

Our Area Meetings today

'The area meeting is the primary meeting for church affairs in Britain Yearly Meeting.'
Quaker faith & practice 4.02 (part)

1. Introduction

Our consideration of the nature of the life of our AMs at our December meeting has been prompted by the 'Meeting for Sufferings Roadshows' which took place in 2014 and 2015. (See section 9 for information about a review of this initiative.)

Travelling around Britain, and meeting Friends from different areas, the MfS clerks and other members of Arrangements Group learned something about the life of different area meetings. Friends shared some of the joys and challenges of organising Area Meetings, working within them, co-ordinating and connecting with each other.

We feel it is important to bring these reflections back to Sufferings, for shared consideration.

2. Preparation for this session

We hope representatives will be able to prepare for this session by:

- reading this paper and the attachments
- considering the questions raised at the end of the paper
- talking with your Area Meeting clerks
- talking with your Area Meeting Quaker Life Representative
- ... and if possible, asking other Friends

3. Area Meetings – in an ideal world

We start in this place because Area Meeting (AM) is the keystone for Meeting for Sufferings. For most of the year they are the point of connection between local Friends and, their engagement with Quakers more widely and with central work. AMs are at the heart of British Quaker structures. It is the AM that we join when we become members. Locally, they are the legal entity, and they carry a range of responsibilities:

- Oversee and support local meetings
- Hold the list of members
- Appoint elders and overseers
- Conduct Quaker marriages
- Record deaths
- Own and manage buildings, finances, and employment
- Set safeguarding policy

- Can communicate on behalf of local Quakers with Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting
- Send a representative to Meeting for Sufferings

AMs are not simply expected to fulfil specific tasks: they are asked to support and nurture Quakerism locally. Section 4.02 of Quaker Faith and practice which starts with the sentence quoted above and continues:

Its [the AM's] role is to develop and maintain a community of Friends, a family of local meetings who gather for worship and spiritual enrichment. It should provide that balance between worship, mutual support, administration, learning, deliberation and social life which can make its meetings enjoyable occasions and build up the spiritual life of its members.

Area meetings act as facilitators and co-ordinators, ensuring that their constituent local meetings have access to opportunities for fellowship, spiritual development, and spiritual and pastoral care, including the care of children and young people. They also provide mutual support through the shared testing of concerns.

So an ideal AM will be full of life, spiritually uplifting, have well-organised and supported projects and events and consisting of growing, vibrant local meetings.

4. Area Meetings – a snapshot

There are 71 AMs in Britain, and they vary widely in size and nature:

- **People** - the smallest has just over 70 members and attenders (Wensleydale and Swaledale), and the largest over 800 (Central England).
- **Meetings** – there are 2 local Meetings in Wensleydale & Swaledale AM, and 3 in each of Southern East Anglia and Wirral & Chester. North Scotland, Devon and South Wales have 13 each and Central England has 16.
- **Geographic area** - some AMs cover a relatively small geographic area – North London is probably the smallest, geographically – and it's relatively easy to travel from one meeting to the other. Others (North Scotland in particular) cover a huge area.
- **Frequency of meetings** – some AMs meet every month – Central England is one - while others have at most four meetings a year.
- **Constituency** – many AMs are centred on one or two larger inner-city meetings, surrounded by smaller meetings, while others are primarily rural. They might be in poorer or more affluent areas of Britain.
- **Resources** – while some AMs have inherited significant investment portfolios and beautiful, well-kept buildings, others have extremely limited resources; and many own buildings which have become a burden.

5. Area Meetings – the reality?

The ideal picture as envisaged in Quaker Faith and Practice probably exists in only a minority of AMs.

Certainly, some AMs are lively and energetic. Many Friends have learned of the initiative of Northumbria AM, which decided to re-energise its meetings, and has shared news about this widely. It now meets four times a year, with a programme including include Meeting for Worship, workshops, children's activities and a provided lunch as well as Meeting for Church Affairs.

In other parts of Britain, AMs are barely operational. Some find it difficult to appoint clerks – indeed, several don't have one appointed clerk, and instead have a 'rotating' arrangement. Attendance can be low, with some members never present.

Anecdotally, we know that for some Friends, AM is in the wrong place, at the wrong time. They don't feel connected, feeling it is about 'them', not 'us'; some find the process too technical, archaic or complicated, and might even describe it as boring. Elders and Overseers are AM appointments; but in many areas, Elders and Overseers are effectively only active in their own local meeting. Some areas don't appoint Elders or Overseers.

In all the 'Meeting for Sufferings Roadshows' participants told us it was hard to engage people for whom the local Meeting is all that matters. Our religious structures can't survive if the majority favour congregationalism. When Friends don't feel fully engaged with their AM – to which members belong – this also raises questions about the nature of membership. In the 21st Century, are Quakers more focused on individual than on creating a covenant with the worshipping community to which we belong?

6. What about Meeting for Sufferings?

That many AMs are struggling has a direct impact on Meeting for Sufferings.

- A few AMs find it hard to send a representative to every meeting.
- Representatives find it difficult to bring reports back to an AM which is small, unrepresentative, and pushed for time. For many local Friends, Area Meeting and the central structures seem irrelevant.
- AM clerks often feel over-burdened, and resent information coming from 'the centre'. Some lack an understanding of our structures. Even those who are knowledgeable, engaged and energetic can struggle to make 'Meeting for Sufferings' relevant to local Friends.
- Some AMs are struggling with the process of discernment. Quaker Life has told Meeting for Sufferings it sees a limited understanding amongst British Quakers of how to test concerns, and how to articulate concerns as a spiritual leading. This is confirmed, when AMs send 'un-tested' minutes to Meeting for Sufferings.

7. Helping to strengthen AMs

Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC)'s report to Meeting for Sufferings this time describes recent efforts to help AMs, including:

- In 2011, a Representative Council focused on Strengthening Area Meeting
- There is an email Cluster for AM Clerks within the QL network
- QL organises a conference for AM clerks every year – usually a one-day event, but residential every three years
- Sharing positive experiences, and encouraging Elders through conferences and training

8. Meeting for Sufferings - previous consideration

In 2011, at about the same time Quaker Life was focusing on Area Meetings, Meeting for Sufferings spent some time exploring the issue of 'Strengthening Area Meetings'. The first minute (April 2011) is copied here because of its reference to a minute from North Wales AM, and to Quaker Life Central Committee's consideration.

S/11/04/10: Strengthening Area Meetings

Further to minutes S/10/01/8 of 15-17 January 2010: 'Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Meetings' and S/10/03/3 of 27 March 2010: 'What makes meetings grow?' we receive minute 28 of North Wales Area Meeting held 8 January 2011 concerning Quaker faith & practice 4.02

We also receive minute 11/107 of Quaker Life Central Committee held 18-20 February 2011.

The clerks have noted the points shared today and will send them out with the minutes.

We will return to this matter at our meeting in October 2011.

When the Meeting returned to this in October 2011, it minuted:

S/11/10/8: Strengthening our area meetings

Further to our minute S/11/04/10 of 2 April 2011, we receive further minutes on this matter from the following meetings: Meeting of Friends in Wales (paper S/11/10/mc i c), Hampshire & Islands AM (paper S/11/10/mc i d), Ipswich & Diss AM (paper S/11/10/mc i e), Kingston & Wandsworth AM (paper S/11/10/mc i f), North Wales AM (paper S/11/10/mc i g), West Scotland AM (paper S/11/10/mc i h) and Luton & Leighton AM (paper S/11/10/mc i p).

We have received a paper prepared by the Recording Clerk, offering some queries to help focus our discernment on this matter (paper S/11/10/D).

The purpose of area meetings is to build communities living under the guidance of the Spirit, - worshipping together, supporting each other, testing concerns, being inclusive of attenders and visitors, and enjoying social time together.

We believe that worshipping together is central to this, and that the Quaker business method with good clerking are essential. Elders bring prayerful support to this, and encouragement to all Friends, but especially to those who attend conferences or are representatives on committees.

We know that life is generated by warmth and caring. We will be strengthened by the fun and social events we include.

We have heard about telephone conferencing and video conferencing. Advice is available from Friends House and West Scotland Area Meeting. Area meeting trustees could perhaps take some routine items off the area meeting agendas. How can we involve young people more directly in our Area Meetings? Advice and help are available from Quaker Life on this.

We commend to area meeting clerks the conference at Woodbrooke, 16-18th November. We ask our representatives to take back to area meetings the paper S/11/10/D, which we have received from the Recording Clerk, and challenge them with the three questions at the end of the paper:

- *Are our area meetings clear about their purpose?*
- *Are they fit for purpose?*
- *What support and advice would meetings welcome to help change the things which need changing?*

9. Other reading

These papers are available on the Meeting for Sufferings website or on request from Graham Spackman (grahams@quaker.org.uk, or 0207 663 1021)– please read them beforehand, if you can:

- QL Rep Council 2011 introductions (Paul Parker, Linda Murgatroyd)
- QL Rep Council 2011 accompanying notes (Linda Murgatroyd)
- QL Rep Council 2011 questions for AMs handout
- MfS October 2011 - Strengthening Our Area Meetings (paper MfS/11/10/D)
- Meeting for Sufferings regional events programme 2014-2015 (review)

10. Questions for Meeting for Sufferings

We hope representatives will come to Meeting for Sufferings prepared to explore three sets of questions. It will help if you can talk beforehand with your current (or recent) AM clerks and QL Representatives, and other Quakers in your area.

A. Picking up the threads

- Did Friends in your AM follow up Meeting for Sufferings' consideration in 2011? Did you consider paper MfS/11/10/D?
- If your AM has considered itself recently, what have you learned?
- Has anything been changed and what difference has that made?

B. Identifying and articulating the problems

- We see some strong, growing AMs, but more which are struggling – is this interpretation correct?
- What works well in your AM?
- What problems are facing your AM?
- What underpins these problems?
- Why do some AMs work, and others don't? Can you identify particular factors?

C. What might be done?

- What can we, in our different roles, do to help Area Meetings?
- How can we strengthen the links between Meetings locally – and between local Meetings and the centre?
- Could Our Faith in the Future be helpful?
- Should we consider more radical solutions?
- What could be done? By whom? And how?

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