

# **Guide to Membership in the Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends**

## **FOREWORD**

The Membership and Spiritual Care Committee of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends presents this guide as one expression of Quaker values and practices in the hope that it will give insight into the meaning of membership and provide practical guidance for those considering whether to apply to become members of this Meeting.

The Religious Society of Friends holds as the basis of its faith the belief that God endows each human being with a measure of the Divine Spirit. The gift of God's presence and the light of God's truth have been available to all people in all ages. Friends do not have a creed. Quakerism is, essentially, a way of life and a set of values. There are among Quakers many expressions of this way of life, some traditional and some which reject traditional expression.

We are a society of seekers, seeking God and divine guidance, valuing unity but not uniformity. As our search continues and deepens, both as individuals and as a group, our comprehension of God is ever expanding.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

“The immanence of God implies that all persons are children of the Divine and brothers and sisters one of another. All have the capacity to discern spiritual truth and to hold direct communion with God. No mediator, rite, or outward sacrament is a necessary condition of worship... All seekers who in spirit and in truth try to find and follow the will of God and who are in sympathy with the principles and practices of Friends, we welcome to our fellowship.” (Baltimore Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 1988, p. ii.)

“A full-fledged member differs from an attender only in his full commitment to the testimonies of the Society and responsibilities for its continued existence... All members, regardless of how they came to the Society of Friends, must periodically become seekers again. The three basic steps -- seeker, attender, and member – have a parallel in the mystic life. A seeker initiates himself, an attender is initiated by the meeting, but one is initiated spiritually in the form of a mystic experience. As John put it, ‘And they shall be all taught of God.’” (Peter Fingesten, “They Shall Be All Taught of God,” *Friends Journal*, February 1, 1971)

Membership in a Friends Meeting provides an opportunity for individuals to grow and to support one another in the quest for inward growth.

## How To Obtain Membership

If you wish to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends, you must take the initiative of applying for membership in a Monthly Meeting. In the beginning *you* try to decide, not the Meeting.

By reading and by attending Friends worship, the prospective applicant can gain a clearer understanding of what it means to enter into membership in the Religious Society of Friends. Sometimes an attender will form too favorable an image. The image may be so favorable that he or she feels unworthy to join, or, after joining, may suffer disillusionment.

“Much less than in the past are new members expected to have already attained final certainty. For them as indeed for old members, the Society of Friends can be looked upon as the favorable environment in which both individual and corporate growth may be expected to take place.” (Henry J. Cadbury, *The Character of a Quaker*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 103, p.13.)

### New Members

When you desire to join Sandy Spring Meeting, you should submit a letter to the Clerk of the Membership and Spiritual Care Committee saying so and stating your reasons for wanting to become a part of our Meeting. This letter may be handed to the Clerk of the Meeting or mailed to Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting, 17715 Meeting House Road, Sandy Spring, MD 20860. The Membership and Spiritual Care Committee will arrange for a Clearness Committee (usually two or three members of the Membership and Spiritual Care Committee) to meet with you to discover your own “feeling of the meaning of membership and of the significant features of the Quaker life and witness.” (*ibid.*, p. 14) The Clearness Committee will seek to determine that you are engaged in a sincere search for truth, that you feel Sandy Spring Meeting and Quakers can contribute to your spiritual growth, and that you desire to join with the Meeting in creating an environment which encourages individual and group growth.

Your decision to become a member should be an unhurried and carefully considered one. When you and the Membership and Spiritual Care Committee agree that you are ready for membership, your application will be presented to the next scheduled Monthly Meeting for Business. Traditionally your name is held over one month for final action at the next Business Meeting. After you are accepted as a member, Friends appointed by this second session welcome you on behalf of the Meeting. Welcoming committees are also considered permanent committees of nurture or “special friends.”

If you would like further help in preparing yourself for membership, you may request assistance from any member of the Membership and Spiritual Care Committee or write to the Clerk of the Meeting.

### What should I expect from the Clearness Committee?

You may feel intimidated at the thought that a committee will interview you for membership; however, the Clearness Committee is designed to help you discern whether you feel clear about joining the meeting. The Clearness Committee will inquire about your spiritual journey and what draws you to seek membership at this time. It will seek to discern with you whether Sandy Spring Meeting truly is your spiritual home at this time in your journey. The Clearness Committee meeting should be a supportive and nurturing experience.

The Sandy Spring Meeting *Manual of Procedure* suggests inquiries for the Clearness Committee in its meeting with you. At your meeting, the Committee may cover some or all of these topics. So that you may know what to expect at your Clearness Committee meeting, here is the relevant excerpt from the *Manual of Procedures*:

To reach clearness together about the rightness of membership for the applicant, the committee and the applicant should discuss all the issues in a deliberate fashion. The committee should:

1. Ask about the spiritual journey of the applicant and listen attentively and prayerfully to the applicant's response. Does the applicant seem to be genuinely led by the Holy Spirit in seeking membership and willing to respond to Divine guidance in making other decisions?
2. Inquire as to the applicant's understanding of Quaker history and experience.
3. Inquire whether the applicant finds harmony with Quaker testimonies and with the Meeting's expressions of these testimonies. The committee might also inquire how the applicant sees his or her life, including vocational choices and other associations, being affected by these testimonies.
4. Consider whether the applicant is involved in the life of the Meeting and whether the applicant is prepared to make a commitment to the Meeting community and to the Society of Friends as a whole. Is the applicant prepared to seek clearness for individual leadings through the Meeting?
5. Discuss the applicant's familiarity with Friends' decision making processes. Has the applicant had opportunity to observe the Meeting conducting its business in order to understand this aspect of the Meeting's life?
6. Inquire as to other religious affiliations of the applicant and discuss whether they are to be terminated or continued.
7. Inquire whether anything further is needed to help the applicant reach clarity about the decision.

### **Membership of Children**

Members of our Monthly Meeting may ask to have their children listed as full or associate members. When an associate member is ready to become a full member, he or she should write to the Membership and Spiritual Care Committee requesting full membership. Associate members should seek full membership status before they reach age 25.

Children who feel led to pursue membership on their own initiative are welcomed and encouraged to seek membership through the regular clearness process (described above) as if they were adults.

### **Transfers from other Friends' Meetings**

When a member of another Monthly Meeting wishes to transfer membership to Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting, the Friend seeking transfer must write to the Clerk of his/her Meeting requesting a letter of transfer to Sandy Spring Meeting. After the transfer is read and accepted at Meeting for Business, Membership and Spiritual Care Committee recommends a committee of welcome and nurture, and notifies the other Meeting of our action.

## **OBLIGATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP**

Membership implies participation in the life and work of the Meeting. The second Query, *Faith and Practice*, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 1988 states: "Do you participate regularly in meetings for business, discharge faithfully your committee responsibilities, and assume your share of financial support of the Meeting?"

### **Work of Sandy Spring Meeting**

Sandy Spring Meeting is similar to all nonpastoral Friends' Meetings, i.e. its activities are initiated and reviewed by Monthly Meeting for Business, and the activities are performed by committee members and other dedicated Friends. The Nominating Committee provides all members an annual opportunity to serve on one or more committees of the Monthly and Yearly Meetings.

### **Financial Support**

The work of Sandy Spring Meeting is supported by voluntary contributions. While Friends are not expected to tithe, it is hoped they will contribute what they can to the Monthly Meeting to support its work. Copies of our budget are available for the asking.

Contributions may be placed in the contribution box at the rear of the Meeting House, or may be mailed to the Treasurer, Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting, 17715 Meeting House Road, Sandy Spring, MD 20860. On request, the Treasurer can arrange for direct deposits from your account on a regular basis.

## **PRINCIPLES AND BELIEFS**

The following statements, selected from many sources, reveal some insights of truths which have come to various Friends:

## **Belief**

“Speaking of Quakerism,” Howard Brinton writes, “the energizing center of the whole movement was the Inward Light, the Inward Christ, that of God in every man, the Power of God, the Witness of God, the Seed of the Kingdom, the pure Wisdom which is from above (James 3:17). The Society of Friends escaped anarchism because its members realized that this light was a superindividual Light which created peace and unity among all persons who responded to it or ‘answered it in one another,’ to use an expression which often appears in George Fox’s letters.” (Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, Pendle Hill Publications, 5<sup>th</sup> pr. 1976, p. 14.)

“The Society of Friends is tolerant of varied judgments amongst its members. It does not expect acceptance of a precise definition of its faith... It leaves its members wide freedom in working out the application of its testimonies. Throughout the Society’s history there have been tensions, but in practice these have proved to be fruitful, and the result has been a continuing and developing unity in both faith and practice.” (Introduction, *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*. London: 1960.)

“There is a Principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, ...they become brethren.” (John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, 1746)

## **Creed**

Quakerism is a way of life, rather than a set of beliefs dogmatically required of each member. It is a kind of Christianity which begins with experience rather than with dogma. Friends have avoided stating their beliefs in catechisms or creeds, as they tend to present religion as centered in the mind and memory, rather than as a life centered in the heart. Creeds tend to fossilize the expression of growing truth. “Friends prefer to begin with personal experience of God. They are convinced by their experience that He is not remote or far away.” (Rufus M. Jones, *The Quaker’s Faith*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting)

“Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with a measure of the light that is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.” (Elders at Balby, England, 1656)

The fact that Quakers profess no creeds does not mean that they have no settled and shared beliefs. Historically, the Society of Friends has been a religious and Christian

body, knowing God as revealed in the Bible generally, and in the life and teachings of Christ supremely, and in the past experiences of religious men and women.

## **Testimonies**

“A Quaker testimony is a belief that stems from our fundamental understanding of religious truth. It is a corporately held belief about how we should individually act. In practicing them, we witness to our understanding of the very nature of God’s spirit of love and truth.” (Jonathan Dale, 1996)

“A testimony is different from a secular value. It is a way of living, not a creed . . . based on the realization that there is that of God in everybody, that all human beings are equal, that all life is interconnected.” (Jonathan Dale, *Faith in Action: Quaker Social Testimony*, 2002).

Our testimonies include community, equality, integrity, simplicity, social responsibility, stewardship of the environment, and peace.

## **The Scriptures**

“Because the scriptures are only a declaration of the source, and not the source itself, therefore they are not to be considered the principal foundation of all truth and knowledge... They are and may be regarded as a secondary rule that is subordinate to the Spirit, from which they obtain all their excellence and certainty... The Spirit is the first and principal Leader.” (Robert Barclay, *Apology*, 1676)

“The world is better able to read the nature of religion in a man’s life than in the Bible.” (Richard Baxter, cir. 1650)

## **Continuing Revelation**

“...if God ever spoke, He is still speaking... If there is something of His image and superscription in our inmost structure and being, we ought to expect a continuous revelation of His will and purpose through the ages... He is the GREAT I AM, not a GREAT HE WAS.” (Rufus M. Jones, *A Call to What is Vital*, 1947, p. 65)

## **Sacraments**

“If the sacrament be defined as an outward sign of inward grace, then any act such as self sacrificing service to one’s fellow man may be considered sacramental. ‘The Holy Supper is kept indeed, in whatso we share with another’s need.’” (J. R. Lowell, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*.)

“Friends accept the doctrine of baptism by the Holy Spirit and communion of devout souls with God as goals which they seek to attain, not only in meetings for worship, but also in the circumstances of daily life. We believe that if the inward states

shown by their outward rites are to be truly realized, a ritual is not needed, and if baptism and communion are not inwardly realized, the outward ritual will not produce them.” (Anna C. Brinton, *Friends and Sacraments*. Friends General Conference)

## **Worship**

“Friends gather in hush and silence in order to feel and hear before they speak.” (Rufus M. Jones, *The Quaker’s Faith*)

“Our way of worship is not just an historical accident; it is a corollary from our conviction concerning the universal Light of Christ. Believing that in every worshiper, regardless of age, learning, sex, or any other human label, the promptings of God’s spirit are at work. Friends meet together in entirely unprogrammed silent prayer, opening themselves (to the Spirit)... In such corporate worship... we are led into a depth of communion with God and with one another that is deeply meaningful and spiritually refreshing.” (L. Hugh Doncaster in Baltimore Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 1988)

## **Mysticism**

“Mysticism is a religion based on the spiritual search for an inward, immediate experience of the divine. Whenever and wherever religion becomes too formal and institutional, too dependent on external expression, the mystic rises up in protest and points the way to a religion which is internal, independent of outward forms of organization and centered in the direct apprehension of God.” (Howard H. Brinton, Introduction of *Friends for 300 Years*, p. xii)

“Mysticism is the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of ... the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage.” (Rufus M. Jones, *Luminous Trail*, 1947, pp. 25-26)

For many Friends the word ‘mysticism’ implies that awareness of ‘God with us,’ such as we can and do have, for example, in deep passages of a Meeting for Worship. Such an awareness for most of us comes only in moments. With the mystics of Christian history it is more sustained. In each case there is a realization that God is in our lives; differences in experience of God are those of degree, not kind.

## **Service**

“They (Friends) have uncommon faith in the transforming power of love. They make it an inherent part of their religion to practice the spirit and method of love in the various walks of life. They feel to a high degree the preciousness, the absolute worth, of the human life, made in God’s image and big with divine possibilities, and they count nothing too hard or too difficult or too costly if they can save or elevate or liberate any life... They have been the champions of less favored races. They have been friends and helpers of friendless people, of those who were neglected or exploited. They have opposed war on Christian principle and on the grounds of love and humanity. It seems to

them unthinkable as a method of solving international issues. They have insisted that Christians should exhibit a way of life that would eliminate the causes of war. In any case they themselves stand unalterably for the application of Christ's way of life not only to relations between nations, but to relations between races and to all social and economic problems as well." (Rufus M. Jones, *The Quaker's Faith*)

Thus Friends believe that "there is that of God in every person." With the help of God, members seek to grow inwardly, to overlook faults in others while seeking the good in them, and to help their fellows grow in God's love. It is through nurturing growth within that Friends may fulfill George Fox's admonition to walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.

## **FRIENDS ORGANIZATIONS**

The Religious Society of Friends began as a Fellowship of Friends of Truth. Within twenty years, in response to internal dissension and widespread persecution, George Fox created a system of governance in which Meetings were established and named after the interval between business sessions. Monthly Meetings became basic units. Groups of nearby Monthly Meetings met quarterly, and geographically separated Meetings gathered yearly for fellowship and business. Thus Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting belongs to Chesapeake Quarterly Meeting and Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century several associations of Yearly Meetings were formed to integrate and encourage spiritual growth and outreach of Friends. To embrace and nurture Monthly Meetings which had separated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baltimore Yearly Meeting (United) participates in both Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting. The Yearly Meeting also belongs to Friends World Committee for Consultation, an association of nearly all yearly meetings in the world.

Furthermore, Baltimore Yearly Meeting appoints representatives to other Friends' Organizations, including American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Friends Council on Education, and William Penn House.

### **Friends Schools**

Sandy Spring Friends School, founded in 1961, is the tenth Friends school in the Sandy Spring neighborhood since 1797. It is under the care of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting and Baltimore Yearly Meeting, who appoint 16 of the 20 member Board.

Other Friends schools in the area are the Friends Community School (Adelphi, MD), Friends Meeting School (Frederick County, MD), Friends School (Baltimore, MD), Sidwell Friends School (Bethesda, MD and Washington, DC), and Thornton Friends School (Silver Spring, MD).

## **Additional Resources**

Baltimore Yearly Meeting. *Faith and Practice*, 1988.

Brinton, Howard H. & Bacon, Margaret Hope. *Friends for 350 Years*. Pendle Hill, 2002.

Cooper, Wilmer A. *A Living Faith*. Friends United Press, 1990.

Freiday, Dean, ed. *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*. Barclay Press, 1967.

Kelly, Thomas R. *A Testament of Devotion*. 1941.

Morley, Barry. *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 307, 1993.

Moulton, Phillips, ed. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Oxford University Press, 1971.

Nickalls, John, ed. *Journal of George Fox*. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1985.

Punshon, John. *Portrait in Grey: A short History of the Quakers*. Quaker Home Service, 1984.

Steere, Douglas V., ed. *Quaker Spirituality Selected Writings*. The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1984.

Taber, William. *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #306, 1992.

These and other books and pamphlets may be found in the Sandy Spring Meeting Library in the Community House. Most can be purchased from:

FGC Bookstore  
1216 Arch Street 2B  
Philadelphia PA 19107  
(800) 966-4556  
[www.Quakerbooks.org](http://www.Quakerbooks.org)  
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This Guide to Membership has been compiled by the Membership and Spiritual Care  
Committee of the Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.  
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