

Quaker organisation in the UK: a note

Frank Cranmer

Structure:

- Local Meeting (ie the business meeting of the local worshipping group)/Area Meeting/Meeting for Sufferings/Britain Yearly Meeting. There is a separate General Meeting for Scotland to look after specifically-Scottish concerns, to make sure that the Society complies with Scots law and to relate to the Scottish Government.
- Crucially, *there are no clergy*.
- With the exception of Meeting for Sufferings (to which Area Meetings appoints representative Friends) any member can attend any meeting for business – there is no election or delegation.

Sources of regulation:

- Ultimately, the Minutes of 'Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in session'.
- The church government sections of *Quaker Faith & Practice* [3rd edition as amended by decisions of BYM 2007]. *QF&P* contains partly 'theology' and partly the Society's regulations.
- The Marriage Act 1949 and the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 – with which Quaker marriage procedure must be compliant
- (In England and Wales) the Governing Document currently being agreed with the Charity Commission; it will be based on *QF&P* and govern Friends' status as a charity in England and Wales. (Friends in Scotland are already registered under the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005.)

Procedure:

Quaker business meetings are, in principle 'meetings for worship with a concern for church business'. There is no chairman; instead, the clerk (who drafts the agenda and keeps the minute-book) facilitates the meeting. At some point in the proceedings the clerk offers a draft minute in the hope that it reflects the sense of the meeting. If Friends unite around it, that becomes the meeting's decision; if not, discussion continues until either a serviceable minute can be produced or the matter is passed over. *There are no votes in Quaker meetings, ever.*

Recent changes in structure:

Traditionally, the only thing that looked like a body of trustees was Meeting for Sufferings – a kind of day-to-day executive to act for the Society between Yearly Meetings, rather like the Church of Scotland's Commission of Assembly. But it was far too large, so now there is a small group of trustees who hold the Society's general assets on its behalf. Under the law of trusts, however, the trustees must exercise their judgment independently and act in the best interests of the trust. The fact that they cannot be directed has caused a good deal of anxiety in some quarters – and Meeting for Sufferings is still trying to work out how it relates to the trustees and what its new role might be. (However, registration and trusteeship do not seem to have caused a problem in Scotland.)

In addition, because the new general trustees cannot reasonably be expected to sign off the accounts for every individual Local Meeting, each *Area Meeting* is going to be a separate trust, accountable for the Local Meetings within its bounds. At the moment, the Society is undertaking a programme of training for potential trustees.

The place of canonical regulation:

'Canon law' is not a term that Friends would readily recognise or understand. In reality, however, Friends are very careful indeed about observing the correct forms of procedure (in Quaker-speak, 'right ordering'). We are a small Society with a lot of jobs to fill (in my small meeting of fifty members: two co-clerks, a treasurer, four elders, four overseers and a clerk/convener of the property committee just for a start) so almost every member holds some kind of office – which means that Friends probably pay more attention to canonical regulation in their day-to-day church business than do most of the members of other faith-communities, certainly within the broadly-Christian tradition.

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