

A Modern Membership Concern

Alternate Membership Pathways Working Group

Membership among Friends for most of our history has been exclusively through the local meeting. There is a solid foundation for this practice. Without formal creed, doctrine, or required formal training, there needs to be a clearness process to discern if an applicant is aware of the history, practices, testimonies, and traditions of Friends and of the meaning and responsibilities of membership. The body that accepts the applicant becomes responsible for his/her welfare, just as the new Friend becomes responsible for the welfare of the others in the meeting. These practices have served Friends well throughout almost four centuries of our history. They are cherished practices that have proved worthy through the test of time.

Another important Quaker concept is continuing revelation. Many people become Friends because of our willingness to discard or modify past practices if they no longer pertain to the current world. We recognize that society has changed over recent generations and concerns have arisen within our and other yearly meetings regarding the process of becoming a member. We are being called to faithfully review and reconsider this exclusive process.

We face decreasing membership and work hard to welcome new and returning young and older attenders. We also have set up barriers to membership for many who bring valuable gifts to our communities. Many active and committed Friends have few or no ties to local meetings due to increased mobility or affinity with alternative spiritual homes like Powell House or wider Quaker bodies. Young adults (and people in general) are less likely to remain in one community for longer than a few years. Some are raised as children in a local meeting then move away for college and then move again for new work opportunities. Other Friends with no Quaker upbringing have discovered Friends as adolescents or young adults and may have never had a meaningful relationship with a local meeting or do not expect to remain where they currently live. Many Friends may actively participate in the life of many meetings while never

identifying any as “home.” They may regularly attend meetings and even support committee work and live in observance of Quaker values and practices, yet may not feel it natural or authentic to pursue membership at a given meeting.

Barriers to membership exist for others who have found a spiritual home in Quakerism and who may be unable to apply for membership for various reasons. For prisoners, clearness committees may not be permitted to enter the prison. For students at Quaker schools or for regular attenders at Powell House (both youth and adult programs), there may never have been a connection to a local meeting. There are those who grew up as Friends and have lived their lives committed to Quaker service and values but whose circumstances made it impossible to attend meeting for worship and find a spiritual home.

There are many for whom our current systems do not work and in response to these concerns, a working group of mostly active young people became the Alternate Membership Pathways Working Group of Ministry Coordinating Committee in 2016. We are exploring ways not to replace existing membership processes but to add to them in a way that improves inclusivity and relevance for Friends who do not have, but are seeking, ways to pursue membership without necessarily affiliating with a single local meeting. The working group has recently proposed alternate pathways for membership through the yearly meeting as what we are calling becoming an itinerant Friend. Ministry Coordinating Committee is currently discerning our recent report. If you are interested in joining our work, please contact one of us.

*—Marissa Badgley, Jennifer Swann, Jillian Smith, Jeffrey Aaron, active
members of the working group*