

On Being a Member

Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

To seek and to hold membership in Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting is, to us, an important commitment in one's life. So that we members of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting might hold it as inspiration and reminder before us, and so that applicants for membership might better understand the religious community they seek to join, we set down here in the clearest words available to us at this moment, our understanding of what it means to be a Friend, what it means to be a member of Central Philadelphia, and what we mean when we speak of the covenant of membership among us.

As we speak of what it means to be a Friend, it is important to note that what is described in this Statement on Membership represents the tradition of "unprogrammed Friends." There are also members of Friends meetings and churches in many countries around the world who worship in services which are planned in advance and led by paid pastors.

It is also important to be aware that most monthly meetings are part of larger aggregations of worshippers--quarterly meetings, yearly meetings, and broader associations. While an individual's membership is based in the monthly meeting, in becoming a Friend one also is joined to these larger groups. In joining Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, one becomes a member of Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which is affiliated with Friends General Conference; it is hoped that each member will actively seek ways to relate to these larger Quaker groups.

The Religious Society of Friends -- Origins and Beliefs

The Religious Society of Friends arose in England in the middle of the seventeenth century. This was a time of turbulence and change in both religion and politics. In the established Church of England, great emphasis was placed upon outward ceremony; there, and in such dissenting churches as the Baptists and Presbyterians, religious faith was also generally identified with the authority of the Bible or the acceptance of a formal creed. Many individuals, however, became increasingly dissatisfied with ceremonies and creeds, and broke away from these churches. Singly or in small groups, they turned inward in search of a religion of personal experience and direct communion with God.

George Fox (1624-1689) was one of these seekers. Even as a child, he was serious and thoughtful, often pondering the Scriptures and engaging in solitary reflection. At age nineteen, after being urged to engage in conduct that violated his religious scruples, he decided to leave home in order to seek spiritual direction. For four years he wandered through the English midland and as far south as London. Though he consulted various ministers and professors (that is, professing Christians), none could give rest to his troubled soul. Finally, as he recorded in his Journal,

...when all my hopes in [Christian ministers and professors] and in all men was gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh! then, I heard a voice which said,

*“ There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,”
and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. ...My desires after the
Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of
Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing.*

Faith and Practice of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997 Revision, pp.1-2.

From this experience of opening was laid the foundation for the movement which was to become known as Quakerism or more formally, the Religious Society of Friends, a movement founded by George Fox, Margaret Fell and many other committed seekers in the mid 17th century.

At the most fundamental level, what unites Quakers is our belief that there is a sacred aspect, or “that of God,” in all people. All have direct access to God; our religion is experiential. This core belief of that of God in every person has many important ramifications. We believe that all of us can be ministers, without formal ordination. We believe that each of us can hold a measure of the Light, or the Truth; that together we discern a fuller understanding of Truth than we might singly; and that discernment may unfold and mature over time. Thus, our openness to continuing revelation.

Our belief, as Friends, in continuing revelation means that Truth is continuing to emerge in this day and time, rather than having been completely revealed at some past time in history. Because of our belief in continuing revelation, Quakers are a non-creedal people, i.e., we do not subscribe to efforts to develop a creed, which fixes our beliefs and which becomes a test of membership. The absence of a formal creed, however, sometimes leaves seekers outside our Society puzzled about what makes someone Quaker . Or they may think, “Quakers let you believe anything you want.” It is more accurate to say that Friends hold that each of us can have a direct experience of communion with the Divine, and that our own experience of God is important in the development of our religious belief and practice. George Fox, in preaching at Ulverston church, spoke to the responsibility of discernment which is placed on Friends when he said, “... what had any to do with the Scriptures but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the Apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a Child of Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?”

Early Friends, as Christians, experienced Christ as divine, as do many Friends today. Now, however, the Society of Friends has become more diverse, including people from many traditional religious backgrounds and others exploring non-traditional spiritual paths. Early Friends spoke of Christ as synonymous with “the Light within”, or “the Inner Guide”. For many Friends today the “Light Within” and the “Inner Guide” have taken on a broader, more generic meaning.

Our belief in that of God in everyone leads to several commonly held “testimonies”--corporately held beliefs based in our experience about how we are called to put our faith into practice in our daily lives. These testimonies are central to our religious practice. The peace testimony holds that violence is not acceptable, and we seek to find peaceful solutions to every type of conflict. We believe that no one is our enemy or beyond redemption; and that everyone must be treated as a person who can be drawn by love to live in a way which manifests respect and consideration for others. We seek to apply these values to our own behavior in community, to live in harmony with each other, to care for one another, and to settle our conflicts peacefully and promptly. We do not elevate one gender above the other, or one race above another, but accord equal respect, privilege and responsibility to all. We value and provide opportunities for learning, both as a means of nurturing the spiritual potential in every person, and also to help ensure that no one is held back socially or economically for lack of access to education. And we strive to live simply, so that we may not be distracted from the Spirit, so we may be good stewards of the Earth’s resources, and so these resources may be sustained and equitably shared.

Membership in Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

We see membership in our meeting as a covenant with God and a covenant among ourselves. That covenant, when lived into faithfully, brings rewards and joys and also defines the expectations of our relationships one with another. In this covenant each member shares in the responsibility of helping to build and maintain a meeting community in which we strive to model the Blessed Community. In our attempts to define the meaning of membership in our Religious Society and in our meeting, we have come to the following essential understandings.

Because God is infinite and we are finite we hold no expectation that we will come to a shared definition of that Mystery with which we strive to live in a covenant relationship. Indeed, we rejoice in the wide variety of ways in which we come to understand that Spirit. Some among us experience a loving and personal God, made manifest in the risen Christ; others' experience is of a Spirit which pervades and energizes the universe; still others among us are seeking a vital experience of a Presence that they cannot name, and still others continue a faithful journey through the desert seeking a God they believe to exist, but which they have not yet experienced. The vitality of our community is enhanced when we seek together for the revelation of the Spirit in our hearts and in our lives. We believe that by joining together in community we come closer to understanding both the individual and corporate roles we can play in witnessing to God's presence in the world. We are enriched when we speak with one another frankly and lovingly of our experience. We actively encourage each member's search for this understanding through our corporate religious practice, which has evolved over Friends' history of nearly 350 years, and continues to evolve as we gain new insights as a religious society.

We understand there to be four components which are integral to the commitment we make as members. These are: worship, the conduct of the meeting's business, the work of committees and the fulfillment of our financial responsibilities. When each member examines his or her resources in light of the larger community's need in each of these four areas, and is generous and responsible in sharing those resources, our corporate health is maintained. We struggle to find meaningful ways to speak clearly about both the importance of each person giving generously of his/her time, gifts, and financial resources, and the reality that all of us have different seasons and circumstances in our lives which will cause the measure of what we are able to give to vary. We envision a community in which all have a generosity of spirit in what we give of our self and our resources, and it is that generosity of spirit for which we hold each other accountable. Members are expected to be rigorous with themselves in this process of discerning what they are able to give, to be in dialogue with others, and to inform the community, through the Membership Care, if they experience difficulty discerning or sharing their gifts and resources.

Meeting for worship is the core of our life together. As with all monthly meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, we have no paid ministers, and our meetings for worship are "unprogrammed," held in expectant silence, free of prescribed ritual. Each member of our Meeting has an important part to play: to come to worship regularly, prepared to participate fully, whether in centered waiting or, when moved to speak, in vocal ministry.

Monthly meeting for business is held in the belief that our decision-making process is Spirit-led; we seek understandings from a higher source, transcending the insights of individuals. As our meetings for business are a vital part of our communal life, each of us shares responsibility to be present and to help assure that they are conducted in a spirit of worship.

Committees are the means by which much of the work of our meeting community is carried out. Some committees, such as Property and Office Oversight, focus their efforts on sustaining some aspect of our day to day operations. Our ministry to those in our larger community is given leadership by our Homeless Committee and Peace and Social Concerns. Other committees, such as First Day School, Education, Adult Religious Education, Worship and Ministry and Membership Care seek to nurture the spiritual lives of our members and provide pastoral care. Still others, such as Finance Advisory and

Donations guide us in our efforts to provide good stewardship to our financial resources. It is the responsibility of the Nominating Committee to match members, and the gifts they bring, to various committees and meeting offices. Each member is asked by the Nominating Committee to prayerfully consider the contributions which s/he can make to the meeting, and on behalf of the meeting to the world of which we're a part, through service on a committee.

Corporately, we have come to understand **meeting our financial responsibilities** to mean that current operating expenses of the meeting will be paid for, as fully as possible, through the contributions of our current membership. Income from unrestricted trust funds, left to us by Friends in earlier generations, is money which we feel led to apply to assisting Friends organizations and to furthering the cause of peace and justice in our larger world. This is a rigorous standard which we have set, and not one which we have, yet, fully achieved. It is, nevertheless, a commitment we affirm, in the knowledge that it can be fulfilled if each member gives as generously as resources permit.

In addition to being responsive to opportunities which exist in the four areas mentioned above, members are also encouraged and supported to nurture their spiritual life and witness to the testimonies outside of meeting for worship, finding work or service in the outside world in tune with our beliefs, and participating in study or prayer groups within or outside of the Meeting. We also seek to care for one another on a personal, one-on-one basis, as well as corporately, to the best of our abilities. Still we recognize that disagreement and even conflict are normal to life in any vital and dynamic community. When these occur, we expect our members to engage one another forthrightly, in a spirit of openness and love. While humbly acknowledging the many times we fail to achieve it, our expectation for ourselves is that we will seek to appreciate each other's presence and contributions, looking for the strengths in our diversity. We expect ourselves also to attend to how each member is faring at any given time, reaching to see that individual worth is appreciated and spiritual needs are met.

While all meetings have in common shared beliefs and practices, each meeting tends to have its own unique tone and identity. Central Philadelphia, and the two meetings (Race Street Meeting and 12th St. Meeting) from which Central Philadelphia was formed in 1955, have had a rich history of being responsive to concerns in our Society and the larger world of which we are a part. As both the conditions in our world and our understanding of the world itself change, the issues to which our meeting pays special attention, in living out our witness, also change. Our openness to continuing revelation requires an openness to new leadings with respect to our testimonies. Our meeting has some areas of particular commitment at the present time. We are deeply committed to the peace testimony and encourage members to work toward non-violent solutions to conflicts both at home and abroad, and we support, as well, those who are war tax resisters and/or conscientious objectors to military service. Our strong concerns about social justice have led us to take clear positions against sexual harassment and the death penalty, and have led us to speak out against the oppression of minority groups in our society, particularly persons of color, lesbians, and gay men. As a community we have provided support to our members who are called to work actively in ministry to persons with AIDS, crime victims, and people who are homeless. In addition to these areas of corporate commitment, the meeting provides sustenance through worship and other means, to members as they carry their individual witness and ministry in the world.

Within our meeting community we have been challenged by our Committee on Education to reflect on the meaning of true education as it relates to our young people, and we have wrestled with finding ways to be supportive of public education while also being supportive to our meeting children who are in Friends schools. It is important to us that the benefits of our community are available to all members equally, including marriage under the care of the meeting, which is offered to same-gender as well as heterosexual couples. We strive to remain open to the movement of the Spirit bringing us new concerns.

The primary focus of what is addressed in this Statement on Membership is the participation of our adult members on an active, day to day basis. We see such participation to be vital to the health of our community and our witness to the life of the Spirit. There are times, however, when age or other circumstances preclude the continued active participation of a member. In situations in which the inability to continue active participation is beyond the control of the member, and there is a continued desire to remain in fellowship with the meeting community, both the member and the balance of the community are challenged to find ways to keep the relationship active and vital. We commit ourselves, as a community, to seeking ways to fulfill our part in sustaining such members as part of our fellowship. In those situations in which a person's path has moved away from that of our community, or where one has moved to another geographic area in which there is a Friends meeting, we explore with them whether their path is leading away from membership in Central Philadelphia. Such exploration may lead to sojourning membership elsewhere, transfer of membership or resignation from the meeting.

As a meeting we strive to embrace our children and, in ways appropriate to their age, ensure that they are full participants in the life of our community. While full membership is possible for a minor, we also offer the option of associate membership to the children of our members. Associate membership gives our young people a formal relationship to the Meeting, but reserves for them the decision, when they are ready, to become a full member (or not) rather than having that decision made on their behalf by their parents.

While our commitment as a community goes clearly to those who have entered into the covenant of membership, we recognize and rejoice in the reality that our fellowship also includes occasional visitors and regular participants in the life of our community who have not become members. These persons are invited into the life of the Meeting through worship, attendance at events of our community and service to the meeting.

Friends and fellow seekers are encouraged to study Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Book of Discipline, Faith and Practice, for further understanding of Quakerism in general and membership in particular. They are also encouraged to read other books as listed either in the bibliography supplied in the Attender's Packet or the bibliographies supplied by the Yearly Meeting Library which identify books describing the full range of the Religious Society of Friends.

This Statement on Membership was approved in sections over the course of several called meetings for business. It received full approval, with completion of the final section, on November 16, 1999.