

## MEMBERSHIP IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

**Romans 12: 4-5 NRSV**

*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another.*

**Ephesians 4:25 NRSV**

### The Meaning of Membership

The Religious Society of Friends is a worldwide community of faith, based on experience of a transforming power named many ways: the Inner Light, the Spirit of Christ, the Guide, the Living God, the Divine Presence. Membership includes openness to an ongoing relationship with God and willingness to live one's life according to the leadings of the Spirit as affirmed by the community of faith. The lives of Friends express their faith in accordance with their experiences with God and with the meeting community.

Membership in a monthly meeting is a commitment to a spiritual community and to responsibility for the group. Since early Friends rejected the distinction between clergy and laity, responsibility for the full range of meeting activities rests with the membership. Members are expected to participate in communal worship, to share in the work and service of the Society as they are able, and to live in harmony with its basic beliefs and practices. Membership entails readiness to live as part of the monthly and yearly meetings. Specifically, this means participation in meeting for worship, meeting for business, committee work, and giving time, skills, and financial support to the meeting. Members are encouraged to follow leadings to take part in activities such as religious education, pastoral care, and witness to the broader community. The meeting commits to providing a community where spiritual enlightenment and growth are encouraged, a community which welcomes each individual with love. We are in a spiritual community to learn from and teach each other. Noticing how the community works and how it fails to work suggests to us how to improve the community and ourselves.

Perhaps the most important understanding that may be reached in the membership process is concerning our separate and joint spiritual journeys. Everyone is growing in a relationship with God. This results in growing in our relationships with other people. Each spiritual journey is unique. The meeting aims to be a place where our spiritual journeys can thrive. We seek guidance from one another and the meeting in discerning God's will for ourselves and for the meeting. Spiritual listening is an important part of Friends' relationships and includes listening to God, listening to each other, and listening to the spirit behind the words. Since we do not ask members to subscribe to a creed or specific spiritual language, we encourage all to learn to live with and learn from the differences in spiritual perspective in our meetings.

There are regular attenders who are part of the meeting community but do not feel led to membership. We affirm their value to the community.

## **Initiating the Membership Process**

### **The Meeting**

All action concerning membership is taken in and by the monthly meeting. Only the monthly meeting can admit and record a member. Membership in the meeting also means association with the yearly meeting and with Quaker organizations with which the yearly meeting is associated. The meeting continually needs to be concerned with making the attenders aware of the membership process. The responsibility for encouraging membership lies with each Friend but particularly with the committee which handles membership.

As a part of the continuing care of new attenders, the meeting has a responsibility to help them learn about all aspects of the Society: the home meeting, fall or winter interim business meeting, yearly meeting, worldwide Quakers, and the other Quaker bodies with which Southeastern Yearly Meeting is affiliated. In addition, the study of Friends' literature, history, legacy, and particularly Southeastern Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice will enhance attenders' understanding of our foundations.

### **The Attender**

After a time, the attender begins to understand the unique Quaker method of shared responsibility for service to the meeting. He realizes the needs of the meeting for constant renewal of its spiritual, organizational, community, pastoral care, and physical aspects. To meet these needs, the attender participates in worship, ministry, committee work, and meeting for business. He will find that participation in the work of the meeting will help him move forward in his spiritual journey.

Before an attender applies for membership, she may find it valuable to read material on membership and discuss her spiritual goals and concerns with Friends in whose wisdom, experience, and personal sympathy she has confidence. These Friends will guide the attender in deciding whether she is ready to apply or should first become more familiar with the Religious Society of Friends.

When an attender decides to formally apply for membership, he writes a letter to the clerk of the meeting asking to become a member and giving some idea of his spiritual journey and the circumstances which led to his initiative.

## **Response to the Application for Membership**

### **Appointment of a Clearness Committee**

The clerk of the meeting gives the applicant's letter to the committee responsible for membership and asks the committee to appoint a clearness committee to conduct the membership process. Friends thoroughly grounded in Quaker principles and attitudes and familiar with

Southeastern Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice, including procedures regarding membership, are asked to be on the committee. Some of the members of the committee should know the applicant. The clerk of the clearness committee is encouraged to give the applicant and members of the committee the document, "Clearness for Membership Queries," which is found at the end of this section, or the meeting may prepare a similar document.

## **The Applicant and Clearness Committee Meet**

The clearness committee may feel the need to meet by itself before meeting with the applicant. The committee meets with the individual as often as is beneficial. Usually the best place for meeting with the applicant is at her home. One important aspect of the membership process is that it often leads to deeper friendships among the participants and opens them to each other's gifts.

The committee is asked to discern whether the meeting should accept the applicant into membership and to help the individual discern whether he is clear that membership is right for him. Membership in the Religious Society of Friends means relinquishing membership in other religious bodies before becoming a member. It may also entail canceling membership in a secular organization that clearly promotes behavior and beliefs contrary to Friends' principles.

Throughout the membership process the meeting affirms the diversities of religious experience in its midst. The applicant describes his expectations of membership and his beliefs. The committee shares openly the expectations the meeting has for commitment, participation, and faithfulness by its members. These expectations depend on the gifts and life situation of the individual. The applicant will have questions for the committee, which will be answered with care. Suggested questions and topics for discussion can be found in the document, "Clearness for Membership Queries," which is found at the end of this section. Loving consideration is given to the applicant's familiarity and agreement with Friends' principles and practice, but complete agreement of formal belief or practice is not expected. We urge an understanding that there is diversity in theology among Friends. This diversity is held within the framework of Friends' testimonies and Friends' willingness to move toward unity in the Spirit.

Before the close of the final meeting with the applicant, the clerk of the committee describes the remainder of the membership process for the individual.

## **Completion of the Membership Process**

At a separate meeting without the applicant present, the clearness committee for membership writes its recommendation and forwards this to the committee responsible for membership. After prayerful consideration of this recommendation, the committee responsible for membership forwards a minute regarding the application to the monthly meeting. At this point, a member of the clearness committee shares the recommendation with the applicant.

When membership is recommended the committee, responsible for membership presents its minute of recommendation for membership to the meeting for business. The meeting receives the minute but takes no action on first reading. If any member has concerns, he shares those concerns in private with the committee responsible for membership. That committee works to resolve all

concerns before bringing the minute back to the meeting for business. Final approval of membership occurs at the following business meeting. This gives time for all members to consider prayerfully the application, to converse with the applicant about this step, and to confirm that all are in unity with the new membership. After the second reading and approval of the membership minute, the business meeting welcomes the new member into the monthly meeting. The membership minute is sent to the new member. The meeting arranges a celebration of the new membership. The monthly meeting sends the minute recording a new membership to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

If the applicant and the clearness committee agree that membership is not appropriate at this time, this is reported to the committee responsible for membership. That committee reports their decision to the meeting for business.

If clearness for membership is not being reached, the applicant and each member of the committee need to become clear why this is so. Sometimes there is a disagreement about what the expectations are for the community and for the individual. The committee and the applicant continue to work toward resolution of the points of disagreement. If the committee and the applicant feel that progress has stopped, the committee can report to the committee responsible for membership that the committee and the applicant have not been able to reach clearness. The process will be suspended for a period of time either by the decision of the clearness committee or the applicant. If the clearness process is suspended, the committee will continue to stay in touch with and support the applicant in every way. The clearness process for membership can be resumed at any time. At appropriate intervals, the committee responsible for membership reports to the meeting for business.

## **Membership of Children in the Meeting**

All children from birth to maturity need to feel themselves full participants in the fellowship of the meeting, to be nurtured in their spiritual development and their understanding of the faith and practice of Friends, and to be guided and encouraged in preparation for Quaker adulthood. The meeting should sympathetically help children prepare for the life-changing decisions they must face, such as those regarding cultural conformity and military service. As they mature, if they have received this care from their meeting, they will become increasingly conscious of the full meaning of the responsibilities of membership in the Religious Society of Friends and be ready to make their own decision regarding membership. Growing up in a meeting offers children an extended religious family. It is the meeting's joyful responsibility to provide an atmosphere of care, love, and recognition—in short, a spiritual home—for all young people in the meeting, regardless of their membership status or that of their parents.

A monthly meeting's approach to membership for children should promote the goal of a Religious Society of Friends made up of members by mature convincement. Some Friends believe the process of nurture of the young toward mature convincement is aided by a child's sense of belonging fully to a meeting, a sense that comes only with membership. Other Friends believe the process is aided by a status of "youth member" that calls for a child to make an assertion of mature convincement when ready to do so. Still others believe that any form of involuntary membership limits a child's freedom to choose. Monthly meetings are encouraged to respect parents' sense as to what is best for their children.

Thus, either on their own initiative or in response to an inquiry from the meeting, parents

who are members may, at the time of their child's birth or adoption or later, (1) request membership for their child, (2) request youth membership for their child, or (3) not request any enrollment for the child. If the parents are members of different meetings, the parents decide which meeting records the child's membership. When only one parent is a member, children may be recorded upon the request of one parent and with the permission of the other or, under unusual circumstance, upon the request of one parent. Meetings are urged to recognize the diversity of family patterns and be sensitive to the concerns of all involved.

Parents requesting membership or youth membership for their child should intend to raise the child as a Friend in a meeting community. When the meeting accepts a child into membership or youth membership, it should consider whether the parents or guardians are taking seriously their responsibilities in raising their child as a Quaker and minute the discernment. The parents and the meeting should help the child to grow gradually into the responsibilities of membership and should encourage the child to take on specific responsibilities when ready. The meeting has an obligation to those recorded as members or youth members at a young age to ensure that as they reach adulthood they are aware that they should thoughtfully consider their own commitment to membership.

Youth membership is available only to children. It carries with it the full responsibilities and privileges of membership up to age twenty-five. (For yearly meeting statistical purposes, youth members will not be recorded after their twenty-fifth birthday.) Youth members, when they are led, may request adult membership. The monthly meeting should encourage youth members nearing the age of twenty-five to apply. If a youth member does not take this step by the age of twenty-five, that person's name may be dropped from membership. If a youth member is not clear by that age about applying and is dropped from membership, the meeting is encouraged to continue a caring relationship. Such a person may be encouraged to apply for membership when ready. Children whose parents requested membership for them will remain members after age twenty-five. However, they may want the experience of participating in the membership process. Under some circumstances the meeting may want to review the young person's membership at age twenty-five.

A person may apply for adult membership in a meeting at any age, following the procedure set forth above. Meetings are urged to show a loving flexibility which recognizes the uniqueness of each person's spiritual growth. Some people are spiritually ready for membership early in their lives; others are ready only as adults. In the case of younger applicants, it may be desirable to ascertain the support of the parents or guardian.

The growth of young Friends and the health of the meeting are well served when the meeting encourages the participation of young Friends in all aspects of the meeting. Meetings need to encourage membership among their young people.

Before youth members leave home or for any reason are geographically removed from the meeting, it is important that the committee responsible for membership makes sure that youth members are clear about their relationship with the meeting and explores the question of adult membership with them.

## **Recording the Membership**

The recorder of the monthly meeting asks the new member to fill out a membership form, which is then put in the membership file. The membership form needs to be reviewed from time to

time by the member, at the request of the recorder, and kept up to date. A blank membership form is in the appendices; more can be obtained from the yearly meeting secretary. Membership information is shared with the yearly meeting as requested. The monthly meeting sends the minute reflecting any change in membership status to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

### **Transfer of Membership**

Friends who live at a distance from their own monthly meeting, but near another, will do well to transfer their membership to the nearer one. Living near the meeting makes it possible to enjoy the benefits and to carry out the responsibilities of membership in a particular meeting. Inability to participate in the life of one's own meeting means a loss to both the individual and the meeting. A member of one monthly meeting who moves to the area of another is normally accepted as a member of the Religious Society of Friends and welcomed into membership. If the Friend who has moved from another meeting does not initiate a transfer of membership, the meeting he is now attending, or his home meeting begins a discussion of membership with him.

Pending transfer of membership, both meetings should cooperate in discharging their responsibility toward the member.

When wishing to transfer membership from one meeting to another, a Friend writes a letter to the meeting where his membership is and asks for a letter of transfer to the meeting he is attending.

On occasion, Friends request a transfer of membership for reasons other than a change of residence. The transfer procedure applies in any case.

### **Duties of the Monthly Meeting From Which the Member is Moving**

When a monthly meeting receives such an application for transfer, the committee responsible for membership prepares, in duplicate, a letter of transfer recommending the Friend to the care of the meeting to which transfer is requested. A reason for not making such a reply is if there is a strong reason to doubt the member's willingness to contribute to the life of another meeting. In such a case, communication between the meetings and with the member is advisable.

If the monthly meeting approves the application for transfer, the clerk signs the letter, the principal copy being forwarded to the receiving monthly meeting, the duplicate being retained for the records.

When the meeting issuing the transfer receives acknowledgment that the new meeting has accepted the Friend into membership, the original meeting terminates the Friend's membership, noting its action in the minutes.

### **Duties of the Monthly Meeting To Which the Friend Is Moving**

The clerk of the monthly meeting to which a member is being transferred acknowledges receipt of the letter of transfer. Then the clerk refers it to the committee responsible for membership, which recommends action to the monthly meeting. If there is no objection, the monthly meeting

accepts the transfer and records the Friend as a member. The clerk sends information to that effect to the issuing meeting, to which the Friend in the interim has continued to belong. If there is ground for serious objection to the transfer, the letter should be returned to the meeting which sent it, saying membership transfer was not accepted.

Following a transfer, the new member is welcomed into the meeting with a celebration.

### **Duties of the Recorder Concerning Letters of Transfer**

The recorder keeps a list of all letters of transfer issued and accepted by the meeting. The accepting meeting's recorder notifies the yearly meeting of the new member. The releasing meeting's recorder notifies the yearly meeting of the transfer. Both monthly meetings send the minute reflecting the change in membership status to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

In the situation where a member of the meeting has moved away to a new location and has not asked for a transfer of membership within a reasonable time, the meeting should contact the member about transfer of membership.

### **Sojourning Members**

Friends may attend a monthly meeting because they have moved temporarily into its vicinity but may not wish to give up membership in their home meeting, to which they expect to return eventually. Their desires in this regard should be set forth in a minute from their home meeting. Such Friends are listed as sojourning members of the meeting they attend and are full members of that meeting. Sojourning Friends may fulfill all functions that they are willing to undertake and that the host meeting sees fit to assign them. The host monthly meeting sends a minute of sojourning membership to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth. However, sojourning members should not be counted in the statistical reports of the host meeting or the host yearly meeting. Their sojourning membership ends when they leave the area of the meeting where they have sojourned. Its clerk should then notify their home meeting and the host yearly meeting. If a Friend spends part of each year with the host meeting and part with the home meeting there is no need to renew the sojourning membership each year. The host meeting asks sojourning Friends who live the year around in Southeastern Yearly Meeting to examine their reasons for remaining in that status and to consider a transfer of membership.

### **Dual Members**

Friends who hold membership in a monthly meeting belonging to another yearly meeting but regularly attend a meeting in Southeastern Yearly Meeting for all or for a regular part of the year may be recorded as dual members after informing their home monthly meeting of the proposed action and getting the approval of the monthly meeting in Southeastern Yearly Meeting. Such persons, whether sojourning or dual members, will not be counted as members of Southeastern Yearly Meeting when statistical reports are made, but in every other way will be considered as full members as long as they wish the relationship to continue. The monthly meeting sends the minute of dual membership to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

## **Laying Down Membership**

## **Joining Other Religious Bodies**

If a member wishes to leave the Religious Society of Friends and join some other religious body, that person notifies the monthly meeting. The monthly meeting may provide a letter stating the applicant's good standing in the Religious Society of Friends. When the member has been received into membership by another religious group, his membership with Friends ceases.

## **Resignation by the Individual**

Members may find that they are not in accord with the faith and practice of Friends or do not feel led to be involved actively in the monthly meeting. They may seek to discuss their differences with the meeting, with a member of the committee responsible for membership, or with others in the meeting whom they trust. If the member decides to leave the Society of Friends, she writes a letter of resignation to the clerk of the meeting.

When a member resigns, the meeting is not absolved from further care. A committee appointed either from the committee responsible for membership or from the meeting at large visits the Friend, inquiring in love and forbearance into the cause of the resignation and, if appropriate, endeavoring to bring the member back into the fellowship of Friends. A resignation may be accepted without appointing a committee when the meeting is already well acquainted with the case and is satisfied that the member's decision will not be altered by friendly efforts.

When the meeting accedes to a member's decision to resign, a minute should be made stating that this Friend is released at her own request. The individual should be informed of this action and is no longer a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Letters written in acceptance of a resignation should always show a considerate regard for the person leaving membership. The monthly meeting sends the minute releasing the member at her own request to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

## **Release by the Monthly Meeting**

Long-term nominal membership is generally discouraged except when the member can not get to meeting because of poor health, disability, or location at a distance from any meeting. When a member cannot attend, the Committee for Caring communicates and connects with the member in creative ways. The member may wish to worship with Friends in her home.

When a Friend is consistently absent over a long period of time, the meeting needs to respond to the absence. If the meeting is unable to contact a member after every effort over a period of years, then, under divine guidance, membership may be laid down. Meetings try to stay in touch at least once a year with members who have moved away. Friends who have moved away may be encouraged to transfer their membership.

Either when a Friend is unresponsive to the idea of a transfer of membership or is not participating in the meeting, the meeting may wish to send a letter inquiring whether the member wishes to continue membership. If the answer is yes, the Friend should be encouraged to participate in meeting activities, such as by phone contact, e-mail, contributions, and being present when possible. If the response is negative, the meeting makes every effort to understand where the member is in his spiritual journey. Eventually, the meeting may minute that the membership is laid down, and a loving letter is sent informing the Friend of this action. The ending of membership does not mean the ending of friendship or of welcome if the person comes to meeting for a visit. The ending of membership only recognizes the choice of the individual and the meeting. The monthly meeting sends the minute laying down membership to the yearly meeting membership recorder along with the following data: name, address, phone, e-mail, date of birth.

## Queries for the Meeting Laying Down Membership

Is it really practical to keep people on the records of the meeting as members if they have not participated in the meeting for a long time?

Is the meeting or the individual reluctant to acknowledge the reality of the situation between the meeting and the member by keeping the names of such people on the meeting's records?

*The unity of Christians never did nor ever will nor can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion, but in Christian love only.*

**Thomas Story, 1737**

*Dearly Beloved Friends and brethren, in the Power, Life and Seed of God all dwell, serving one another in Love and in the Wisdom of God. . . . You must do nothing for the Lord by earthly policy ... but wait in the Power of the Lord God and be ordered by that to his glory....*

**George Fox, 1654**

## Clearness for Membership Queries

For meetings, these queries are suggestions or a meeting may make its own clearness for membership queries. Print out these queries or others and distribute copies to the applicant as well as the clearness committee before meeting for the first time.

For applicants, these are questions members of your clearness committee may use to get to

know you better and to guide their prayerful consideration of your request for membership in their meeting. This is not about “right or wrong” answers; rather, it is intended to ensure that you understand what you are taking on and to give you the opportunity to explore aspects of the Religious Society of Friends which may not be clear to you. Please ask any questions you may have.

### **YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

What has been your spiritual journey and how has it led you to seek membership in the Religious Society of Friends? We invite you to share with us ways in which you have experienced the Divine/God’s presence. How can the meeting support your continued spiritual growth?

### **MEETINGS FOR BUSINESS**

How many meetings for business have you attended (lots, a few, none)? What is your understanding of the way Friends conduct meeting for business? What has been your experience with business meeting?

### **MEETINGS FOR WORSHIP**

How do you feel about the unprogrammed meeting for worship being based on expectant waiting? What questions do you have about the role and source of vocal ministry? What do you do with messages that you have felt as being intended for you as opposed to messages meant for the meeting as a whole?

### **TESTIMONIES**

What do you know about the various testimonies of Friends: peace, integrity, equality, simplicity, community?

### **WORLD OF QUAKERISM**

What do you know about the world of Quakerism: Southeastern Yearly Meeting (SEYM), Friends General Conference (FGC), Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW), Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)?

### **ROOTS AND DIVERSITY OF QUAKERISM**

What are your thoughts about the historical and spiritual roots of Quakerism and the diversity of Friends practice today? Have you noticed that there is within our meeting a spectrum of spiritual experience and language? How do you respond to this diversity?

### **QUAKER WRITINGS**

Please tell us which Quaker writings, historical or contemporary, have helped you and why.

### **QUAKER LANGUAGE**

What is your understanding of these phrases used by Friends: “discerning community,” “listening to that of God within,” “yielding to the Spirit,” “coming to unity with Friends,” “seeking inward peace,” “the Inward Christ,” and “way will open”?

### **INDIVIDUALS HELPING THE MEETING**

What special gifts can you share that will enrich the life of the meeting? What other ways might you contribute to the work of the meeting, financially or otherwise? Do you realize that your presence at meeting for worship and meeting for business is a gift to the meeting as well as to yourself? Are you comfortable both with helping when you are asked and just doing a job that needs to be done?

### **HOW THE MEETING HELPS INDIVIDUALS**

Are there forms of ministry and support that you have found helpful or that you would like to receive? How will you ask for help from the meeting? What are the various uses of the clearness process? Do you realize that you can have spiritual friends in the meeting?

### **RECONCILIATION**

Membership in a meeting means membership in a community where people respect and love each other. Nevertheless, conflicts sometimes arise. How have you reconciled differences in the past? What have you learned from these experiences about how to resolve differences in the future?

### **MEETING AND YOUR CHILD**

Have you requested associate membership for your child? Are there special ways the meeting can support your child's spiritual growth or your parenting?

### **OTHER AFFILIATIONS WITH RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS**

Are you currently a member of any other religious organization?

### **QUAKERS AREN'T PERFECT**

One question you do NOT need to ask yourself is, "Am I good enough to be a Quaker?" The Religious Society of Friends is not a body of ultra-virtuous people: We all have our weaknesses as well as special gifts. In any case, who among us could judge who is "good enough"?

## **At the End of the Clearness for Membership Meeting**

At the end of the meeting, the clerk of the clearness committee describes the remainder of the membership process to the applicant.