

Why Apply for Membership?

Steven Davison

Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

Why would an attender apply for membership in a Quaker meeting?

In a lot of meetings I know, the only thing it gets you, really, is the privilege of serving on some new committees, a more solid sense of Quaker identity, and maybe some more deeply internalized sense of responsibility.

Thus, we tend to focus on what the member's responsibilities to the meeting are (or not). But what is the responsibility of the meeting to the member? This is what really differentiates membership from "attender-ship". What does the member get out of the deal that is different from being just a faithful attender, besides a roof over the worship and some coffee?

I think we can name with some confidence the things that meetings try to offer. I would then add another one that I think is extremely important, but I'm not so confident that we have this one covered. Meetings offer members:

1. communion, that is, meeting for worship, the regular opportunity to share the presence of the Spirit;
2. community, f/Friendship in the Spirit; which includes
3. pastoral care;
4. religious education (hopefully), opportunities to clarify and deepen one's identity as a Friend; and
5. spiritual nurture, usually in the form of programs.

However, nothing here changes with the status of meeting membership. The thing that would differentiate membership, for me, is proactive and personal spiritual nurture, that is, meaningful engagement in one another's spiritual/religious lives beyond the offering of general spiritual nurture "programs".

For me, covenantal community means that the community is willing to engage with me, actively and proactively, in the nurture of my spiritual gifts, the support of my leadings and ministry (including my vocal ministry), and in the formation and nurture of my spiritual life in general.

It's the proactive part that differentiates membership from "attender-ship". I think we would not presume to get intimately involved in someone's spiritual life without her or his express wish. Thus, the difference between being an attender and being a member is that you invite the meeting into your spiritual life, recognizing that, in the Quaker way, the spiritual life only fully flourishes in the embrace of community.

I am talking about an active, even robust, culture of eldership, working in both its aspects—positive spiritual nurture and accountability. We pay attention to each other's spiritual journeys, we seek opportunities to nurture each other in the life of the Spirit, and we hold each other accountable in love, with love as the bond that makes membership a covenant.

In practical terms, this means we bring these things up in our clearness committees for membership, for it is here that the rubber hits the road. It is here that we would ask an applicant what their spiritual life consists of and just how involved we can get in helping them put it together and deepen it.

All this presupposes that the meeting is actually going to engage with members in the ways I'm talking about and that it is equipped to be of service in these ways. I don't think I've ever known a meeting that is clear about its role in members' spiritual lives or prepared to be proactive in the ways I'm talking about. Even my own meeting is hesitant and it has a Gifts and Leadings Committee specifically charged with this role.

So, for a meeting to offer something substantive and distinguishing to attenders considering membership, the meeting must have a rather deep conversation about its mission, about its role in members' lives. It needs a worship and ministry committee that has a clear internal agreement about its role in these matters and that is confident in the meeting's support. And it needs to be prepared to deliver on its promises if it's going to make any promises in the first place.

This, in my opinion, is an essential calling of a Quaker meeting and what we owe our members. But I recognize how difficult this is. For one thing, many members won't agree with me—they wouldn't want this kind of "in their face" attention. And what am I talking about? I am not fully sure what I have in mind myself, beyond one concrete example: Recognizing that I speak more often than many Friends in meeting for worship, someone from worship and ministry or gifts and leadings would approach me

to find out whether I feel I have a calling to vocal ministry, and, since I do, they would then ask me, do I want support in that calling in any way?

But what more would this involve? I have some other ideas, but a meeting would have to ask itself and experiment. At the least, we would have to just ask our members what they want and then try to give it to them. Just asking is being more proactive than we usually are. That's the least we owe them.