed of God is burthened, speak in the light (as of the Lord they are moved,) in meekness and godly fear, to him; but let it be done in private, betwixt them two, or before two or three witnesses, and not in the public meetings, except there be a special moving so to do.....

19.- That the Elders made by the holy Ghost, feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof willingly, not by constraint, but of a willing mind; neither as lords over God's heritage, but as examples to the flock of Christ.

There was still no regular structure of Meetings beyond the local Meeting (what we would now call the Worship Group). There were occasional wider gatherings, usually within a day's journey, but otherwise Meetings were informally linked by visits from travelling ministers and by epistles. In 1660 the first national gathering of Friends took place at Skipton in Yorkshire.

In 1660 the monarchy was restored, and Charles II returned from exile. The English Revolution had failed, and the gentry had reunited to impose its aristocratic rule. The Quaker Act of 1662 announced serious persecution, followed by an act of 1664 that struck at all denominations outside the Church of England.

Quakers could still have been ground out of existence by jails, deaths in jail, heavy fines and the threat of transportation. But when Fox was released from jail, he and Margaret Fell set about creating the sustaining structure of Monthly Meetings and the wider Quarterly Meetings.

In 1672 the first recognized meeting of London Yearly Meeting took place, and the centre of Quakerism swung from the north to London, where it was possible to lobby and influence Government and "public affairs". Yearly Meeting was not open to all Friends, but to "weighty, seasoned and substantial Friends" as representatives chosen by their Meetings. In effect they were those who could afford to take time away from their work – often they were employers in the growing number of Quaker businesses.

### **Friends in Aotearoa New Zealand**

The first list of Friends living in Aotearoa was drawn up in 1870. There were just 82 and would have been far fewer in the earlier years of colonisation. By 1913 there were 266, by 1949 388, and in 1972 there were 691, but according to Margaret West and Ruth Fawell in *The Story of New Zealand Quakerism* the numbers were already beginning to decline. According to the 2023 statistics, we are now 399.

During those earlier years, Friends were too scattered for Monthly Meetings to be practicable, and they remained members of their original English Monthly Meetings. For their contacts with other Quakers here, many had to rely on travellers in the ministry such as Ann Fletcher Jackson. That may remind us of the earliest days of Quakers in England.

The first recognised Monthly Meeting in Aotearoa was Auckland in 1910, but that followed the first national New Zealand Friends Conference, held in May 1909. The conference took advantage of a visit by Thomas Hodgkin, travelling in the ministry from England, and between 60 and 70 Friends gathered in Wellington for it. There are stirring accounts of it from an unnamed source quoted in *The Story of New Zealand Quakerism*.

They were "a large company of very ordinary men and women, taken suddenly from all sorts and conditions of life, and dumped down to transact business together. Most of them were absolute strangers to one another and there were plenty of strong individualities with widely different views. Yet the one thing they had in common, the Quaker method and tradition, was enough to transform them into an organized body in less than five minutes. A Clerk was chosen and a twopenny Minute Book bought: the sense of the Meeting did the rest and was simply sufficient to deal with the most knotty problems as they arose... Dr Hodgkin ...said that he considered the deliberations were quite on a level with those of London Yearly Meeting, and he was surprised at the high level of the whole. It certainly did seem most strange. Here were those Friends, some of whom had not been able to associate with others or attend a Meeting for Worship for many years yet, when they met once more, the atmosphere overshadowed them and they fell into old ways and usages of the Society."

That first conference was the start of "General Meetings" held every year after that. They reported to London Yearly Meeting, where they had the same status as English Quarterly Meetings. Within Aotearoa there grew up a patchwork of Meetings using the English titles of Monthly Meetings and Preparative Meetings, sometimes regardless of how often they actually met for business. In 1910 Auckland became a Monthly Meeting and held its members' memberships. The Wellington Hawkes Bay and Taranaki Six Months Meeting was recognised as a Monthly Meeting in 1912. Christchurch and Dunedin began as Preparative Meetings – you might well ask what they were preparative to – and they then duly became Monthly Meetings, Dunedin not until 1929. (See *Quaker Handbook* 3.1.2). The General Meetings were translated into Yearly Meetings from 1964, a cutting of the apron strings to Britain. In the first 50 years of General and Yearly Meetings, there were seven Clerks – all male – so they averaged over seven years each in the role.

Yearly Meeting 1973 approved a publication called *Church Government of the Religious Society of Friends in New Zealand*. It drew "heavily" on the London Yearly Meeting equivalent, that part of the "orange book" that can be traced back to its origins with the Elders of Balby; and it also drew on the equivalent document of Pacific Yearly Meeting. That 1973 *Church Government* is the more immediate ancestor of the new *Quaker Handbook*.YM