

THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION ON BRITISH QUAKER ECCLESIOLOGY

By

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Abstract

THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION ON BRITISH QUAKER ECCLESIOLOGY

It has been a charism of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) that major decisions have been made not by a small leadership group at the apex of the organisation but by the largest possible gathering of the worshipping community seeking to discern the ‘will of God’ through their quest for unity.

This thesis discusses the centralisation of Quaker decision-making; especially since the introduction, in response to Charity Commission requirements, of managing trustees in 2006. It explores the implications of these changes in the ecclesiology of the Religious Society of Friends through reviewing the shifting role and content of the annual Yearly Meeting, with reference to the Quaker concept of ‘Gospel Order’¹ and also by a review of decisions reserved by the trustees rather than left to the discernment of the wider body.

This study acknowledges the fragmentation of belief among Quakers and identifies the effects of this and two further features of internal secularisation described by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce: ‘the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands

¹ ‘Gospel Order’: the theological understanding which informed early Quakers in their development of organisational processes and structures (see Chapter 3).

that accord with strictly technical criteria'; and 'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation'.²

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² Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In defence of an unfashionable theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London, CA: Watts, 1966).

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THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION ON BRITISH QUAKER ECCLESIOLOGY

Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Contents

THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION ON BRITISH QUAKER ECCLESIOLOGY	1
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Chapter Outline	1
1.2 Introduction to the Thesis	1
1.3 Context: The Religious Society of Friends.....	3
1.4 A shift from Christian to post-Christian.....	8
1.5 The Area of Research	12
1.6 The Research Focus.....	13
1.7 Methodology.....	15
1.7.1 How this project came about	15
1.7. 2 The decision to undertake a desk-based study	16
1.7.3. Research Processes	18
1.7.3.3 Analysis, and the use of Case Studies	22
1.7.4 The participant as researcher; and the practice of reflexivity.....	25

1.8 The Academic Value of this Thesis.....	30
1.9 Outline of the thesis	31
1.10 Chapter Summary	34
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL CONTEXT.....	35
2.1 Introduction	35
2.2 Literature about the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.....	35
2.3 Wider Theoretical Literature	51
2.3.1 Secularisation and organisational change.....	52
2.3.2 Management and Authority Within Faith Groups.....	57
2.3.3. Management in religious organisations.....	62
2.3.4 Management, Authority and Leadership	66
2.3.5 Decision-making in Organisations	70
2.3.6 Decision-making in face-to-face and egalitarian organisations	78
2.4 Chapter summary.....	87
CHAPTER 3: GOSPEL ORDER: THE THEOLOGY OF AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS	89
3.1 Chapter Outline	89
3.2 Gospel Order	89
3.3. The Quaker Meeting for Worship, and Meeting for Worship for Business.....	94

3.4 Discernment and decision-making	101
3.5 The Challenges of the Quaker Business Method.....	103
3.6 The uses of silence in Quaker business meetings.....	111
3.7 Authority and leadership in the Religious Society of Friends.....	114
3.8 Personal ambition	120
3.9 The Quaker Business Method outside of a Meeting for Worship for Business	122
3.10 Chapter summary.....	126
CHAPTER 4: THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN: QUAKER	
STRUCTURES AND THE ROLE, CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF THE YEARLY MEETING	
.....	131
4.1 Chapter Outline	131
4.2 The History of the Organisation of the Religious Society of Friends	131
4.3 The History of the Yearly Meeting.....	136
4.4 Residential Yearly Meetings, Summer Gatherings and Yearly Meeting Gatherings.....	144
4.5 Management of the Yearly Meeting.....	148
4.6 Revisions to the Structure of the Religious Society of Friends, and to the role of the Yearly Meeting since the mid-20th century	153
4.7 Meeting for Sufferings	161
4.8 Rationalisation of committees and their members	164
4.9 Paid staff and the role of the recording clerk.....	166

4.10 Chapter Summary	168
CHAPTER 5: YEARLY MEETING CASE STUDIES	172
5.1 Chapter Outline	172
5.2 Earlier Yearly Meeting case-studies	172
5.2.1 The 1912 Yearly Meeting.....	173
5.2.2 A cluster of Yearly Meetings in the Mid-Twentieth Century	177
5.2.3 Yearly Meeting 1989: Aberdeen: the comportment of the clerk and of the Yearly Meeting.....	180
5.3 Yearly Meetings since the introduction of Trustees	192
5.3.1 Yearly Meeting 2008: Censorship on the part of the Agenda Committee	193
5.3.2 Yearly Meeting Gathering, York 2009: Same-sex Marriage	196
5.3.3 The 2012 Yearly Meeting – The Shortest Yearly Meeting in History; the First at Which Only Ritual Decisions Were Made	206
5.3.4 Yearly Meeting 2014 and the Book of Discipline Revision.....	210
5.3.5 Yearly Meeting Gathering, Warwick 2017: The Story the Group Tells to Itself Helps to Shape the Nature of the Group	214
5.3.6 Yearly Meeting 2018: A Single Decision to Ratify	219
5.4 Chapter Summary	223
6.1 Chapter Outline	229
6.2 Charitable Registration and Trusteeship.....	230

6.2.1 The Rise of Governance and of Non-Executive Boards	230
6.2.2 The Charity Commission.....	232
6.3 Charitable registration and Trusteeship in the Religious Society of Friends	235
6.3.1 Quaker registration with the Charity Commission	235
6.3.2 Trusteeship in the Religious Society of Friends.....	237
6.3.3 The new Trustee body and the locus of decision-making	240
6.3.4 Opportunities for scrutiny.....	249
6.4 Property-related case studies associated with the work of Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees	253
6.4.1 Case study: Courtauld House 1995–2008	253
6.4.2 Case Study: The values and capital decisions associated with the refurbishment of the Large Meeting House	261
6.4.3 Case study: What’s in a name? ‘The Light’	273
6.4.4. Discussion: The three property case studies.....	277
6.5 Case studies relating to the locus of power and to charitable status	279
6.5.1 Case study: The centralisation of decision-making: The role of the Recording Clerk – and Whoosh!.....	279
6.5.2 Case study: The decision to register under the Charities Lobbying Act 2014	282
6.5.3 ‘The Church and The Charity’	286
6.6 Chapter Summary	293

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION	298
7.1 Chapter Outline	298
7.2 Summary of Key Points.....	298
7.3 Discussion.....	306
7.4 Conclusions	320
7.5 Looking forward.....	323
7.6 Contribution to scholarship	326
7.7 Opportunities for further research	328
7.8 Chapter Summary	330
Coda.....	333
Bibliography	335

THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION ON BRITISH QUAKER ECCLESIOLOGY

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the study as a whole, and to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, the locus of the study. This investigation of changes in the organisation and management within the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is a study of a faith group in transition. The methodology section indicates that this is primarily an historical study of the recent past, making use of data which has been published either generally or within the Society of Friends. It notes the challenges associated with developing an academic understanding of a social environment in which the researcher is themselves embedded, not as a participant-observer but as an observing participant. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the thesis.

1.2 Introduction to the Thesis

In the academic study of religion in modern Britain, whatever the faith group being studied, one of the key questions today is: ‘How is it adapting within the wider social context of increasing secularisation?’³

³ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A critical agenda* 2nd edn. London: Sage, 2013) ; Grace Davie, *et al*, eds., *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

This study traces the changing role, content and management of the annual national gathering of British Quakers; the Yearly Meeting (YM),⁴ particularly since the changes in governance instituted in response to the Charity Commission's requirements under the 2006 Charities Act. It explores how organisational changes, both those initiated internally and those precipitated by external factors such as new requirements on the part of the Charity Commission, have affected the structures and the authority relationships within the Society of Friends, and therefore too the individual's experience of the communal life of this particular faith group. This is also a case study, then, of a religious group changing its nature in response to the requirements of the secular state, as predicted by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce⁵ (See below).

This suggested inclination to theological shape-shifting in response to the demands of the secular state has not, of course, occurred in isolation from other changes in the Religious Society of Friends and the national culture within which it functions. The changing profile of membership, and the disparate range of beliefs that members hold, are also symptoms of secularisation, and provide the context for the organisational changes observed and reported upon.

⁴ Confusingly, the term 'Yearly Meeting' is also used to refer to the national organisation of the Society of Friends, and the name of the national body is 'Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends'.

⁵ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: CA, Watts, 1966); Bruce, *Secularization*.

1.3 Context: The Religious Society of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends ('Quakers'⁶), arose during a period of widespread spiritual seeking in 17th-century England, among communities of dissenters from the established, Anglican, church.⁷ Crawford Gribben, writing about the varieties of religious movements in Cromwell's period, comments that the key characteristic of the Society of Friends, which distinguished it from the other formal and informal religious movements in Britain and Ireland in the mid-17th century, was that, while most groups emphasised the importance of the Word of God as transmitted in the Bible, Quakers (who were as well-versed in the Bible as anyone else) celebrated the imminence of the Spirit.⁸ Quakers believed everyone had access to God's guidance, repudiated ordained clergy, and affirmed the priesthood of believers.⁹

This overriding insight helped to ensure that, for most of its existence, the Religious Society of Friends in Britain has been structured to ensure widespread participation by members of the Quaker community in decision-making, which is framed as communally seeking the will of God.¹⁰ Any member of a 'Local Meeting' (congregation) can, and is enjoined to, attend the

⁶ The term 'Quaker' was initially used pejoratively by a magistrate during a trial of one of the founders of the group, George Fox, in 1650. It was adopted almost immediately as a sobriquet by the Religious Society of Friends.

⁷ Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646-1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972). Historians such as Christopher Hill describe the role and genesis of dissenting sects such as the Levellers, Ranters, Baptists and Quakers in terms of the wider political environment, but it would be simplistic to discount the real religious fervour which was also present. Like many other reformists throughout the history of Christianity, these breakaway groups went back to basics and looked to the Bible, particularly the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, for inspiration about how to conduct their new movement.

⁸ Crawford Gribben, *God's Irishmen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). p.70.

⁹ 1 Peter, 2:9. See also 1 Cor:12, and also George Fox: *General Epistle 1667 (Quaker Faith and Practice: the Book of Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1995, 5th edn., 2013), (Henceforth *QF&P*), 19:31.

¹⁰ *QF&P*, 3:30.

business meetings, ‘Meetings for Worship for Business’ which are held locally or in the ‘Area Meeting’ of which the Local Meeting is a part. Representatives from each Area Meeting are nominated to attend the national ‘Meeting for Sufferings’, the national standing committee of the Religious Society of Friends; or they may be nominated to other national, ‘Central’ committees, such as ‘Quaker Life’, or ‘Quaker Peace and Social Witness’. Any Quaker, or, with permission, someone not in membership but a regular ‘Attender’ at a local meeting, can attend and take a full part in the Yearly Meeting, which is described in the church handbook, *Quaker Faith & Practice* (hereafter *QF&P*) as ‘the final constitutional authority of the Religious Society of Friends in England, Scotland, Wales and the Channel Islands’.¹¹ *QF&P* explains that Quaker business meetings are worshipful events, very similar in principle and in their form to the general ‘Meeting for Worship’ held each Sunday.¹²

The Religious Society of Friends has been known in the wider society in Britain for reasons such as its progressive stance against slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries; Elizabeth Fry’s 19th-century work among prisoners, commemorated on the now-withdrawn £5 note; and its support for conscientious objection to conscription, especially during World War 1.

It is actually a small faith group; worldwide there are fewer than 380,000 Quakers.¹³ At the end of 2018 in Britain, where the group originated, there were 12,666 members and 7,433 regular attenders (i.e. participants not in formal membership) spread throughout the 475 Local Meetings

¹¹ *QF&P*, 6:12.

¹² ‘In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God’s will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God’s guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions’ (Britain Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 3:02).

¹³ The Friends World Committee for Consultation reported that there were 377,557 Quakers around the world in 2017. <http://fwcc.world/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/fwccworldmap2017.pdf>.

(LMs).¹⁴ The LMs are grouped geographically into 70 Area Meetings (AMs), each containing between 2 and 17 LMs, and a total of between 65 and 799 people.¹⁵

The current total of 20,099 members and attenders is down from a post-war peak of 26,757 members and attenders recorded in 1991.¹⁶ However, a Quaker demographer, Bill Chadkirk¹⁷ points out that the tabular statements in many Area Meetings are inflated, with names still recorded of people who had left the area or no longer attended Meeting. Extrapolating from Meetings which he had surveyed, he suggests that the real numbers of active Quakers and attenders may be barely two-thirds of the figures officially recorded.¹⁸

Although in the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century the Society of Friends was primarily an endogenous group, into which members were born, this changed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. There have been spikes of incomers at particular historical moments, for instance among pacifists around the time of the first and second world wars, and in the mid-1960s by people who welcomed Quakers' declaration of compassion about relationships and sexuality in *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*,¹⁹ which was published in 1963.

¹⁴ Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Patterns of Membership, including the 2018 Tabular Statement*. Compiled for Yearly Meeting, 24–27 May 2019, London, Friends House (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2019), p. 2.

¹⁵ Yearly Meeting of RSF, *Patterns of Membership*, p.8–9.

¹⁶ Post-war peak of 26,757 members & attenders aggregate in 1991. James William Croan Chadkirk, *Patterns of Membership and Participation by British Quakers, 1823–2012* (unpublished MPhil Dissertation, The University of Birmingham, 2014), p. 253.

¹⁷ Chadkirk, *Patterns of Membership*, p. 154.

¹⁸ My own experience, in Thaxted Area Meeting, indicates that Chadkirk's figure may be optimistic; in one of the Local Meetings, Saffron Walden, barely 35 members and attenders, fewer than half of the 82 recorded in the membership list, attend that meeting as much as once a year.

¹⁹ Alastair Heron, ed., *Towards a Quaker View of Sex: An Essay by a Group of Friends* (London: Home Service Committee, Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting, 1963).

The British Quaker Survey of 2013 found that 84% of respondents had become drawn into the Society as adults.²⁰ The 2018 ‘tabular statement’ shows that 24.2% of the current membership came into the Society within the past decade, which indicates that there is considerable fluidity in the population. Over the same period, some 24.3% of members died, and 15.2% terminated their membership, leading to an overall decline of 13%.²¹ In other words, more than 80% of the current members have had to familiarise themselves with Quaker theology and traditions in adulthood; and a quarter have only done so within the past decade.²² This of course means that a substantial minority of present-day Quakers simply have no memory and no experience of the way in which Yearly Meetings were conducted, or the Society of Friends was organised, before the changes in governance in 2006 which are the concern of this study.

Indeed, whether or not they are longstanding members, unless they belong to the small set of Friends and Attenders who take part in Yearly Meetings (roughly 6% of the official total in both 1912 and 2012),²³ the many new participants are therefore not particularly likely either to recognise the changes and their effects over the period. Nor are they in a position to appraise the extent to which any changes in the management or content of the Yearly Meetings might have

²⁰ Jennifer Mary Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey: Examining Religious Beliefs and Practices in the Twenty-First Century’, *Quaker Studies*, 19:1 (2014), 7–136, p.21.

²¹ Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Patterns of Membership, including the 2018 Tabular Statement*. Compiled for Yearly Meeting, 24–27 May 2019 (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2019) p. 2.

²² Conversely, though beyond the scope of this study, it is also apparent that the Society of Friends is not effective at retaining its members, particularly those young adults who were born or brought up in the Society.

²³ Penelope Cummins, ‘To See One Another’s Faces’: *The Role and Purposes of Yearly Meeting in Britain in 2012 and 1912*. Paper presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association ‘Differences’ Conference. Woodbrooke, Birmingham, July 2012.

been constructive, or have increased or diminished the extent to which Quakers in their national gatherings remain true to the spirit or intentions of Friends in earlier times.

The decision-making processes examined in this study are still formally described within the Society of Friends in the language of a theocratic group, although the group in Britain has long contained within its membership a tension between the overtly Christian and other members and attenders.²⁴ The latter reflect the influences of the wider society, among them, Deism and Humanism since the 18th century;²⁵ Darwinism in the 19th century;²⁶ and New Age spirituality, Universalism and non-theism in the 20th and 21st centuries.²⁷ At least one academic has described the Society of Friends in Britain today as ‘post Christian’ in character.²⁸

Jennifer Hampton, in her analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey, found that barely 37% of respondents described themselves as Christian; though 85% said that they believed in God.²⁹ In other words, that leaves another 15%, who, not believing in God, define themselves as practicing Quakers. Well under a half of the Quakers surveyed believe that Quaker business meetings seek the Will of God. These belief characteristics of the Quaker population of course affect, and even

²⁴ ‘Remember that we do not seek a majority decision or even a consensus. As we wait patiently for divine guidance our experience is that the right way will open and we shall be led into unity’ (*QF&P* 1:14).

²⁵ Robert P. Falk, ‘Thomas Payne: Deist or Quaker?’, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 62:1, (January 1938), 52–63. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20087087> [accessed 16 September 2018]; Richard C. Allen & Rosemary Moore, *The Quakers 1656–1723: The Evolution of an Alternative Community* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2018).

²⁶ Thomas Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Alastair Heron, *Quakers in Britain: a Century of Change 1895–1995* (Kelso: Curlew Graphics, 1995); Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: the Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society no. 34), 1996); Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology Since 1895* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Jennifer May Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey: Examining Religious Beliefs and Practices in the Twenty-First Century’, *Quaker Studies*, 19:1 (2014), 7–136.

²⁸ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p. 133.

²⁹ Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey’, pp.36–37.

determine, the practice of Quakerism today, and the ways in which it diverges from the understanding and practice of Society of Friends in the past.³⁰

1.4 A shift from Christian to post-Christian

From its inception and right into the 20th century the Society of Friends in Britain was unequivocally a Christian body, differentiated mainly by its lack of clerical leadership and its rejection of ‘outward sacraments’ such as baptism and communion. However, given the Quaker emphasis on honesty, on personal encounter with the Divine, their rejection of rote-based credal affirmation, and their long-standing recognition that the Bible is a compilation of books written by devout human beings rather than the inspired Word of God;³¹ it has perhaps been easier for individuals who do not uncritically accept the details of Christian belief to participate in the worship and other activities of the Society of Friends than it would be in many mainstream Christian groups.³²

Pink Dandelion, reporting in 1991 on the findings from his first national Quaker survey, observes a distinctly post-Christian character to parts of the Society of Friends; and the Quakerly insistence that there is ‘that of God’ in everyone was now more diffuse: ‘For the agnostic Quaker

³⁰In a latent class analysis, Hampton identified the Quaker respondents as falling into three main categories: about 32% were ‘Traditional’ Quakers, and, at the other extreme, 18% were Non-theist Quakers. The remaining 50%, ‘Liberal Quakers’ held views similar to, but less emphatic than the Traditional Quakers. Even among ‘Traditional’ Friends, fewer than 75% believe that Quaker business meetings seek the Will of God, and fewer than 40% of ‘Liberal’ Friends share this understanding. (Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey’, pp.26–38).

³¹ *QF&P*, 27: 27–34.

³² David Rush, ‘They Too Are Quakers; a Survey of 199 Nontheist Friends’, *The Woodbrooke Journal* (Winter 2002/3) no. 11, Woodbrooke, Birmingham.

it has to be “that of God, if there is a God”; for the atheist (Quaker) the translation is usually “that of good”.³³

Hampton’s analysis of the 2013 British Quaker survey indicates that these trends have continued. She found that a latent class analysis of respondents identified three distinct clusters:

The first class, labelled ‘Traditional Quakers’ represented 32% of those identifying as Quaker. This group held traditionally Christian attitudes in terms of belief in God, Jesus as saviour and the importance of the Bible. The second class, labelled ‘Non-theist Quakers’, represented 18% of those identifying as Quaker. The third class, labelled ‘Liberal Quakers’, represented 50% of those identifying as Quaker. This group held a pattern of belief similar to, but less pronounced than, the Traditional Group.³⁴

The belief characteristics of the Quaker population of course affect, and even determine, the practice of Quakerism today, and the ways in which, as Peter Collins puts it, vernacular and even prototypical Quaker practice deviates from the canonical understanding.³⁵

In 2017, on behalf of Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations, Francesca Montemaggi surveyed 225 newcomers to the Society of Friends; to elicit what drew them, and what they had found.³⁶ She learned that most were people who had been brought up within the Christian faith, but about two-thirds had not been engaged in religious activity for a while before

³³ Ben Pink Dandelion, ‘Measuring Quaker belief, or ‘Do Quakers Believe?’’, *The Friends’ Quarterly*, (July 1991) pp. 323–333, quoted in Heron *Quakers in Britain*, 1995, p. 132.

³⁴ Hampton, *British Quaker Survey*, pp.7–8.

³⁵ Peter Collins, *The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994).

³⁶ Francesca Montemaggi, *The Spirituality of New Quakers* (London: Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, 2018), pp. 3–56.

starting to attend Meeting. Of that third who had been recently associated with another group, 76% were part of a Christian church; 8% were Buddhists; and another 8% had been engaged in some other meditation activity. New Quakers value the theological openness of the Society, which allows one to be honest with oneself, and doesn't require claiming a fixed set of beliefs. They also value the silent worship, which they perceive as central to the identity of Quakers. However, Montemaggi observes that no respondent actually mentioned Meeting for Worship for Business as being of any particular importance in their understanding of the Society of Friends.³⁷

Obviously, in any faith group, the proportion of participants who fully believe and adhere to the theology of the movement is smaller (to a greater or lesser extent) than the total number of individuals associated with the group.³⁸ But in the Religious Society of Friends, the gradual mainstreaming of agnosticism and of a generalised spirituality – sometimes grounded in belief systems or religions which are explicitly other than Christian (eg Wicca, Buddhism),³⁹ very strongly indicates the secularisation and pluralism of belief as described by Bruce and Wilson.⁴⁰ This of course throws into uncertainty the Quaker beliefs and practices, such as the concept of God, the presence of God in a Quaker Meeting, or a God whose will about a particular issue

³⁷ Montemaggi, *The Spirituality of New Quakers*, p. 17.

³⁸ John Fulton, Anthony M. Abela, Irena Borowik, Teresa Dowling, Penny Long Marler, & Luigi Tomasi, *Young Catholics at the New Millennium, the Religion and Morality of Young Adults in Western Countries* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000).

³⁹ Pink Dandelion, *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2019); Giselle Vincett, 'Quagans: Fusing Quakerism with Contemporary Paganism', in *The Quaker Condition, the Sociology of a Liberal Religion*, ed. by Pink Dandelion & Peter Collins (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 174–191; Klaus Huber, 'The Spirituality of Buddhist Quakers in Britain' (unpublished MPhil Dissertation, University of Sunderland, 1991).

⁴⁰ See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

might be discerned and applied by members attending a particular Meeting for Worship for Business.

It is helpful to bear these factors in mind when considering the history of Quaker business meetings, in particular the Yearly Meeting, and in any discussion of the present character of the Yearly Meeting.

Over the past century, formal and informal changes have been made to the structure and governance of the Religious Society of Friends, though the changes made in the past 15 years, in response to new Charity Commission regulations, are probably the most wide-ranging of all. These also comprise the main set of governance changes which did not originate entirely within the Society of Friends. The recent alterations include the redistribution, in 2006, of responsibility from Sufferings and also from the Yearly Meeting in session, to a newly constituted small group of trustees. Revisions to Chapters 6, 7 and 8 in the fifth edition of *QF&P*, record constitutional and procedural decisions agreed during Yearly Meeting sessions between 1995 and 2013. The revisions since 2006 clarify the new roles, including that of Sufferings as having a ‘visionary and prophetic’ role rather than the decision-making, management and governance responsibilities which it held up to and after the publication of the third edition of *QF&P* in 2004.⁴¹

⁴¹ *QF&P*, 6:28.

1.5 The Area of Research

This investigation is a case study of a church in change. Over the past century formal and informal changes have been made to the structure and governance of the Religious Society of Friends. The culture of the organisation has changed in spoken and in unspoken ways, reflecting to some extent the changes in the wider society from which its membership is drawn.

The study refers especially to the work of Steve Bruce and his predecessor, Bryan Wilson, who posit that one of the ways that a trend to secularisation may be manifest in a faith community is through the adoption of structures and policies derived from the wider society and from government requirements; displacing and replacing systems, and sometimes even values, which have been developed over time within that faith group.

Bruce reiterates Wilson's 1966 definition of the term *secularisation* as 'that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance'.⁴² Bruce also repeats, slightly rephrased, Wilson's later amplification of that definition:

Secularisation includes:

- the decay of religious institutions;
- the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria;

⁴² Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, p. xiv; Bruce, *Secularization*, p. 2.

- the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of the religious agencies;
- the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation;
- the shift from religious to secular control of a variety of social activities and functions; and
- the decline in the proportion of time, energy and resources that people devote to supernatural concerns.⁴³

1.6 The Research Focus

It has been a charism of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) since its inception in the seventeenth century that major decisions have been made not by a small leadership group at the apex of the organisation but by the largest possible gathering of the worshipping community seeking to discern the ‘will of God’.

Previous studies have found that over the past thirty years there has been in the Religious Society of Friends, as in many other faith groups in Britain, a gradual diminution of belief even among its active membership, and a loss of engagement with the processes of ‘meetings for worship for business’, reflecting the spread of secularisation in the wider society.

⁴³ Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 149; Bruce, *Secularization*, p. 2. Emphasis by the present author.

This study examines the effects within the Religious Society of Friends specifically of the second and the fourth of the features of secularisation listed by Bruce and Wilson. In other words, it looks at internal change within the Religious Society of Friends, rather than at the shifting place of religion in British society. The study thus uses the insights of sociologists of secularisation and internal secularisation in considering how corporate faith is lived out in the governance structures and processes within present-day British Quakerism.

Thus, this study reviews the centralisation of decision-making in the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, especially since the introduction, in response to Charity Commission requirements, of managing trustees, in 2006. And it examines the related changes to the role and content of the annual Quaker gathering, the Yearly Meeting, specifically with reference to the Quaker concept of ‘gospel order’⁴⁴ and its manifestations in terms of authority and agency.

These alterations have not hitherto been interrogated either by the Society of Friends itself, or by academics, with a view to understanding either their effects on the ecclesiology of the Society of Friends, nor the extent to which these changes might reflect a process of internal secularisation as identified by Steve Bruce and Bryan Wilson. The present study attempts to address these key areas. It is, I suggest, a critical and constructive attempt to interpret changes in the organisation and management of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. This is a qualitative study, in which the author’s voice, attitudes and prejudices are inevitably a feature of the work, both in the design of the study and in the writing-up.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ ‘Gospel Order’: the theological understanding which informed early Quakers in their development of organisational processes and structures (see Chapter 3).

⁴⁵ Swinton & Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 5.

1.7 Methodology

1.7.1 How this project came about

It seems to me useful, and transparent, to discuss the formal and informal processes through which this project evolved.

Like most British Quakers I joined the Religious Society of Friends as an adult, in 1980. Since then I have taken an active part in the Society at local and at national level, and have served on central committees such as Meeting for Sufferings, the now-defunct Finance & Property and Africa committees, and on Central Nominations and the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations. I have also attended the Yearly Meeting for some 37 of the 40 years of my membership.

Over years of attending the Yearly Meeting, I developed a sense that the purposes and practices of the event were changing, with effects that were generally unacknowledged and perhaps to a large extent inadvertent. I resolved to research the situation more formally, and registered to do so within an academic context. I was already aware of some of the scholarship by Alastair Heron and Pink Dandelion, discussing the growing secularisation of the Society of Friends; and of the Cassandra-like writing of other Quakers, such as Diana Sandy, on that topic.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Alastair Heron, *Quakers in Britain: A Century of Change 1895–1995* (Kelso: Curlew Graphics, 1995); Alastair Heron, *Our Quaker identity: Religious Society or Friendly Society?* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 2000); Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society no. 34, 1996); Diana Sandy, 'The Society of Friends of the Truth', *The Friend*, 14 May 2004, p.10–12.

Reading more broadly in an academic context, I soon learned that secularisation has been a common theme of sociological research on religion in Britain in the recent past.⁴⁷ When I found Steve Bruce's summary of the range and reach of secularisation, the two clauses about the effects of secularisation on the content and form of religious groups, highlighted above, seemed to me the ideal frame for this study, as they expressed and clarified the inklings about change which I had already perceived.⁴⁸

The Yearly Meeting was identified as the primary unit for study because has traditionally been the main decision-making forum in the Religious Society of Friends, and because I wanted to test the idea that the role and nature of the Yearly Meeting had shifted in recent years.

1.7. 2 The decision to undertake a desk-based study

Although, over the course of forty years of membership I have become deeply embedded as a critically-observing participant in the Religious Society of Friends, this project, from its inception, has been conceived of as a desk-based study rather than one based in fieldwork. I made the explicit decision that this would be a study using data that are available either in the public domain without any special permission to access privileged documents. This decision was made with the intention of limiting the bias of the researcher, who, in the course of participant

⁴⁷ James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Grace Davie, Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead eds. *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁴⁸ 'the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria;the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation'. Bruce, *Secularization*, 2011, p. 2.

observation or in interviewing has somewhat greater scope for partisan or idiosyncratic observation or selection than in the use of published material which is equally objectively available to another researcher sceptical of the first party's findings. It was also made with a view to ensuring the traceability and replicability of my work.

Further, as a participant in the Society of Friends, and as a past member of Meeting for Sufferings and other central committees, and as a regular participant in Yearly Meetings, I have contributed, sometimes on one side or another, to decisions made and to some of the events discussed in this study. If this had been an interview-based project, some key informants would be conscious that I had in the past been critical of their actions. While some would be guarded in their responses, others might refuse to be interviewed, thus inevitably skewing the range of material obtained. In that situation, an interview-based project would not necessarily be fruitful.

So this study was explicitly framed so that it would not rely on, or even include, interviews with key participants in the processes under review, either with a view to collecting recollections and observations, or to understanding the motivation of key actors.⁴⁹ There was a wealth of written material to be explored; and this was data objectively available to the present or any future researcher. Adding interviews to the study design would have changed the focus of the study. Conversely, I am aware that as an 'insider' with a long memory, I am better placed than most authors to write this study.

⁴⁹ For this reason, the decision was made early in the study that ethical approval would not be necessary. This decision was reviewed, and confirmed, when I raised the matter with members of the Department of Theology at the University of Birmingham in 2014, at the interim review meeting for the project.

1.7.3. Research Processes

This has been a desk-based study, using material available within the public domain or which is publicly available to members of the Religious Society of Friends. The primary data sources for this work are the contemporary documentation and reports associated with the Yearly Meetings in this series.

1.7.3.1 Data collection

Key documentary sources included:

- Yearly Meeting ‘Documents in Advance’ and Yearly Meeting Minutes and Proceedings;
- Reports of Yearly Meeting and of Meeting for Sufferings, mainly in Quaker journals such as *The Friend*, *Quaker Monthly* and *Friends’ Quarterly*;
- Published accounts by participants, eyewitnesses, or other contemporary commentators, usually in the form of articles in or letters to the Quaker journals identified above;
- Minutes of Standing Committees, position papers, and other contemporary documentation which informed or arose from Yearly Meeting deliberations;
- The various editions of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, the Quaker handbook of ‘Church Government’.

Other primary material includes the body of historical, sociological, devotional and theological writing, mainly by Quakers, about the Religious Society of Friends and about Quaker business methods and organisation; and Quaker reflections on leadership within the Religious Society of Friends and on the right-holding of Meeting for Worship for Business. This supplements academic scholarship, which is discussed separately in the Literature review.

Other key source material includes charity legislation and Charity Commission requirements, regulations and interpretations concerning the governance of religious bodies.

1.7.3.2 Access to data

A challenge for the study, apparent at the outset, was that most committee agendas, minutes and briefing papers would not be accessible, as they have been defined as confidential internal documents; not available researchers until 50 years have elapsed.⁵⁰

However, this withholding does not apply to those committee agendas and minutes published on the Quakers in Britain website, and which are thus freely available to researchers for a period of two years from the date of posting. This leads to the anomalous situation that the most recent documents are available for interrogation, but not the equivalent material relating to the very same committee from its pre-internet years; nor even the same material when its posting on the

⁵⁰ While the Religious Society of Friends in 1959 followed the example of the British government by imposing a 50-year confidentiality rule on its committee minutes and papers, it has not yet followed the government's 1967 example in revising the time-limit downwards to 30 years, nor the 2010 decision to allow access to most state documents after only 20 years, *The Public Records Act* of 1958 and of 1967, and the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act* of 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/25/contents> [accessed 20 May 2020].

internet has expired. Further, all committees continue to circulate confidential material, including briefing papers, which contain the meat of their deliberations and decisions, and which are subject to the 50-year rule.

Although a commitment to truthfulness and to the use of plain language have been attributes of the Quaker way since the 17th century, Quakers are remarkably discreet when it comes to the reporting of disagreement, upset, or incompetence. It is only very elliptically that Quakers indicate, even in the *Documents in Advance* or the introductions to sessions dealing with fraught issues, that there may have been some contretemps or shortcoming in the past that requires rectifying. This means that it is often necessary to rely on published accounts of meetings, both Yearly Meetings and Meetings for Sufferings, reported in the Quaker journal *The Friend* and in other denominational publications, and in the discussions in the Letters pages of these journals, about the decisions made and about the way the meeting was managed. The Letters pages are sometimes the most candid, as the reporting in *The Friend* can be cursory or elliptical when there is controversy.⁵¹ This is perhaps particularly noticeable in relation to governance, finances or people management.

Part of the task of this thesis has been to identify and decode some of these instances of Quaker discretion, before appraising the decisions and their outcome. The incompleteness of the material available, and the ellipticism of some of that which is to hand, are both findings of the study as

⁵¹ See the discussion in Chapter 5.

well as constraints for the researcher; though the problem of discretion on the part of the minute-writers is of course a common challenge to historians in almost any context.

The incompleteness, and the ellipticism, of the primary material increases in modern times, particularly in the reportage and commentary on events occurring at Yearly Meetings. There is a single case-study in this thesis from the early twentieth century; when the Yearly Meeting proceedings were reported in great detail in *The Friend*, with many speeches quoted or summarised. In those days, too, the editorial comment and background reporting on the Yearly Meeting took several pages, and letters to the editor on the topic of the Yearly Meeting continued over several issues. Even towards the end of the last century, *The Friend's* coverage of the Yearly Meeting, the editorial comment, and the flow of letters to the editor were all more prolific than in the past decade, during which time the magazine has become thinner, the reportage much briefer, and there has been little comment from either the editor or the readers.⁵² Where there has been an epidemic of letters, I have interpreted this as being indicative that the issue under discussion is one which has not been resolved in a united meeting for worship for church affairs.⁵³ In general, I used whatever letters and references I could find on any aspect of my research into British Quaker governance, especially given the limitations of access to some of the official records. I was careful to use material from all sides of any debate, and not simply to present a view in line with my theory as it developed. I have, I hope, represented the variety of views in the published

⁵² The editor of *The Friend* in 1989, David Firth, had strong opinions, expressed in the Editorials. The editor from 2009 – 2019, Ian Kirk Smith, very rarely expressed critical comment.

⁵³

material; referring in Chapter 6 for instance both to a critical letter concerning the role of trustees, and to the reply from the clerk of the committee responsible for defining that role.

1.7.3.3 Analysis, and the use of Case Studies

The analysis has been framed with reference to secularisation theory and to other theoretical material relating to religious groups and organisational change identified in the literature review. Actual Quaker practice is measured against the values and behaviours enjoined by Quaker writers and by the Yearly Meeting itself over the past three hundred and seventy years, as described in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The interrogation of primary material such as the Yearly Meeting Proceedings and contemporary reports in, and submissions to, Quaker journals, led to the identification of a limited number of Yearly Meetings and Yearly Meeting sessions for more detailed investigation. These included sessions which have been identified by Quaker historians as ‘turning points’ in some way.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the use of case studies has been a helpful way of exploring the content, processes and outcomes of Yearly Meetings. In some instances, earlier Yearly Meetings are also referred to, for comparative material concerning their treatment of the issues discussed in the case studies. Daniel Schipani describes case studies as ‘a special form of narrative’, particularly suited to qualitative studies of (faith) groups and organisations.⁵⁴ He suggests that processes of

preparing a case study, discussing it and using it for further reflection and eventual action are ‘empirically grounded and contextually situated; they are hermeneutical in character, fundamentally evaluative and normative, and pragmatically and strategically oriented’.⁵⁵ As such, he argues, the identification and construction of case studies is in itself reflexive practice. The use of case studies, both in their construction and in their interpretation, is a common technique both in social anthropology and in business school education.

The material for the case studies has been drawn from published Quaker sources, even in those instances when the Yearly Meeting under review was attended by the author, during the course of preparing this study. This is primarily because the published material is objectively available (though of course not necessarily itself objective); and also because attendance at a Yearly Meeting session is inimical to note-taking, as it is expected that the session will be attended as an act of worship.

Initially, I had contemplated that this study would investigate the whole of a hundred-year span; a project which would have overlapped only slightly with a definitive study of British Quaker history in the 19th and early 20th centuries by Thomas Kennedy.⁵⁶

However, further reading, both within the century span and earlier, led me to conclude that while, if I wanted to understand what was happening in the Society of Friends today, I needed to be informed about what happened in the past; but that I should look particularly at the life of the Yearly Meeting since 2007, when a small trustee body was instituted, partly in response to the

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⁵⁶ Thomas Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

requirements of the Charity Commission (see Chapter 6). So I decided that only a limited set of case studies from before 2007 should be discussed. Similarly, for reasons of length, I had to decide whether to deal chronologically with all the recent Yearly Meetings, or to discuss aspects of a selection of them in greater depth. I decided that the latter course would be the more fruitful.

The process of selecting which Yearly Meetings would comprise the case studies reviewed in Chapter 5 was iterative. I was interested in establishing what patterns of behaviour and decisions might be revealed at a particular Yearly Meeting rather than choosing examples that substantiated previously-prepared arguments. So the first pair of cases investigated was the 1912 Yearly Meeting and that in 2012. By taking two cases a century apart, it seemed likely that in this long interval any differences between the two occasions would be more marked than between two events closer together in time. The choice, precisely, of 1912 and 2012 was because, while I wanted a recent event for the second of the pair, for the six years after 1912 the character of the agendas and the preoccupations of the group were occluded by the preoccupations associated with the imminence or conduct of World War One, creating a very specific situation which I did not feel could be seen as representative of the whole.⁵⁷

There were some events which stood out in the collective memory, and which I felt were too famous to ignore. So the two extended case studies of 1989 and 2009 were chosen because these were both highly controversial Yearly Meetings, which had already been the subject of academic

⁵⁷ The January 1916 session of the adjourned 1915 Yearly Meeting was, quite simply, remarkable. The 1915 Yearly Meeting had been 'adjourned' rather than closed, in the awareness that national conscription would soon be introduced, and that the Society of Friends and its male members of military age, would have to make, once again, decisions about pacifism and about military participation, and the extent to which the Society would support or endorse individuals' decisions either to enlist, to seek non-combatant status or to embrace absolute pacifism. The Yearly Meeting and its preoccupations are covered in great detail in *The Friend* in both January and February 1916.

discussion⁵⁸ so were ‘obvious’ choices for study – yet they were also ones about which, I felt, there was more to be said from a different perspective.

Once the first four cases had been identified, the selection of the others was organic: 2012 had shown itself to be a Yearly Meeting without a major decision to be made; how similar or different was 2017, another Yearly Meeting which did not call for discernment? The main item for decision in recent years was the matter of the revision of the Book of Discipline, dealt with in 2014 and 2018.

1.7.4 The participant as researcher; and the practice of reflexivity

Because I have been an active member of the Society of Friends for almost 40 years, and have attended more than 30 of the Yearly Meetings in that period, the distinction between participant and observer in this study is very delicately shaded. However, I know that I am not unusual in choosing to formalise and to structure an academic understanding of the community and organisation of which I am a longstanding participant.⁵⁹ This occluded role of ‘observant participant’ (as opposed to ‘participant observer’) is a not-unfamiliar situation for researchers working within their own familiar social and moral environment. In the discipline of social

⁵⁸ Pink Dandelion, Pink, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution*. (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996); Susan Robson, *Living with Conflict; a Challenge to a Peace Church* (Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2014).

⁵⁹ In the words of the social anthropologist David Graeber: ‘As the reader may have noticed, I am making no pretence of objectivity here. I did not become involved in the movement [i.e. the protest movement ‘Occupy’] to write an ethnography. I became involved as a participant’. David Graeber: *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), p. 12.

anthropology there is a substantial theoretical literature which guides and counsels the wary researcher about the limitations of their insight. Douglas Davies, for instance, warns that, because our very identity is rooted in the way we classify the world, applying anthropology to our own culture is usually both alarming and distancing.⁶⁰

Within the field of social anthropology, it is not particularly unusual for the researcher to use their own understanding of religion as a starting-point for their reflection on their own or other religious groups. For instance, two luminaries of the discipline, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, both drew on their own experience of Roman Catholicism in their studies, respectively, of pilgrimage and liminality, and on symbolism and taboos in social groups.⁶¹ Since at least the 1980s feminist anthropologists such as Judith Okely and Helen Callaway have researched the worlds in which they live and work.⁶² Similarly, Chapter 2 of this study refers to the work of David Graeber,⁶³ who writes about his own moral, though not religious, community in his explorations of personal ethnography, observing his own experiences as an anarchist and community activist.

In other disciplines, such as the field of church history, authors such as Andrew Chandler, in his study of the Anglican Church Commissioners, and Philip Jones, in his work on the church in

⁶⁰ Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 3.

⁶¹ Victor Turner, *Ritual and Process, Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969); Victor Turner & Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia, 1978); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁶² Judith Okely, & Helen Callaway, eds, *Anthropology & Autobiography*, ASA Monographs 29, (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁶³ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009); David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, University of Chicago, 2004).

Wales, tend not to feel the need to justify their decision, or their authority, to write about the denominations with which they are associated.⁶⁴

Quaker academics such as Pink Dandelion, Peter Collins and Gay Pilgrim have also confronted the challenges of analysing and observing a belief-system and an organisation within which they are participants.⁶⁵ The literature review in Chapter 2 refers too to the writings of authors such as Simon Best and Helen Meads,⁶⁶ who have also engaged with the challenges of insider research. Each of these authors chose to combine interviews and survey work, to learn about other participants' experience of the Society of Friends. Dandelion observes that most academic studies of Quaker belief and behaviour (and history too) have been undertaken by Quakers, and he is alert to the dangers of 'premature saturation and over-familiarity': he comments that 'This is especially problematic when the work is on contemporary Quakerism, for few participants do not hold a strong view on the subject of their study'.⁶⁷

That comment is one which subsequent researchers, including this author, should perceive as a warning about the importance of scholarly objectivity – or of at least recognising that there is an

⁶⁴ Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the politics of reform, 1948-1998* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006); Philip Jones, *The Governance of the Church in Wales* (Cardiff: Greenfach, 2000).

⁶⁵ Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society no. 34, 1996); Peter J. Collins, 'The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism' (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994); Gay Pilgrim, *Taming Anarchy: Quaker Alternate Ordering and 'Otherness'*, in *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, ed. by Pink Dandelion (Philadelphia: Ashgate, Aldershot & Burlington, 2004), 206–225.

⁶⁶ Simon Best, 'The Community of Intimacy; the Spiritual Beliefs and Religious Practices of Adolescent Quakers' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2010); Helen Meads, 'Experiment with Light in Britain: the Heterotopian Nature of a Contemporary Quaker Spiritual Practice' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of Theology & Religion, University of Birmingham, 2011).

⁶⁷ Pink Dandelion, 'Introduction', in Kathleen H. Thomas, *The History and Significance of Quaker Symbols in Sect Formation*, Quaker Studies, 2 (Lewiston NY. Queenstown, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), (p. xv).

extent to which the author's own experience inevitably shades their objectivity. However, another Quaker researcher, the social anthropologist Peter Collins, argues that the insider/outsider research dichotomy is illusory, and that, in reality, all researchers occupy multiple positions in relation to their research topic, though not all researchers acknowledge this.⁶⁸

I took both Dandelion's and Collins' observations seriously, and decided that the delicacy of the role of observing participant is such that, under the circumstances, I would be less confined by my own experience if I chose not to make this an interview-based or ethnographic study, and instead focussed on using publicly available published material. However, Collins might say inevitably, in the discussion in Chapters 5 and 6, of events at very recent Yearly Meetings, my own observations do of course help shape my interpretation and, thus, the narrative. In any qualitative study, whether it is acknowledged or not, the author's voice, attitudes and prejudices are inevitably a feature of the work, both in the design of the study and in the writing-up. It is wise to be conscious of one's own bias and of how one's own experience helps to determine the way in which evidence is identified and interpreted.⁶⁹ I have described above how this project came about, arising from my own observations of change in the practices and organisation of the Religious Society of Friends. I have also explained that, because I was myself an observing participant, embedded in the

⁶⁸ Peter J. Collins, 'Connecting Anthropology and Quakerism: Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy' in Arweck, Elizabeth & Martin J Stringer, *Theorising Faith: the Insider/outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*. Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2002, pp.77-95

⁶⁹ Salzman, Philip C., 'On reflexivity', *American Anthropologist*, vol104:3, September 2002, pp.805-813. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567258>, Accessed 20 September 2020; Esha Patnaik, 'Reflexivity; situating the researcher in qualitative research' *Humanities and Social Science Studies*, September 2013, vol2:2, pp. 98-106, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263916084_Reflexivity_Situating_the_researcher_in_qualitative_research. Accessed 20 September 2020.

faith group which I was studying, I made a deliberate decision to use objectively available written material rather than anthropological techniques for this study, with a view to minimising the subjectivity of my analysis.

I am, however, very conscious that my own outlook and experience⁷⁰ has affected the way in which I have perceived the changes and events within the Religious Society of Friends; and I was keen that my own prejudices should not warp any insights I might have gleaned in the course of this research.

I was fortunate that my supervisor, a Quaker sociologist and historian, had himself attended many of the events which I discussed, and was alert to every discrepancy in our perceptions or interpretation. Further, as a way of ensuring a level of objectivity rather than partisanship in my work, I made a deliberate policy of presenting papers at Quaker-related and other academic conferences. The analysis in Chapters 5 to 7 of this thesis has gained from the questions and observations from audiences with and without specific Quaker Studies expertise, at conferences such as those of the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association (Socrel), the Oral History Society; the American Academy of Religion; and at Quaker Studies Research Association conferences and a conference of Quaker Historians and Archivists. In the Acknowledgements, before the contents page of this document, I thankfully list a dozen of the British and American Quaker academics and other Friends who have engaged with my arguments and thus helped me to refine them. I am

⁷⁰ As a civil servant appraising health service organisations in terms of their own mission statements and nationally accepted 'best practice'.

aware that some of my conclusions are controversial, but I am also aware that some Quakers who I respect have agreed with them or found them thought-provoking.

Further, for the past ten years I have served as a voluntary 'Friend in Residence' at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, where the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies associated with the University of Birmingham is based. The students' thesis titles and abstracts are displayed on a notice board in the main corridor. Woodbrooke is visited by more than 3,000 Quakers each year, including some from other Quaker traditions abroad. This has provided copious opportunities for reflection, as I have had many thoughtful conversations with informed individuals, in which I have had to explain, and sometimes to justify, my work. Conversely, this project has been enriched by the observations, insights, challenges, and new information offered in these discussions.

Thus, I feel sufficient awareness and safeguards were brought to this project in order to maximise the benefits of my insider status and to minimise its potential for bias. I was supported by many other scholars and Quakers, sometimes unwittingly, in being able to maintain high levels of reflexivity.

1.8 The Academic Value of this Thesis

The literature survey in Chapter 2 shows that while several researchers have explored the secularisation of belief among individual members of the Society of Friends there has been no critical academic exploration of the functioning of the Society of Friends as a faith organisation,

and specifically there has been no research into the effects of recent organisational and procedural changes on the ecclesiology of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. Even in other faith bodies little work has been done to explore the effects of state-imposed changes such as those required in terms of the Charities Act of 2006 on the life and priorities of the church or other faith group. It is intended that this thesis will contribute to an under-explored area of research, both within the denomination studied and in other faith bodies.

1.9 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 includes both a review of Quaker academic literature and a more general review of theoretical material which illuminates the subsequent investigation. This is drawn mainly from the field of sociology of religion, social anthropology and management theory relating to leadership and to organisational change. It also refers to decision-making in face-to-face and egalitarian organisations, drawing particularly on Adam Kuper's typology of ceremonial and other 'illegitimate' forms of decision-making.⁷¹ It is from this platform of the study of religious organisational life that this thesis engages with the concerns of practical theology, those of everyday religion.

Chapter 3 introduces the Quaker theology of 'gospel order', in terms of which the structure and activities of the group are perceived as vehicles for the embodiment of the Kingdom of God on earth. This was integral to the world view and theological understanding of 17th century Friends,

and informed the development of organisational processes and structures. The Quaker business method – their tool for making shared or corporate decisions – is discussed with reference to the insights of Quaker and other academic observers about its actual use and application. This chapter gives an outline of the theology of Quaker decision-making, a necessary base for understanding the effects of the recent changes on the functioning of the Society of Friends as a whole.

Chapter 4 provides a brief description of the structure of Yearly Meeting in the history and organisation of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. It also presents Quaker self-description of the role and purpose of the Yearly Meeting, Quaker Business Meetings, and the organisation and leadership of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. It traces the changes in the structures and organisation of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain over the past century, including the changing lines of accountability and authority to and from local meetings and the centre; shifts in the locus of authority and power from the Yearly Meeting to the national representative council Meeting for Sufferings; and, in response to Charity Commission requirements, to a small trustee body, with corresponding increases too in the scope of authority of the ‘Recording Clerk’, or chief executive responsible for the staff of ‘Britain Yearly Meeting’ (BYM), the central charitable body of the Society of Friends in Britain.

In **Chapter 5** a selection of Yearly Meetings, and YM topics and sessions, are discussed as case studies. These include sessions which have been highlighted by Quaker commentators as ‘turning points’ in some way. With reference both to the theoretical literature about leadership and organisations and to the Quaker self-description of their business methods, this chapter examines the management, processes and outcomes of the Yearly Meeting’s deliberations. It asks: if this is

not actually the theocratic decision-making process that Friends claim it to be, what is in fact happening in these sessions?

Chapter 6 considers a second set of case studies, those concerned with Trustee decisions. It examines the role of the trustees and of the Yearly Meeting in the conception and implementation of the Quakers' largest capital programme in recent years; the £4-million refurbishment of the Large Meeting House at Friends House, on London's Euston Road, which was financed by the sale of other property on a 200-year lease. It also looks at other major decisions reserved by trustees and by the hospitality company which was created from the pre-existing hospitality functions at Friends House, in conformity with Charity Commission requirements, with a view to understanding how the new tier of governance has affected, or even supplanted, traditional Quaker decision-making.

The final chapter, **Chapter 7**, opens with a summary of the findings from previous chapters. It appraises whether the changes noted and interpreted during the course of the investigation are merely superficial, or whether the nature of the organisation, and perhaps even of the denomination itself, have been fundamentally affected by the changes reported upon. The study concludes that the shift in organisational practice has occurred in the context of a period of increased secularisation of Quaker faith. The co-incidence of these phenomena has the effect that the members of the Religious Society of Friends, for whom Quaker theological claims are less compelling than in earlier times, find that they are given fewer opportunities to practise a diminishing faith – and this in turn has the effect of further secularisation, in an internally driven process. The discussion reflects on the implications of these findings for scholarship, and also identifies topics for potential future research.

1.10 Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the thesis as a whole. It explains that this is an exercise in practical theology, reflecting on changes in the role and management of the annual Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, using case studies of Yearly Meeting events and also of decisions made by the newly-instituted trustee tier to explore the case of secularisation within the Society of Friends.

The chapter discusses the demography of the Religious Society of Friends; noting that it is a very small faith group, of whom the overwhelming majority are converts, a quarter of them in the past decade. This indicates that many members have a very short experience of the ways of the Society, and that, for them, the effects of recent institutional changes are what they understand as being characteristic of the Society of Friends.

It puts forward the research question, which is framed around secularisation, specifically the internal secularisation of religious organisations, as developed by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce.⁷² It discusses the methodology of the study, which is desk-based, and some of the research challenges, including the especial need for reflexivity on the part of a researcher who is also a participant in the social group being investigated.

The chapter concludes with an outline of the rest of the thesis.

⁷² Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*; Bruce, *Secularization*.

⁷² Adam Kuper, 'Council Structure and Decision-making', in *Councils in action*, ed. by Audrey Richards & Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 13–28.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 opens with a review of academic literature in the field of Quaker Studies, which provides the immediate intellectual context for this study; making it possible to identify the contribution to the discipline which this thesis attempts to offer. The second part of this chapter refers to different threads in the wider academic literature which have been useful in illuminating the topic. These include work on secularisation; authority and leadership; and decision making and consensus-seeking in organisations.

2.2 Literature about the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Academic writing about the Religious Society of Friends generally falls into one of three categories; historical, theological, or sociological. A recent volume edited by C. Wess Daniels, Robynne Healey and Jon Kershner critically covers all of these areas;⁷³ but in this section I mention literature which is directly or elliptically relevant to my own work.

Much of the historical research hitherto in the field of Quaker Studies has dealt with the early years of the denomination, particularly the 30 years around its founding, the period in which core

⁷³, C. Wess Daniels; Robynne Rogers Healey & Jon Kershner, *Quaker Studies: An Overview: The current state of the field* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, Brill Research Perspectives, 2018).

Quaker values, attitudes, and organisational features discussed in this study were developed. The history presented is inevitably not just of deeds, it is also concerned with the theology and ideas which infused them. For instance, Douglas Gwyn identifies ‘the central organising principle of Fox’s rather unsystematic writings to be an apocalyptic sense of Christ’s presence in the world to transform both individuals and the wider social order.’⁷⁴ Richard Vann investigates the social history of Quakerism in the period up to 1738⁷⁵, and Rosemary Moore rebuts the materialist narrative of the historian Christopher Hill in her study of the formation of the Society of Friends.⁷⁶ She, and other researchers such as Hugh Pyper, Betty Hagglund, and Richard Allen,⁷⁷ have taken this work forward in a volume on the early history of the Society of Friends, edited by Stephen Angell & Pink Dandelion,⁷⁸ and in another, edited by Allen & Moore.⁷⁹

Concerning the 19th century, Elizabeth Isichei’s 1970 study of Victorian Quakerism discusses the (formally unacknowledged) role of affluent families and kinship groups in the leadership of the

⁷⁴ Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford, Pa: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995). See also Douglas Gwyn, *The Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ Richard T. Vann, *The Social Development of English Quakerism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969).

⁷⁶ Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646-1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972).

⁷⁷ Hugh S. Pyper, ‘Robert Barclay’, in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought* ed. by Stephen Ward Angell & Pink Dandelion (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015); Rosemary Moore, ‘Gospel Order: The Development of Quaker Organization’, Rosemary Moore & Richard Allen, *The Quakers 1656 – 1723* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2018), pp. 54–75; Betty Hagglund, ‘Quakers and the Printing Press’, in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought*, ed. by Stephen Ward Angell & Pink Dandelion (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 32–47.

Richard C. Allen, ‘Living as a Quaker During the Second Period’, Chapter 4 in Rosemary Moore & Richard Allen, *The Quakers 1656 – 1723: The Evolution of an Alternative Community* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2018), pp. 76–97.

⁷⁸ *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought*, ed. by Stephen Ward Angell & Pink Dandelion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷⁹ Richard C. Allen & Rosemary Moore, *The Quakers 1656 – 1723: The Evolution of an Alternative Community*. (University Park, Pa: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

Society.⁸⁰ She reflects on the sectarian nature of the Society, and the limited extent to which it breached its own ‘hedges’ against the world and other denominations even by the end of the century, and she concludes that the beliefs of individual Victorian Quakers were ‘largely a reflection of currents of thought in the wider society.’⁸¹ Some of the points raised by Isichei, especially concerning the issues of leadership and unacknowledged power, were also dealt with by Dandelion in the 1990s.⁸² Thomas Kennedy analysed the shift in the Society from a declining, endogenous, inward-looking group in the mid-19th century, through highly conservative evangelicalism, to the mystic liberalism of the early 20th century; modified again by the equivocal commitment of the Society to pacifism in World War 1.⁸³ Gethin Evans’ history of the Society in Wales covers a similar period to that of Kennedy.⁸⁴

Since the work of John Punshon in 1984, written for popular audiences, there has been no systematic history of the Society of Friends as a whole in Britain.⁸⁵ While Dandelion has produced both an academic and a popular introduction to world-wide Quakerism,⁸⁶ there has been no overview of 20th-century Quaker history in Britain; though some periods, such as the Quaker

⁸⁰ Elizabeth A. Isichei, 'From Sect to Denomination Among English Quakers' in *Patterns of Sectarianism: organisation and ideology in social and religious movements*, ed. by B. R. Wilson (London: Heineman, 1967), pp. 161–181; Elizabeth A. Isichei, 'Organisation and power in the Society of Friends 1852-59 in *Patterns of Sectarianism: organisation and ideology in social and religious*, ed. by B. R. Wilson (London: Heineman, 1967), pp.182–212; Elizabeth A. Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁸¹ Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*.

⁸² Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers, The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

⁸³ Thomas Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁴ O. Gethin Evans, *Benign Neglect: The Quakers and Wales circa 1860 to 1918* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2014).

⁸⁵ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984)

⁸⁶ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

response to the First World War, have been covered in some detail by writers such as David Boulton, Pam Lunn, Cyril Pearce, and Sian Roberts.⁸⁷

A second, substantial, area of Quaker Studies research has been the analysis of Quaker religious thought, and studies tracing its development.

Rachel Muers focuses on the Quaker understanding of ‘Testimony’, the ‘patterns of actions and behaviour that are understood as an individual and collective response to God’s leading and calling... and that work in communicative, challenging and transformative relation to a wider context.’⁸⁸ She describes the Testimonies as having an identity-defining and community forming function within the group.⁸⁹

Martin Davie identifies a process of substantive theological change in the Society of Friends through analysing the writings of Quaker theologians in the century since the Manchester Conference in 1895.⁹⁰ That conference can be seen as the turning point when the views of Liberal Friends became acceptable, and those of 19th-century Evangelicals became less evident in the Society. Davie identifies two principles which he suggests are central to Quaker Liberalism, which together have led to the divergence of Quaker theology both from mainstream Christianity and from the teachings of early Quakers: the first is that Quakerism should adapt

⁸⁷ David J. Boulton, *Objection Overruled, Conscription and Conscience in the First World War* (Dent, Cumbria: Dales Historical Monographs in Association with Friends Historical Society, 2014); Pam Lunn, “‘You Have Lost Your Opportunity’ British Quakers and the Militant Phase of the Women’s Suffrage Campaign: 1906-1914”, *Quaker Studies*, 2:1, pp. 30–55; Cyril Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience: The Story of an English Community’s Opposition to the Great War* (London: Francis Boutle, 2001); Sian Lliwen Roberts, ‘Place, Life-Histories and the Politics of Relief: Episodes in the Life of Francesca Wilson, Humanitarian, Educator, Activist’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, School of Education, College of Social Sciences, 2010).

⁸⁸ Rachel Muers, *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 2015), p. 7.

⁸⁹ Muers, *Testimony*, p.5.

⁹⁰ Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology Since 1895* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

itself to the contemporary development of thought, and the second is that of intellectual tolerance. Together, he argues, they have led to the increasingly secularised and pluralised theology of the Society of Friends in Britain today, to the point that Quaker theologians as well as Friends on the benches query whether Christ still has a central place in Quaker theology, and ‘whether Quakerism should still be viewed as an essentially Christian form of religion.’⁹¹

Gay Pilgrim, Helen Meads, Simon Best and Rhiannon Grant⁹² all, in different ways, interrogate the present range of belief in the Society of Friends. Pilgrim follows Foucault in her discussion of Quaker heterotopia, which is picked up by other authors such as Meads and Best. Dandelion observes that Pilgrim’s insight reveals that the Quaker movement’s embracing of ‘otherness’ has become a strongly-identifiable feature of the group.⁹³

Meads uses survey, interviews and participant observation to explore the experiences of individuals taking part in a shared Quaker spiritual practice, the ‘Experiment with Light’. She finds that although participants claimed a wide range of theological or intellectual understanding, they recognised that they had similar, religious, experiences in practice. She describes her own

⁹¹ Davie, *British Quaker Theology*, p.345.

⁹² Gay Pilgrim, ‘Taming Anarchy: Quaker Alternate Ordering and ‘Otherness’’, in *The Creation of Quaker theory: Insider perspectives*, ed. by Pink Dandelion (Burlington: Pa. & Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 206–225; Gay Pilgrim, ‘The Quakers, Towards an Alternate Ordering’ in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*, ed. by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, & Linda Woodhead (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2003), pp.147–160; Helen Claire Meads, *Experiment with Light in Britain: the Heterotopian Nature of a Contemporary Quaker Spiritual Practice* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of Theology & Religion, University of Birmingham, 2011); Simon Best, *The Community of Intimacy: the Spiritual Beliefs and Religious Practices of Adolescent Quakers* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2010); Rhiannon Grant, *Wittgensteinian Investigations of Contemporary Quaker Religious Language* (unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Philosophy, Religion and Science, University of Leeds, 2014).

⁹³ ‘What [Pilgrim] adds is an analysis of what happens when that becomes the prime instinct of a group, regardless of its theology’, Pink Dandelion, (2004) p. 234, quoted by C. Weiss Daniels, ‘The Rise of Quaker Sociology’ in, C. Weiss Daniels, Robynne Rogers Healey & Jon Kershner, *Quaker Studies: an Overview; the Current State of the Field* (Brill Research Perspectives, Brill, 2018), p.85–105, p. 95.

work as ‘the first academic study of British Quakers to focus on religious experience.’⁹⁴ This is not entirely accurate, as Best’s study, a year earlier, also examines religious experience – but among adolescent Quakers. Grant uses a Wittgensteinian frame to examine the range of ways in which British Quakers describe ‘God or whatever we may choose to call it.’⁹⁵ Although it may appear that none of these studies are directly relevant to the present enquiry, they illuminate contemporary Quakers’ understanding of worship and of ‘the will of God’⁹⁶ and, by association, what in earlier times were understood to be the divinely guided processes of discernment in Quaker business meetings.

Christy Randazzo identifies that ‘the dearth of works of sustained theological thought in Liberal Quakerism’⁹⁷ (actually, ever since publication of the core Quaker text in systematic theology, Robert Barclay’s 1676 *Apology for True Christian Divinity*⁹⁸) is a challenge facing any Liberal Quaker ecclesiology’.⁹⁹ He cites only two partial exceptions, both explicitly embedded within an American context: work by George Amoss, and, arising from personal reflections, by Margery Post Abbott.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Meads, *Experiment with Light*, p. i.

⁹⁵ Grant, *Wittgensteinian Investigations*, p. 7.

⁹⁶ *QF&P* 2:89.

⁹⁷ See Glossary. In the Long Twentieth Century Quakerism around the world has fallen into three categories: Conservative, Evangelical and Liberal; Britain Yearly Meeting, since the Manchester Conference of 1895, has been part of the Liberal tradition.

⁹⁸ Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: Being an Explanation and Vindication of the Principles and Doctrines of the People Called Quakers* (Birmingham: John Baskeville, 1765).

⁹⁹ Christy Randazzo, *Liberal Quaker Reconciliation Theology: A Constructive Approach* (Leiden/Boston: Brill Brill Research Perspectives in Quaker Studies 2.4, 2020), p.17.

¹⁰⁰ Randazzo cites only two partial exceptions, both explicitly embedded within an American context: work by George Amoss, and, arising from personal reflections, by Margery Post Abbott, George Amoss, *A Quaker Faith and Practice for the Twenty-First Century*. F&P Available: [Postmodernquaker.wordpress.com](https://postmodernquaker.wordpress.com). <https://postmodernquaker.wordpress.com/2016/02/21/faith-practice-pdf-available/>[[access date?](#)]; Margery Post Abbott, *To be Broken and Tender: A Quaker Theology for Today* (Portland OR., Western Friends/Friends Bulletin Corporation, 2010).

The third area of academic engagement, which has contributed the most to this study, is that of the social practices of the Society of Friends as discussed within the frame of sociology or social anthropology. Though even in this area, the discourse has been dominated by explorations of individual belief and spiritual experience.

The first three academic studies of the Society of Friends in Britain in modern times, in terms of social anthropology or sociology, were, respectively, by Peter Collins, Pink Dandelion, and Caroline Plüss.¹⁰¹ All three completed their doctoral research, at different universities, between 1993 and 1995; and they all engaged in participant observation.

Collins, a social anthropologist, observed the behaviour, preoccupations and rituals of Friends in a single local Meeting, where for just over three years he was both a member and also the warden, or resident caretaker. He distinguishes between what he describes as ‘canonical’ Quakerism – the theological explications, and the descriptions of best practice or what perhaps ideally ‘ought’ to happen in a Quaker community; and ‘vernacular’ Quakerism, what really happens, including aspects of Quaker experience which are not necessarily written about officially. For instance, the time spent chatting in the foyer, or washing up, are all part of the individual’s experience of attending a Sunday morning Meeting for Worship.¹⁰²

He also identifies a third category, ‘prototypical Quakerism’ which is the individual’s accumulated understanding of what is ‘normal’; constructed both from their reading of canonical

¹⁰¹ Peter. J. Collins, ‘The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism’ (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994); Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996); Caroline Plüss, ‘A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement’, (unpublished DPhil. Thesis, Lincoln College, Oxford, 1995).

¹⁰² Collins, ‘The Sense of the Meeting’, p.18.

material and their personal experience – which may of course be untypical. Collins suggests that individuals' prototypical Quakerism entails 'a moral outlook, a stock of knowledge and a configuration of belief which, although peculiar to each individual Friend, is partially shared with others'¹⁰³ and that it usually includes three features: 'worship that is silent and corporate, an expectation of social concern on the part of members, centring on the Peace Testimony, and a business method which is unique.'¹⁰⁴ The discussion in Chapter 5 indicates that the features of prototypical Quakerism have shifted quite markedly over the quarter-century since Collins was writing.

Both Dandelion and Plüss use interviews and survey data, as well as fieldwork, to elicit an understanding of Quaker belief systems, and of the features that hold together a group that does not subscribe to a single, unifying, statement of faith.

Dandelion identifies a 'double culture' in the Society of Friends in Britain: on the one hand there is a great toleration of the wide plurality of belief, but there is at the same time a strong emphasis on conformity of behaviour. He concludes that the 'behavioural creed'¹⁰⁵ (also termed 'orthopraxy') masks the diverse but ultimately post-Christian nature of the Society in the late 20th century, and suggests:

The behavioural creed fulfils most of the requirements of group continuance that Bruce sees threatened by liberalism, even if components of attitudes towards commitment and

¹⁰³ Collins, 'The Sense of the Meeting', p.4.

¹⁰⁴ Collins, 'The Sense of the Meeting', p.20.

¹⁰⁵ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.193.

recruitment are less clearly defined. The behavioural creed also acts as a controlling feature of the group.¹⁰⁶

Dandelion uses illustrative examples from his surveys and fieldwork in a review of the sources of authority and the systems of control in what he terms an ostensibly 'leaderless' group, and discusses the culture of silence, which is incidentally a feature of the form of worship, within which cultural change within the group occurs.¹⁰⁷

Of all the early studies which used survey data, Dandelion's survey of Quaker demography and belief was the most comprehensive. This initial survey has been twice repeated, at ten-year intervals, thus generating a 30-year study of the belief patterns in the Society of Friends, and the changes over time.¹⁰⁸ The 2013 version of the survey incorporated questions from the British Social Attitudes Survey, making it possible to compare Quaker attitudes with those of British society as a whole. It also partially reprised Simon Best's 2010 study of the religious attitudes of teenagers attending Quaker events, thus providing a comparative view of the attitudes of young Friends.¹⁰⁹ The findings of this study, interpreted by Jennifer Hampton are discussed in Chapter 1.¹¹⁰

Studies such as those of Dandelion, Plüss, Best, and Hampton focus on the attitudes and religious experience of individual Quakers, or groups of Quakers; some of whom have been

¹⁰⁶ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.306.

¹⁰⁷ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.238–253.

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer Hampton, 'British Quaker Survey: Examining Religious Beliefs and Practices in the Twenty-First Century', *Quaker Studies* 19:1, 2014, (7–136).

¹⁰⁹ Simon Best, 'The Community of Intimacy; the Spiritual Beliefs and Religious Practices of Adolescent Quakers', (unpublished PhD Thesis, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2010).

¹¹⁰ Hampton, 'British Quaker Survey'.

associated with the Society of Friends since childhood, but most of whom (currently some 84%) have only come to Quakerism in adulthood;¹¹¹ bringing with them their experience and religious formation in other denominations or faith groups, or simply reflecting the prevailing spirituality of the wider social world around them. These studies of the shifts in belief and in theology of British Friends provide essential background to the present study of the processes used and the decisions made at Yearly Meetings over the past 30 years.

It is also helpful to take account of Dandelion's schematisation of the culture of silence in Quaker meetings, and the function of that silence as a mask for the individual's experience of new forms of belief, and thus for covert changes in popular Quaker theology.¹¹² The unspoken, and subterranean, nature of these changes over the past half-century has meant that there has been an increasing divergence between vernacular and 'canonical' Quakerism, and helps to explain how it is that longstanding systems and procedures are no longer routinely practised in the old frame of shared worship, 'seeking the will of God.'¹¹³ In a 2004 essay Dandelion discusses the shift from 19th-century evangelicalism to liberal seeking and, currently, to a post-Christian frame; a marked shift in the context within which the Yearly Meeting is held and the rituals of a meeting for worship for business are enacted.¹¹⁴

Plüss seeks to investigate the institutional conduct and other attributes of Quakerism in Britain that help contribute to the group's unity; especially in a context where there is no common belief

¹¹¹ Hampton, 'British Quaker Survey', p.21.

¹¹² Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*; Pink Dandelion, 'Conclusion; The Nature of Quaker Studies', in *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, ed. by Pink Dandelion (Burlington: Pa. & Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 226–238, p.230.

¹¹³ *QF&P* 2:89.

¹¹⁴ Pink Dandelion, 'Conclusion; the Nature of Quaker Studies', in *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives* ed. by Pink Dandelion (Burlington: Pa. & Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 226–238.

system. At the time of her research the breadth of theological variance between groups within the Society of Friends ranged from the (Christocentric) New Foundation Fellowship to the Quaker Universalist Group which asserted that Quaker belief need not be framed in an exclusively Christian format.¹¹⁵

Plüss suggests that although Quakers do not share agreement about the content of their belief, their understanding is associated with a certain cognitive style; so that Friends accept their own beliefs and those of others as tentative and exploratory insights about the truth they experience¹¹⁶. She examines the processes of Quaker socialisation and self-censorship; and discusses the informal authority structure of the group. She suggests that the unstructured form of Quaker worship, and the general acquiescence to some form of transcendent reality, together help validate the variety of Quaker belief and also the individual's commitment to the group. This is a situation in which toleration of difference is highly prized, and where self-assertive behaviour is reproved or shunned; so in a business meeting there is a prevailing shared desire to find agreement. However, when disagreement persists, she identifies delay as a tactic commonly used to achieve eventual resolution of an issue:

Delaying making a decision until group participants withdraw their dissent not only puts social pressure on group participants to do this, but it also reassures them, by virtue of the fact that Friends will await their consent to the sense of the meeting in order to make a decision, that their views are important within the group. This reassurance is more likely

¹¹⁵ Twenty-five years later the range of diversity has extended even further, and the groups at the extremes are now 'Friends in Christ' and the Quaker Non-Theist Network.

¹¹⁶ Plüss, *A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement*, p.110 .

to encourage group participants to consent eventually to the sense of the meeting, than if they felt that their opinions were not considered as worthy of respect by the group.¹¹⁷

Both Dandelion and Plüss, and also Susan Robson¹¹⁸ in her analysis of conflict in the Religious Society of Friends, refer to case studies of particular, contentious, Yearly Meeting sessions to illustrate values, control systems, and behaviours by decision-makers and within the participant-group as a whole. Dandelion and Plüss both discuss the sessions in the 1989 Yearly Meeting at Aberdeen at which Friends agreed to join Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Plüss suggests that the continuing opposition to this decision, after the Yearly Meeting, is evidence that 'Friends view their loyalty to Quaker decisions as dependent on whether or not the group takes their views seriously'.¹¹⁹ This chimes with the findings which she cites by Charles Conrad¹²⁰ on group decision-making, to the effect that 'participation in, and perceived influence on, a group's decision-making process is positively related to its members' satisfaction with, and commitment to, the goals and values of the group'.¹²¹ Robson, a member of the Agenda Committee for the 2009 Yearly Meeting, provides an insider's view of the decision to support same-sex marriage. Both of these cases are revisited in Chapter 5.

Douglas Kline, another participant observer, also refers to case studies from local and other levels of business meetings in his discussion of conflict in the Society of Friends.¹²² He emphasises that

¹¹⁷ Plüss, *A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement*, p.138.

¹¹⁸ Susan Robson, *Living with Conflict: A Challenge to a Peace Church* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2014).

¹¹⁹ Plüss, *A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement*, p.139.

¹²⁰ Charles Conrad, 'Identity, structure and communicative action in church decision-making', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27:3 (1988), 345–361.

¹²¹ Plüss, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.139.

¹²² Douglas Kline, *Quakerly Conflict, the Cultural Logic of Conflict in the Religious Society of Friends* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2002).

there is a culture of agreement-seeking in the Society; and suggests that the communal pride in its history of pacifism makes it particularly difficult to acknowledge, and to deal with, internal conflict when it arises. He observes that an individual's expression of disagreement, for instance in a business meeting, is perceived as threatening damage to the sense of community – which is highly prized among Friends. Kline suggests that the strong association among Quakers between conflict and violence leads to a tendency to withdraw; either for the group to withdraw its approval for the individual, or for that individual or others simply to remove themselves from the arena, rather than choosing to engage with a view to resolving the disagreement or dispute. He also notes that within a local community or in a wider forum the details of disputes or conflict may not be widely aired; so some members of the group simply don't understand what issues are hidden, or informing the actions of the leadership. Similarly, Robson observes that where there has been strong feeling in a meeting, the outspoken minority is rewarded with approbation if they concede, and defer to the 'feeling of the meeting'.¹²³

Also on the topic of conflict in Meetings, though outside of an academic context, Stephen Angell has reported the events, and the Quaker politics, leading to the split of conservative and liberal Quaker Meetings from Indiana Yearly Meeting in 2013, to form the New Association of Friends.¹²⁴ He and Chuck Fager have also reported in the same journal on other splits, or potential splits in other North American Yearly Meetings.¹²⁵ This body of writing is highly

¹²³ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, 2014.

¹²⁴ Stephen Angell, 'The Impending *Split* in Indiana Yearly Meeting', *Quaker Theology*, 11:20 (2012), 11–32; Stephen Angell, 'Separation Accomplished: New Beginnings for a New Association of Friends and a 'Reconfigured' Indiana Yearly Meeting', *Quaker Theology*, 13:1 Winter/Spring (2014).

¹²⁵ Stephen Angell, 'Moment of Truth: Wilmington Yearly Meeting Divides Over a Familiar Set of Issues' *Quaker Theology*, 33 Winter, (2019), 1–34; 'Wilmington Yearly Meeting: another Yearly Meeting schism?' *Quaker Theology Double Issue*, 30 & 31, (2017–2018), pp. 27–47; Chuck Fager, 'North Carolina and Northwest Yearly

unusual among denominational authors writing about contemporary events, both among Friends and among faith groups in general, where, I would suggest, the ‘dirty laundry’ of disagreements and religious splits tends to be under-reported, even within the congregations affected.

As this discussion above indicates, much of the research about the Quaker movement over the past 30 years has been within a frame of the phenomenon of secularisation within British society, and it also, explicitly or not, traces the spread of secularisation and pluralism of belief within the Society of Friends. In 2019 Dandelion used the Religious Society of Friends as a case study in an exploration of the internal secularisation of a religious group.¹²⁶ He suggests that a culture of conformity with secular values has developed, not as an intentional decision within the group, but through incremental changes associated with a desire of adherents to accommodate to the secularisation of the wider social world which members of faith communities inhabit. He argues that this ‘cultivation of conformity’ with the secular world precedes the organisational changes associated with the internal secularisation of faith organisations, and specifically of the Religious Society of Friends.¹²⁷

Stewart Yarlett expands on this work, and proposes that the proliferation of non-theism within the group in recent decades is incompatible with the practice of mystic religion and with the earlier, liberal, universalist, inclusiveness.¹²⁸ He suggests that non-theists reference Dandelion’s

Meeting Updates’, *Quaker Theology*, 28, Spring/Summer (2016) <http://quakertheology.org/QT-28-North-Carolina-and-Northwest-update-Fager.html>. [accessed 3 June 2018].

¹²⁶ Pink Dandelion, *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹²⁷ Dandelion, *Cultivation of Conformity*, p.161.

¹²⁸ Stewart Yarlett, *The Accommodation of Diversity: Liberal Quakerism and Non-Theism* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020). He asks (p.209) ‘in what sense can they hold themselves to be authentically Quaker when they do not even hold a notion of religious experience such as that which seems so central to that religion?’

conception of orthopraxy so regularly that this has now become one of the creeds of the Society, ‘marginalising the substantive informative role of discursive theology and/or orthodoxy with regard to the Liberal Quaker identity.’¹²⁹ This insight, I suggest, is helpful for understanding the context in which the role of the ‘gathered’ meeting for worship for business has been marginalised in the quest for efficiency and other changes to the organisation and the decision-making practices of the Society of Friends which are described in the following chapters.

In the period that this thesis has been in preparation, several Quaker academics have become interested in the Quaker business method, and in its potential applicability in organisations outside of a religious context – finding secular uses for what has been theologically-informed practice. A cognitive scientist, Peter Cheng, has undertaken ‘an autonomous scientific analysis’ of the attributes of the Quaker Business Method (QBM), with a view to understanding how it might be applied outside of a religious context.¹³⁰ He identifies a taxonomy of value, culture and process tools used in the QBM. He also identifies behaviours which reduce open-mindedness, such as loyalty to an individual, that might bias the process.

Rachel Muers, a theologian, and Nicholas Burton, a management lecturer, have, with colleagues, been exploring the contribution that the Quaker business method might make in secular organisations.¹³¹ This proposition is discussed further in Chapter 4. Muers & Burton identify attributes of the Quaker business method, which they indicate can be applied in secular

¹²⁹ Yarlett, *Accommodation of Diversity*, 2020, p.310.

¹³⁰ Peter C-H. Cheng, ‘A Cognitive Science Analysis of the Quaker Business Method: How it Works Why it Works?’ *Quaker Studies Journal*, 24:2 (2019), 271–297, (p.273).

¹³¹ Nicholas Burton, Juliette Koning & Rachel Muers, ‘Organizational ethnography and religious organizations: the case of Quaker decision-making’, *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 15:4 (2018) pp. 349-367.

contexts.¹³² They suggest that these include: Turning attention to ‘God or the Spirit as the source and ultimate authority in decision-making’; contributions being framed by silence; no votes being taken; and action-oriented minutes being agreed, reflecting the discernment of the group. They explain that other conventions include no individual speaking twice.

They identify that they are working within a sub-discipline at the margins of both management and theology: ‘Management, Spirituality and Religion’ (MSR); a field in which some Quaker management academics elsewhere, such as Margaret Benefiel in America and Charles Tackney in Denmark, are already engaged¹³³.

In a separate study, Muers and Grant discuss the workings of ‘Threshing Meetings’; a device used less commonly by Quakers in Britain than in some North American Yearly Meetings, where a particular issue, often a personal one rather than a decision to be made by the group as a whole, is aired in a worship-sharing mode. The secular or New Age version of this might be seen as that of respectful listening – perhaps, outside of a Quaker context, using a ‘talking stick’ to emphasise the role of each speaker and to deter interruption.¹³⁴

The discussion shows that while some authors, such as Dandelion, Davie, Plüss, and Kline, have considered issues of power within the Society of Friends, Quaker academic authors have not

¹³² Rachel Muers & Nicholas Burton, ‘Can We Take the Religion out of Religious Decision-Making? The Case of Quaker Business Method’, *Philosophy of Management*, 28 (June 2018). pp.1–12.

¹³³ Margaret Benefiel, ‘The second half of the journey: Spiritual Leadership for Organisational Transformation,’ *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16:5 (October 2005), pp. 723–747.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1048984305000731?via%3Dihub> [accessed 8 August 2019]; Margaret Benefiel, *Soul at Work: Spiritual Leadership in Organizations*, (Atlanta: Church Publishing Inc. 2005); Charles T. Tackney, ‘Authenticity in Employment Relations: A Theology of the Workplace Analysis’, *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 15:1 (2018), 82–104.

¹³⁴ <https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/TraditionalTalkingStick-Unknown.html> [accessed 16 November, 2016].

focussed on organisational issues nor on governance within Britain Yearly Meeting. Dandelion, in his recent book about internal secularisation within religious organisations,¹³⁵ refers only glancingly to these aspects of secularisation, and does so by referencing conference papers of my own; earlier versions of the material in Chapter 6 of this thesis.¹³⁶

2.3 Wider Theoretical Literature

The second part of this chapter introduces a wider theoretical literature which informs this study. It is eclectic, making use of material from within the streams of sociology of religion, social anthropology, management studies and practical theology. It opens by situating this study within the context of secularisation within Britain, specifically within religious organisations. It continues with a discussion of literature concerning the management of religious organisations, before turning to more general material on leadership and management, and on consensus and other forms of decision-making in face-to-face organisations. All of these insights will help to inform the discussion in Chapters 3 – 7 of change within the Religious Society of Friends.

¹³⁵ Dandelion, *Cultivation of Conformity*, p.145.

¹³⁶ Penelope Cummins; 'After the Charities Act: Governance and Decision-making in Britain Yearly Meeting'. Quaker Studies Research Association Conference, Birmingham, 2018.

2.3.1 Secularisation and organisational change

The issue of internal secularisation of faith organisations was discussed as far back as 1969 by Thomas Luckmann, who identified it as being embedded within American faith communities through the bureaucratisation of their organisations.¹³⁷

In this examination of change within the Religious Society of Friends, this study focuses particularly on the observation by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce, discussed in Chapter 1, that state intervention, and conforming to state requirements, can be determining factors in the secularisation of a religious body.¹³⁸

Malcolm Torry is an Anglican priest who has found Wilson and Bruce's analysis of secularisation helpful in his own work on management and change within the Anglican denomination. Like them, he does not identify secularisation as a simple, unitary, phenomenon:

but, rather, secularizations, in the plural: the secularization of ideas (religious ideas are no longer at the heart of the way we think), cultural secularization (religious symbols are no longer central to our culture), desacralization (a loss of the sense of the sacred), practical

¹³⁷ Thomas Luckmann, 'The Decline of Church-orientated Religion', in *The Sociology of Religion*, ed. by Roland Robertson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); 'There can be little doubt... that Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism are jointly characterized by similar structural transformations – a bureaucratization along rational business-like lines – and accommodation to the 'secular' way of life.' p.147.

¹³⁸ It is perhaps necessary to remind the reader that this thesis is not directly concerned with the wider debate within the sociology of religion as to whether Bruce and his colleagues are correct that secularisation is an increasingly widespread and inevitable phenomenon, especially in Western Europe. Nor does it consider whether authors such as Grace Davie and Peter Berger are correct in repudiating Berger's earlier view that modernity necessarily brings about a decline in religion, and in celebrating instead the pervasiveness of a spirituality which is not necessarily associated with membership of an institutional church but which utilises ideas and concepts available in the public arena in a pluralist society. (Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A critical agenda*, 2nd edn. (Sage: London, 2013); Peter Berger, 'Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity', *Society*, 49:4 (July 2012), pp. 313–316; *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City NY: Anchor, 1967).

secularization (a decline in religious activity), state secularization (a loss of links between state organizations and religious organizations), institutional secularization (a loss of links between religious organizations and private, public and voluntary organizations), religious secularization (religious organizations becoming less religious), secularization of beliefs (fewer people now believe in God).¹³⁹

Torry perceives the interlinked nature of the various ‘secularizations’ which he lists, and proposes that a particular challenge, ‘even for those congregations that are growing numerically, is “religious secularization”, of which the inappropriate employment of secular management theory is both cause and symptom’.¹⁴⁰ He suggests that there is plenty that a religious organisation can do to roll back the effects of secularisation, but warns that to succeed ‘it will need to remain a religious organization, that is, worship must be at its heart, proclamation by word and deed must be integral to everything that it is and does, and crucially, it will need to guard against religious secularization’.¹⁴¹ I suggest that this observation is highly relevant in a study of change within the Society of Friends.

Bruce suggests that the declining level of adherence to organised religion in the wider society causes it to be:

progressively harder for those who remain religious to preserve the cohesion and integrity of their particular belief system. As religion becomes increasingly a matter of free choice,

¹³⁹ Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion: The Management of Christian Religious and Faith-based Organizations, Vol 1: Internal Relationships* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.188–189.

¹⁴⁰ Torry, *Managing Religion*, p.189.

¹⁴¹ Torry, *Managing Religion*, p.190.

it becomes harder to maintain boundaries, alternative re-workings of once-dominant ideologies proliferate, and increasing variation encourages first relativism – all roads lead to God – and then indifference as it becomes harder to persuade people that there is special merit in any particular road.¹⁴²

John S Knox¹⁴³ describes this phenomenon as ‘Sacro-Egoism’: the perception that the individual, rather than the divine, the Bible or religious institutions, is the ultimate authority in spiritual matters. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman¹⁴⁴ describe a similar understanding when they speak of a ‘pick ‘n mix’ approach to spirituality. And the American sociologist of religion, Jose Casanova speaks ruefully about the phenomenon of the privatisation of religion, saying:

The modern individual is condemned to pick and choose from a wide arrangement of meaning systems... what is certainly new in our global age is the simultaneous presence and availability of all world religions and all cultural systems, from the most ‘primitive’ to the most ‘modern’, often detached from their temporal and spatial contexts, ready for flexible or fundamentalist individual appropriation.¹⁴⁵

Some sociologists of religion, such as Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, who do not favour the secularisation model as a vehicle for describing religious adherence and spirituality

¹⁴² Bruce, *Secularization*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁴³ John S. Knox, *Sacro-egoism and the Shifting Paradigm of Religiosity* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009).

¹⁴⁴ Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman, ‘Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21:2, (2006), 201–222
DOI: <https://www.10.1080/13537900600655894>, (p.201).

¹⁴⁵ Jose Casanova, ‘Rethinking Secularisation’, *The Hedgehog Review*, (Spring/Summer 2006), Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, pp. 7–22, (p.18).

in contemporary Britain, argue that while formal levels of religious adherence (and of Western theological and Biblical literacy) may be declining, there is still a mostly unrecognised high incidence of generalised spirituality.¹⁴⁶ In the Kendal project, a detailed study of faith and religious observance in a small town in the north of England, Heelas & Woodhead identified an extensive range of spiritual or semi-spiritual practices in which the inhabitants participated, drawn from aspects of several world religions.¹⁴⁷ These include Transcendental Meditation with its Hindu roots; and Mindfulness, which is sometimes presented in a therapeutic guise by practitioners in or outside of the NHS as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Therapy, drawn from Buddhist practice. It should of course be observed that many participants are barely aware of the religious context from which practices such as mindfulness, yoga or Tai Kwando are drawn.¹⁴⁸

All of these, mainly recreational or ‘healing’ activities, are part of the social and cultural environment in Britain, and it is more probable that a new participant in the Society of Friends will have taken part in one or more of these activities than that they will have immersed themselves in a theological frame.

¹⁴⁶ Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda*, 2nd edn. (London: Sage, 2013); *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* ed. by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

¹⁴⁷ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski and Karin Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁴⁸ Not that this, arguably, necessarily affects the beneficial effects of the de-natured practice; for instance Chikako and Brendan Ozawa da Silva find that the contemplative practices of Naikan, a secular version of Shin Buddhism, are capable of affecting psychological wellbeing both among Japanese people familiar with Buddhism and among people from other cultures (Chikako Ozawa da Silva & Brendan Ozawa da Silva, ‘Secularising Religious Practices: A Study of Subjectivity and Existential Transformation in Naikan Therapy’, *Journal of Social Science Research*, 49:1 (2011), 147–161).

If one is surprised by the atheism of some active members of the Society of Friends as described by Alistair Heron, Dandelion or Hampton¹⁴⁹ it might be helpful to refer to the work of Josh Bullock, Katie Cross, and Tim Mortimer & Melanie Prideaux,¹⁵⁰ who have researched the ‘Sunday Assemblies’, a non-religious movement which explicitly makes use of the Sunday-morning activities of church attendance without any engagement in worship – community singing, hearing a sermon, chatting over tea and coffee after the event.

The phenomenon of prizing the ritual processes, or the outcomes of religious behaviours, and seeking to separate them from the religious engagement itself, and their re-presentation in secularised form for commercial purposes, may be perceived as an aspect of New Age spirituality.¹⁵¹ It is discussed further in Chapter 3, in relation to Quakers’ own use of the Quaker business method, and their recent initiatives to disseminate it more widely.

In Chapter 3, this study suggests that the Religious Society of Friends has particular theological and organisational characteristics which, if anything, make it perhaps more vulnerable than most other religious groups to the changing nature of the religious beliefs and adherence of its

¹⁴⁹ Alastair Heron, *Our Quaker Identity: Religious Society or Friendly Society?* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 2005); Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*; Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey’.

¹⁵⁰ Josh Bullock, *The Sociology of the Sunday Assembly: ‘Belonging without believing’ in a post-Christian context*, [unpublished PhD Thesis, Kingston University, 2017]; Katie Cross, ‘The Sunday Assembly in Scotland: Vestiges of Religious Memory and Practice in a Secular Congregation’, *Journal of Practical Theology*, 10:3 (2017), pp. 249–262; Tim Mortimer & Melanie Prideaux, ‘Exploring identities between the religious and the secular through the attendees of an ostensibly ‘Atheist Church’, *Religion*, 48:1 (2018), pp.64–82.

¹⁵¹ For instance, Renee Lockwood, in her exploration of the ‘religio-spiritual dimension’ of a self-improvement movement which incorporates aspects of EST and neuro-linguistic programming, concludes that the highly emotional nature of Landmark Education training weekends creates a level of religious effervescence, as described by an early sociologist of religion, Émile Durkheim (Émile Durkheim: *The Elementary forms of the Religious Life* (London and New York: G. Allen & Unwin; Macmillan, 1915. Trans.) And this in turn contributes to the alteration of an individual’s pre-existing belief systems and the development of a sense of a sacred collective. Renee D Lockwood, ‘Religiosity Rejected: Exploring the Religio-Spiritual Dimensions of Landmark Education International Journal for the Study of New Religions, 2:2, 31 (December 2011). <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/IJSNR/article/view/11368> [accessed 12 April, 2017].

members, as manifest in the changes to the character of the Religious Society of Friends since the 17th century, and especially since the rise of Darwinism in the 19th century.

The insights of the American sociologist of religion Peter Berger in this regard may be helpful:

‘the social construction of reality and the maintenance of a sacred canopy depend on social consensus, so any pluralism is a threat to such a situation.’¹⁵² Berger’s proposition was contentious in the context about which he was writing – American society as a whole. It is perhaps more useful today within the frame of a particular denomination, in this case the Religious Society of Friends, which has, particularly in the past half-century, become the locus of a kaleidoscope of belief.¹⁵³

The discussion in Chapter 4 of this study indicates that this frame is useful in a discussion of the changing nature of the Religious Society of Friends, the character of which has shifted diametrically from that of a closed, endogamous group in the early 19th century, given to excommunicating members who married outside of the group or participated too eagerly in the life of the wider society, to an association primarily of adult converts, for many of whom their pre-existing social relations take precedence over the time which they devote to Quaker affairs.¹⁵⁴

2.3.2 Management and Authority Within Faith Groups

In Britain there is a very limited literature reporting or analysing (rather than exhorting about) the functioning and organisation of faith groups. Torry comments on the paucity of writing that is specifically about the organisation and management of religious organisations, and cites his own,

¹⁵² Peter L. Berger: *The Sacred Canopy*.

¹⁵³ See Montemaggi, *The Spirituality of New Quakers*.

¹⁵⁴ Montemaggi, *The Spirituality of New Quakers*.

earlier, work as ‘the only research-based textbook on the management of religious and faith-based organizations.’¹⁵⁵

In most Western religious groups, both at congregational level and beyond, the normal triangle of authority pertains, with an ordained, anointed, or appointed leader at the apex, with varying degrees of autocracy or engagement with the whole group or selected members in decision-making.

In his analysis of the place and source of authority in the (Anglican) church, Paul Avis¹⁵⁶ makes use of Michael Polanyi’s¹⁵⁷ distinction between general and specific authority, whereby specific authority is embodied in pronouncements from the centre, and:

A General Authority relies for the initiative in the gradual transformation of tradition on the intuitive impulses of the individual adherents of the community, and it relies on their consciences to control their intuitions. The General Authority itself is but a more or less organised expression of the general opinion – scientific, legal or religious – formed by the merging and interplay of all these individual contributions. Such a regime assumes that individual members are capable of making a genuine contact with the reality underlying the existing tradition and of adding new and authoritative interpretations to it.¹⁵⁸

Avis identifies the authority of church leaders as situated within the Christian community, and suggests that it is constrained by the ecumenical environment.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion: The Management of Christian Religious and Faith-based Organizations*. vol 2, *External Relationships* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.1.

¹⁵⁶ Paul D.L. Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church* (London: Mowbray, 1992).

¹⁵⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1964, (1st edn. Oxford: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1946)).

¹⁵⁸ Avis, *Authority*, p.7.

¹⁵⁹ Avis, *Authority*, p.12.

Avis writes at length about the role of authority and leadership in the church. He perceives the role and status of the leader as one which is key to the organisation of the church, both from the perspective of those in authority and those without it.¹⁶⁰ Avis suggests that status, rather than role, is the key to traditional authority in the church:¹⁶¹

Bishops, clergy and laity queue to speak. Who will sway the minds of the synod? The view of the elected standing committee carries the most sway – its role is to listen to opinion and to obtain all the necessary information. The two archbishops are next in influence: is it by virtue of their office or due to their personal status or ability and their representative role, close to the heart of the church? Ideological considerations and loyalty to partisan party groups figure third in influence on the synod. But the diocesan bishops, who stand for sacred status more than any other order, have the least influence.¹⁶²

However, this understanding of leadership in the church, while possibly accurate, is not the only one emanating from Anglicans. Alan Ecclestone writes about the parish meeting in theological terms that anyone who seeks the inspiration of the early church can understand. It is easy to apply this description to the Quaker setting:

It is a meeting, the agenda or business of which is the whole life and work of the Christian Community in the world. It can be described on the one hand with the utmost simplicity: that week by week the members of the church in the parish meet together to

¹⁶⁰ 'The cult of the leader or father-figure, the frisson of submission to authority, the craving for absolutes and the thrill of belonging to an army that can never be defeated are all factors to be reckoned with in any discussion of the nature of authority in the Church and of the commitment of the individual Christian'. Avis, *Authority*, p.52.

¹⁶¹ Avis, *Authority*, p.59.

¹⁶² Avis, *Authority*, p.54.

talk over, plan, execute and report on the work of the Christian Church in whose life they share. It must be recognised on the other hand that we are making the most tremendous claims: that this meeting is nothing less than the representation of the Body of Christ, which in the very power and commission of Pentecost is setting about its work and revealing its life. We are not talking about an organisation devised by a parish priest, and enjoyed by some parishioners. We are not talking about a study group, a prayer meeting, a business meeting, a consultative committee, a social. We are not thinking in terms of Chairman, Secretary, minutes, correspondence and agenda. We are talking about the Church, whose primary business is to be the Church. The Parish Meeting is to be thought of in these overwhelming terms or it is better left alone.¹⁶³

In most religious organisations, at both congregational and denominational levels, while the laity do participate in certain of the decision-making and operational structures, most leadership functions are in the hands of ordained priests or ministers.

Torry points out that there is a marked structural difference between participants in other organizations who volunteer for tasks, and the members of a religious congregation who undertake similar tasks: '[C]ongregational membership is not a combination of attendance and voluntary activity, but is instead a unique relationship between an individual and an organization

¹⁶³ Alan Ecclestone, 'The Parish Meeting at Work' (London: SPCK, 1953). in Cotter, Jim (ed): *Firing the Clay: Articles and Addresses by Alan Ecclestone* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1998), p.222. Ecclestone also talks (p.226) about the role of the parish priest, or person chairing the meeting: 'Humanly speaking, everything turns upon his integrity and sensitiveness. He can help the Meeting to go forward to hitherto quite undreamed-of levels of understanding, spiritual insight, and adventurous courage, changing the whole outlook and will of the Church, or he can fritter away the time, the resources, and the confidence of his people. One of the earliest signs of what is happening will be found in the way in which people respond to this opportunity to speak. There is a world of difference in the silence of those who are thinking and the silence of those who are merely waiting for someone to say something'.

in which both attendance and responsibility for the organization constitute the meaning of “membership”.¹⁶⁴ This distinction, I suggest, is particularly important to an understanding of the Society of Friends, which has historically not had an ordained leadership, and which, at congregational and at national level, has been run by committees drawn from the membership.

Torry notes that members take responsibility for the life of the congregation in ways that a volunteer might not. He refers to Helen Cameron’s insight that ‘[m]embers will often invest much of themselves in a congregation, and will therefore be less able to distinguish between their congregational and private roles in a way which a volunteer might be able to do.’¹⁶⁵ The sociologist Margaret Harris points out that a key difference between the members of a congregation and volunteers is that volunteers expect to be well managed, while members will expect not to be managed at all.¹⁶⁶ Torry elucidates:

This is because members will properly regard themselves as *constituting* the congregation, rather than having a relationship with a congregation that has an identity distinct from their belonging to it; and also because they will regard themselves as subject to the same external authority as other congregation members, church officers, and clergy, and will therefore expect to experience a network accountability in which each individual

¹⁶⁴ Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion*.

¹⁶⁵ Helen Cameron, ‘Are Members Volunteers? An Exploration of the Concept of Membership Drawing on Studies of the Local Church’, *Voluntary Action*, vol 1:2 (Spring 1999), 53–66, (p.57), cited in Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion: The Management of Christian Religious and Faith-based Organizations*, vol. 1, *Internal Relationships* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.83.

¹⁶⁶ Margaret Harris, ‘A Special Case of Voluntary Associations? Towards a Theory of Congregational Organisation’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 49:4 (December 1998), 602–618, (p.602).

is subject to multiple sources of secondary authority at the same time as exercising authority themselves.¹⁶⁷

2.3.3. Management in religious organisations

Within the Anglican Church, itself identifiable as a command-and-control organisation, Justin Lewis-Anthony¹⁶⁸ is sceptical about the appropriateness of the church uncritically adopting modern management techniques and assumptions. He reflects on an observation by the American organisational analyst Alfred D Chandler,¹⁶⁹ that a characteristic of managerialism is that the manager is deemed to be central to the organisation, and to the decisions which cascade from his desk and those of his subordinates. Lewis-Anthony indicates that such a view is a fallacy within a church, where the most important relationships are those between the congregation, and individual members thereof, with God and with their neighbours in and outside of the church. Rather than embracing the managerial culture, Lewis-Anthony (like the early Quakers) suggests that a return to the priorities, principles and prayer of the early church is more helpful. He cites Martyn Percy, who also believes that management techniques are tools rather than a destination, and who reminds us emphatically that the church ‘is not called to success, but to faithfulness.’¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion: The Management of Christian Religious and Faith-based Organizations, Vol 1: Internal Relationships* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.83.

¹⁶⁸ Justin Lewis-Anthony, ‘St Gregory and Managerialism; the Limits of Anglican Pragmatism’, *Theology*, 117:3 (2014), pp.170–176.

¹⁶⁹ Alfred D. Chandler, ‘Decision Making and Modern Institutional Change’, *Journal of Economic History*, 33:1 (1973), 1–15, (p.5).

¹⁷⁰ Martyn Percy, *The Ecclesial Canopy: Faith, Hope, and Charity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p.20.

Similarly, in a book on order and organisation in the church, co-edited by Percy, Richard Laughlin asks whether ‘the importation of managerial tasks into the heart of ecclesiology’ actually hinders the capacity of the church to ‘own and perform its vital religious tasks in a society that is increasingly controlled by markets, identities and legislators’. He suggests that the inevitably associated concentration of power within the church may be a ‘fundamentally demoralizing’ phenomenon.¹⁷¹ In the same volume, Stephen Pattison observes: ‘The ultimate aim of the modern organization is *to plan and control its own destiny by setting desired and obtainable goals*’; but that ‘narrow, instrumental view of the world’ is at odds with a theological understanding of grace and of sacramental stewardship.¹⁷²

Christina Kheng points out that even within the discipline of practical theology, ‘most of the discourse on church management has so far been ‘on the level of practical action, and scholarly research has been largely empirical in nature, undertaken from organizational and social science disciplines rather than theology.’¹⁷³ She refers to the work of a theologian, Clodovis Boff, who in the 1980s, in a survey of sociological and theological engagement within the Roman Catholic church found that ‘sociology overcomes theology’ in the semantic mix which eventually leads to the obscuring of core theological understandings.¹⁷⁴ In her own appraisal of the influence of management language and values in the Roman Catholic Church in the past two decades, Kheng

¹⁷¹ Richard Laughlin, ‘A Model of Financial Accountability for the Church of England’, *Managing the Church? Order and Organization in a Secular Age*, ed. by Gillian R. Evans & Martyn Percy (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp.49–77, (p.75).

¹⁷² Stephen Pattison, ‘Some Objections to Aims and Objectives’, in *Managing the Church? Order and Organization in a Secular Age*, ed. by Gillian R. Evans & Martyn Percy (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 2000), pp.128–152, (p.138) (original emphasis).

¹⁷³ Christina Kheng, ‘What Are They Saying About Church Management? Patterns, Problems and Considerations for Proceeding’, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 23:2 (2019), 188–205, eISSN 1612-9768, ISSN 1430-6921, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2018-0039>. (p.190).

¹⁷⁴ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), pp. 20–34.

observes that where there has been a wholesale adoption of management concepts, this has led to a ‘distortion of ecclesial identity, relationships, and roles’, and suggests that the Church adopts the role of producer or vendor, and situates the members of the congregation as clients or consumers rather than as members of a worshipping community.¹⁷⁵

Kheng, like Stephen Pattison a decade earlier, finds that management advisors tend to over-emphasise the role of the leader, priest, or manager, leading to the side-lining and disempowering of the members of the congregation as a whole.¹⁷⁶ This observation is of particular relevance in a study of organisational and conceptual changes in the Religious Society of Friends, a group which has no paid clergy, and which has, at least in earlier years, functioned as a ‘priesthood of believers’, where responsibilities are shared among the membership.

An economist, Douglas W. Allen observes that the organisation of a church is not independent of its theology, and posits that when the doctrinal structure of a religious group fails to match the organisational form, the church fails. He describes the structure and nature of Quaker church organisation as ‘rather unique in Christendom’, with every Member enjoined to attend and participate in local and national decision-making gatherings.¹⁷⁷ Allen notes that the church structure includes many different committees, the shared inspiration and deliberations of which test and largely restrain the eccentricities or power-plays of possibly divinely inspired

¹⁷⁵ Kheng, ‘What Are They Saying’, p.198.

¹⁷⁶ Stephen Pattison, ‘Some Objections to Aims and Objectives’, pp.128–152.

¹⁷⁷ Douglas W. Allen, ‘Order in the Church: a Property Rights Approach’, *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization*, 27 (1995), p.112.

individuals. He points out that the processes of a Meeting ‘waiting upon the Lord’ and seeking unity rather than a majority decision are ‘both cumbersome and potentially easily exploited.’¹⁷⁸

Andrew Chandler’s study of the work of the Anglican Church Commissioners in the 20th century is unusual for its focus on financial management decisions.¹⁷⁹ The present study takes up the challenge posed by Chandler’s work for subsequent researchers to broaden the discussion of secularism in Britain from that of changing beliefs to that of tracing the changes in religious organisations in response to the demands of the secular state.

These instances, as Peter Edge observes, ‘also raise wider questions about the relationship of religion to law. This can create explicit conflict between the religious and the secular.’¹⁸⁰ He suggests:

The legal structures of the UK have not been supportive of formal, over-arching, visions of the place of religion and religious organisations within the legal order. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, have created a number of instances in which the place of such organisations has become contested both at the policy level and at the level of individuals seeking to rely upon their legal rights. There seems to be a confident assertion of state values that do not include religious values, over religious values as such.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Allen, ‘Order’ p. 112.

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

¹⁸⁰ Peter W. Edge, ‘Secularism and Establishment in the United Kingdom’, in *Religions, Rights and Secular Society*, ed. by Peter Cumper & Tom Lewis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), pp. 38–57, p.55.

¹⁸¹ Edge, *Secularism and Establishment*, p. 57.

2.3.4 Management, Authority and Leadership

This study also refers to aspects of organisational and management theory to illuminate the effects of recent changes in the structure and management of the Religious Society of Friends, and on the Yearly Meeting events which are the focus of this study; drawing for instance on Max Weber's¹⁸² analysis of leadership authority derived from status, role or charisma.

In practically every political, religious, voluntary or commercial organisation there is a differentiation of roles, and, usually, of status. Joseph Magee and Adam Galinski¹⁸³ suggest that the institution of hierarchy in organisations has two main functions: helping to establish social order and coordination; and providing incentives for individuals to obtain higher rank with a view to satisfying material self-interest and their need for control. They define social hierarchy in organisations as 'an explicit or implicit ranking of individuals with respect to a valued social dimension.'¹⁸⁴ They observe that hierarchical status is self-reinforcing and determines how others, and the individuals themselves, evaluate their behaviour:

There is also an assumption that... individuals of higher rank possess a greater combination of skills, abilities and motivation to accomplish the work of the organisation

¹⁸² Weber, Max, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organisation* (New York: Free Press, trans. Henderson & Parsons, 1964).

¹⁸³ Joseph C. Magee, & Adam D. Galinsky, 'Social Hierarchy: The Self-reinforcing Nature of Power and Status', *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2:1 (2008), 351–398.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19416520802211628>.

¹⁸⁴ Magee, & Galinsky, 'Social Hierarchy,' p.355.

than do lower-ranking individuals, giving the formal hierarchy a degree of legitimacy to its members.¹⁸⁵

Inevitably, both religious change and structural changes within denominations are both causes and manifestations of shifting relations of power and authority within the religious organisation. Douglas Davies points out: 'People are unlikely to engage in religious activity unless they derive some benefit from it, not least some sense of power coming to them or arising within them.'¹⁸⁶ He observes that clashes within and between religious groups often arise when individuals assert that they have experienced special revelations, 'the God-breathed dynamism that raises up a particular leader.'¹⁸⁷

In the study of any organisation, especially a theocentric one such as the Religious Society of Friends, it is important also to understand the concept of authority, and where authority is held. The Quakers' theological understanding of authority is discussed in Chapter 3. However, it is useful to refer at this point to the sociological writings of Max Weber, who points out that the authority associated with particular roles and tasks, status authority, is only one of the kinds of leadership authority. He suggests that there are three grounds for a leader's authority: rational (or 'legal'), traditional, and charismatic; and that an individual's real source of leadership authority may not be the one officially ascribed; particularly in the instance of charismatic authority or the lack of it.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Magee, & Galinsky 'Social Hierarchy', p.355.

¹⁸⁶ Douglas Davies, 'Divine Power', in *Studying Local Churches, a Handbook*, ed. by Helen Cameron; Philip Richter, Douglas Davies, & Francis Ward (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp.188ff., p.188.

¹⁸⁷ Davies, 'Divine Power', p. 189.

¹⁸⁸ Max Weber, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organisation* (Free Press: New York, 1964 trans.).

John Rayment & Jonathan Smith¹⁸⁹ remark on the ubiquity of command and control as the leadership mode in most organisations; and they point out that, despite rare exceptions, this is the model which pervades the popular understanding of leadership in Western society. They also point out that one of the features of command-and-control leadership is that it disempowers the other, subordinated, members of the organisation.

In 1977, an American Quaker, Robert E Greenleaf, produced a critique of this form of leadership, and began promoting the concept of ‘servant leadership’ in the business community. This became one of the spiritualised conceptions of management that began to infuse the workplace in the 1980s. Greenleaf advocated that a leader should be ‘*primus in pares*’ (first among equals), rather than a lone chief atop a pyramid, which position he described as both abnormal and corrupting. Where power is too closely held, the leader cannot afford to be seen as anything but omniscient, and is likely to spend more energy on ensuring control than in engaging in active leadership:

None of us are perfect by ourselves, and all of us need the help and correcting influence of close colleagues. When someone is moved atop a pyramid, that person no longer has colleagues, only subordinates... The pyramidal structure weakens informal links, dries up channels of honest reaction and feedback, and creates limiting chief-subordinate relationships which, at the top, can seriously penalise the whole organization.¹⁹⁰

Greenleaf draws a distinction between leaders with operational skills and those with conceptual understanding. While some people are capable at both levels, he suggests that ‘it is a stubborn

¹⁸⁹ John Rayment & Jonathan Smith, *MisLeadership: Prevalence, Causes and Consequences* (Farnham, UK: Gower, 2011).

¹⁹⁰ Robert E. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977), p.63.

fact' that 'whereas conceptualizers generally recognize the need for operators, the reverse is often not the case'.¹⁹¹ Larry C. Spiers, the executive director of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, identifies ten characteristics of servant leadership:

These include listening receptively; acceptance of and empathy with others; foresight and intuition; awareness and perception; highly developed powers of persuasion; ability to conceptualise and to communicate concepts; a healing influence upon people and institutions; ability to build a sense of community in the workplace; and the practice of contemplation.¹⁹²

James Burns and Bernard Bass both advocate Transformational Leadership, which can be described as consensus-seeking by within an organisation in relation to proposed changes or responses to change. Burns suggests that the role of the leader should be seen as distinctly moral and value-driven, enabling the organisation to respond to change.¹⁹³ Simon Western mistrusts Transformational Leadership, which, he points out, is pervasive not just in 21st-century Britain but also, specifically, in religious organisations. He likens the Transformational leader in the management world to the Christian fundamentalist leaders of the early 1980s, and points out that the dominant academic and professional discourse about leadership focuses on the characteristics of the individual, idealised, leader rather than on the processes of effective leadership. Western proposes that most contemporary organisations assume that leadership is essentially

¹⁹¹ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, p.67.

¹⁹² Larry C. Spiers, *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit and Servant-Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1997), p.7.

¹⁹³ Burns, James McGregor, (1978), *Leadership*, N.Y, Harper and Row; .Bass, Bernard M,(1985), *Leadership and Performance*, N.Y. Free Press; Bass, Bernard M. & Avolio, B.J. (Eds.). (1994). *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

individualistic, and that the training and appraisal of managers is predicated on the assumption that success or smooth-running is attributable to the individual manager's input rather than acknowledging the contribution of the manager's team members, and that of the other groups within the organisation that support the work of that team, without having line-management connections between them.¹⁹⁴

2.3.5 Decision-making in Organisations

Decision-making in any social context is likely to be problematic, with unpredictable consequences and outcomes. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber describe these social decisions as 'wicked problems'; ones where the outcomes are rarely those expected, as the problem has usually been framed too tightly, perceived as too small; where the unintended consequences cannot all be foreseen, and where each resolution creates a new context, and a new set of 'problems' to be resolved.¹⁹⁵

Henry J. Mintzberg, Duru Raisingham & Andre Theoret observe that major strategic and operational changes in organisations are generally not the result of a single, pivotal decision, but are usually the outcome of a cumulative series of small choices leading to – or adding up to – a

¹⁹⁴ Simon Western, *A Critical Analysis of Leadership: How Fundamental Tendencies can be Overcome*. (unpublished DPhil Thesis, Department of Organisation and Work Technology, Lancaster University Management School, 2004), p.451.

¹⁹⁵ Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning', pp. 155–169, *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, pp155–169, Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Inc., Amsterdam, 1973. Reprinted in N. Cross (ed.), *Developments in Design Methodology* (Chichester: J. Wiley & Sons, 1984), pp.135–144.

major decision.¹⁹⁶ They suggest that organisations move through several decision-points, and that sometimes the cycle might be interrupted by some form of major or minor barrier, such as changing circumstances associated with the passage of time. When it hits a barrier, the organisation has to cycle back through earlier decisions, perhaps trying out new ways forward. They suggest that these barriers might appear at any of three phases of decision-making, which they identify as the identification of options, development of options, and selection of the option to take forward.

The 1970s management writer Charles Handy identifies five main decision-making schemata in organisations: Deciding authority; Majority; Concession; Minority; No response.¹⁹⁷ In Handy's terms, the 'deciding authority' usually consists of a single individual at the apex of a hierarchical triangle, whether king, chairman or chief executive, who alone or in consultation with a small group, such as privy councillors, trustees or board-members, creates legislation, determines policies and leads or adjudicates on routine administration and operational decisions. The majority vote is just that, either within the decision-making elite such as the British parliament, or in the society as a whole, as in at a general election. Similarly, decision-making through concession may be consensual, or it may be a general agreement on the part of participants that a less than perfect outcome is less of a threat to the group as a whole than division into factions might be.

In some instances in a consensual (or other) context, a minority of the general group may have an enthusiasm or vision about which the majority feels neutral; so in a context of general inertia

¹⁹⁶ Henry J. Mintzberg, Duru Raisingham, & André Theoret, 'The Structure of "Unstructured" Decision Processes', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (June, 1976).

¹⁹⁷ Charles Handy, *Understanding Organizations*, (1976, 4th ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006), p.175.

sometimes quite radical programmes may be enacted. Sometimes, of course, a society or organisation simply fails to respond at all to an event or issue, irrespective of whether it is of central or marginal relevance to the continuing life of the group.

It is worth noting that even within an autocratic or strongly hierarchical decision-making structure, the individual at the apex of the organisation or community may value the contributions from their counsellors. For instance, as far back as 540 AD, in his Rule for the monastic order which he founded, St Benedict of Nursia enjoins the local abbot to summon the whole community for consultation on important matters, before making his decision.¹⁹⁸

Similarly, Adrian Cadbury, the chair of the eponymous committee on corporate governance which in the 1990s shaped international accounting standards and the governance of companies, public bodies and charities,¹⁹⁹ and incidentally himself a Quaker, has described what he perceives to be good practice in chairing and leading the decision-making of corporate boards; skills which he used during his own chairmanship of Cadbury Schweppes in the 1970s and 1980s, and in his other roles, such as that of university chancellor and director of the Bank of England. He refers to the writings of another multinational chief executive, Stanley Dixon, who concluded: ‘The effort made by a chairman to ensure that meetings are properly conducted may well be the most

¹⁹⁸ ‘When he has listened to the brothers' advice he should consider it carefully and then do what he decides is best. We have said that everybody should be summoned to take part in the discussion because the Lord often reveals the better course to a younger person....It is up to the abbot to decide what he thinks is the best course, and then the others must accept this’. Caroline White, trans. *The Rule of Benedict*, 2007 Penguin, (Harmondsworth; Penguin Classics text only version 2016), pp.14–15.

¹⁹⁹ Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, *The Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance* (the Cadbury Report), (London: Gee, 1992).

valuable contribution he makes to the good of his company.²⁰⁰ This, suggests Cadbury, is something of an invisible skill, but one which he believes is crucial:

It is decisive because to obtain full value from a meeting of any kind is a difficult task.

While diligent preparation beforehand by the chairman is essential, there is no way of knowing in advance just how a meeting will develop. We are talking about a collective process and a dynamic one. Everything turns on the way in which people react to the ideas under discussion and to each other.²⁰¹

The chairman's task is to keep the discussion moving forward until it has achieved all that it can, then to bring matters to a conclusion and to ensure that the conclusion is acted upon.²⁰²

As a corollary, while these examples show that while the individual decision-maker at the apex of an organisation or community may engage counsellors, or even the whole community, in considering the issues to be decided; it is important to be aware that just because these participants are party to the deliberations, they do not, ultimately, have decision-making authority. So, for instance, in referring to those Japanese and other companies which use Quality Circles to engage staff and other stakeholders in decision-making, it is important for an academic to be aware that the decision-making authority of the Circle members is highly circumscribed and is contingent on the delegation of authority by their superiors.²⁰³ Indeed, Guillermo Grenier

²⁰⁰ Stanley Dixon, 'The Art of Chairing a Meeting', *Accountant's Digest*, (Winter 1975/76), quoted in Adrian Cadbury, *Corporate Governance and Chairmanship, a Personal View* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.79.

²⁰¹ Cadbury, *Corporate Governance*, p.79.

²⁰² Cadbury, *Corporate Governance*, p.79.

²⁰³ Edward E. Lawler and Susan Albers Mohrman, 'Quality Circles After the Fad', *Harvard Business Review*, 63:1 (Jan-Feb 1985), , pp. 65-71.

describes how participation in Quality Circles can be deployed by management as a tool for worker-control.²⁰⁴ Similarly, Diane Hopkins, an urban planner, discusses how a local authority or developer's 'consultation' with stakeholders may actually disempower the participants and the local community. She identifies 'co-option that acts to reduce the power of particular groups by tying their involvement to co-ownership of the resulting plan.'²⁰⁵ Also:

Inclusive planning processes can be initiated to appease minority stakeholders, while at the same time ensuring that they favour the established power-holders. Such processes can also mask inequality, because they appear to involve all interests fairly in the decision-making process.²⁰⁶

Management writers such as Bob Monks and Handy provide useful insights about the conduct of meetings with stakeholders and the commonly occurring reservation of decision-making by trustees and other insiders. Handy points out that this is inimical to good decision-making and that it also obviates the exercise of reasonable scrutiny.²⁰⁷ In an organisation or group where there is a culture of accepting the leadership's recommendations, the wider body is thereby ceding power to the centre, and relinquishing its own agency and decision-making authority.

In his appraisal of the shortcomings of corporate boards in America, and their failures of corporate governance in relation to the 2008 economic crisis, Monks, a past head of the Henley Centre for Governance, offers a critique of board functioning which is relevant to this

²⁰⁴ Guillermo J. Grenier, *Inhuman Relations: Quality Circles and Anti-Unionism in American Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

²⁰⁵ Diane Hopkins, 'The Emancipatory Limits of Participation in Planning: Equity and Power in Deliberative Plan Making in Western Australia', *Town Planning Review*, 81:1(2010), 55-81, p.77.

²⁰⁶ Hopkins, 'The Emancipatory Limits' p.77.

²⁰⁷ Handy, *Understanding Organizations*.

examination of British Quakerism.²⁰⁸ He makes the point that shareholders have minimal influence over the decisions of the board and of the corporate executives. In most companies, the annual general meeting is something of a charade: the majority of the people in the room have no power to affect policy, however much they argue, and however many shares they represent.

If the members of the board are responsible for governance, then who, asks Monks, is responsible for critically auditing the decisions of the governance body, and for sanctioning their financially, morally or strategically dubious decisions? He concludes that no-one is, until the moment when crisis is finally identified, sometimes only when financial or moral bankruptcy is imminent. At best, individual trustees or the entire board may be dismissed, but Monks points out that unwise or questionable decisions tend still to be upheld.²⁰⁹

This is a situation which was recognised long before the formulation of the Cadbury Code, by analysts such as Peter Drucker, who in a critique of the role of the board and of board members (in an essay vividly titled ‘The Bored Board’) argues:

Whenever an institution malfunctions as consistently as boards of directors have in nearly every major fiasco of the last forty or fifty years, it is futile to blame men. It is the institution that malfunctions.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Robert A.G. Monks, ‘Governance at a Crossroads: A Personal Perspective’, *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*, 8:1, (2011), pp. 62–76 doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/jdg.2010.23>.

²⁰⁹ Bob Monks & Nell Minow, *Corporate Governance*, (5th revised edn. London: Wiley, 2011). They suggest, p.74, that ‘Involved owners (that is, shareholders) [Or, in a voluntary or faith organisation, members] are the ‘last best chance’ for an internally governed corporate structure. Ownership as presently construed is so diffuse and often so transient that even the most committed owners have virtually no say in corporate governance and often must endure onerous expenses even to be actively ignored. Therefore, two classes of ownership are both desired and needed: passive shareholders, who choose not to exercise ownership rights and stewardship shareholders, who already bear a fiduciary responsibility for funds under their management’.

²¹⁰ Peter F. Drucker, ‘The Bored Board’, *Toward the Next Economics, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 107–122 (First published *The Wharton Magazine*, Fall, 1976)), p.110.

Richard Chait, William Ryan and Barbara Taylor explain there are three modes of governance which a trustee board should provide: fiduciary (the stewardship of assets), strategic, and generative (creative leadership). While they acknowledge that all three governance roles are needed in an organisation, they suggest that ‘most boards work most of the time in fiduciary or strategic modes, as that is where they are most comfortable’.²¹¹ The generative mode, in which boards provide a less visible, but valuable, frame of leadership, is far more delicate, and more difficult and demanding to achieve. Instead, they suggest that in many organisations, trustees tend to function more and more like managers.²¹²

Chait *et al* suggest that a key reason why boards commonly fail in their responsibilities is because they find it easier to engage in practical management activities than in the governance and oversight for which they are actually responsible. They contend that most board members, and most boards, are easily distracted from the core tasks of governance:

If governance is the use of authority to set an organization’s purpose and to ensure that it serves those purposes effectively and efficiently, then it follows that some of what boards do is not actually governing.²¹³

²¹¹ Richard Chait, William Ryan & Barbara Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Non-Profit Boards* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2004), p.9.

²¹² ‘This will no doubt strike many as an unlikely claim since the number one injunction of governance has been that boards should not meddle or micromanage. Despite this oft-repeated admonition, much of the prescriptive literature of trusteeship actually focuses squarely on operational details; budgets, audit, facilities, maintenance, fundraisers, program review and the like. To discharge that work, most boards structure committees around portfolios of line officers: finance, human resources, program evaluation and customer/client relations, for example’. Chait, Ryan & Taylor, *Governance as Leadership*, p.4.

²¹³ Ryan & Taylor, *Governance as Leadership*, p.16.

This phenomenon is also observed by Cadbury, who points out that ‘what most surveys of director opinion reveal is that chief executives would prefer their outside directors to focus on matters of governance, rather than on the formulation of strategy’.²¹⁴

In a review of the effectiveness of the UK Corporate Governance Code, Andrew Keay emphatically distinguishes between transparency, a board’s reporting of decisions to stakeholders; and accountability, which entails the board submitting its actions for critical appraisal by the stakeholders – which he finds regrettably uncommon in corporate and public life:

So often it seems that committees and commentators have confused accountability with transparency. Transparency, which is clearly laudable, involves ensuring openness about what it done. It does not involve justifying what is done, as does accountability.²¹⁵

In summary, there is ample evidence in the literature of governance, both in the private and voluntary sectors, that the existence of a governing board is not, as such, an automatic or necessary passport to good governance. Instead, it is ironic but true that the introduction of a governing board structure may actually diminish decision-making participation and responsibility on the part of the wider group of stakeholders or members (or, in the private sector, shareholders).

²¹⁴ Cadbury, *Corporate Governance and Chairmanship*, p.87.

²¹⁵ Andrew Keay, ‘Accountability and the Corporate Governance Framework: from Cadbury to the UK Corporate Governance Code’, *SSRI Electronic Journal*, (2012), p.40. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.2143171.

2.3.6 Decision-making in face-to-face and egalitarian organisations

Hierarchy and leadership are features of all social groups, though there are some that explicitly deny or minimise the centralisation of authority and power. Given that the Society of Friends has a narrative (see Chapter 3) which affirms that it is a ‘leaderless group’,²¹⁶ it is helpful to refer to the writing of social anthropologists, such as Audrey Richards, Adam Kuper, David Graeber and Jason Hickel,²¹⁷ who have observed leadership and authority in egalitarian societies. In particular, this study refers to the work of Audrey Richards and Adam Kuper, who in the late 1960s convened a series of anthropological studies of councils in action, ranging from the sittings of the elected members of local authorities to the deliberations of a clan or tribe.

Richards defines councils by three attributes:

- A gathering of people for deliberative purposes, the membership of which is limited by the rules of the society to persons of a particular category, eg sex, status, clan, residence;
- Usually, though not always, held in a particular place – whether a council chamber or under a specific tree – which may become symbolic of the activity held there; and

²¹⁶ Pink Dandelion, ‘Quakers: A Leaderless Group?’, *Friends Quarterly*, 27:6 (April 1993), 274–284.

²¹⁷ Audrey Richards & Adam Kuper eds., *Councils in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). Adam Kuper, ‘Council Structure and Decision-making’, in *Councils in Action*, ed. by Audrey Richards and Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 13–28; David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland Ca. & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009); *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York/London: Spiegel & Grau (Random House); Allen Lane (Penguin UK), 2004); Jason Hickel, ‘Liberalism and the Politics of Occupy Wall St’, *Anthropology of This Century*, 4. 2012 ISSN 2047-6345. [accessed 14 August, 2015].

- A body which accepts a series of conventions governing the behaviour of its members in the course of its deliberations.²¹⁸

Richards points out that council meetings can be used as indices of a people's activities, interests and values. The number and type of issues discussed over a series of meetings provides a fairly reliable indicator of the group's interests and concerns. Also:

Council meetings provide an index of the tensions and conflicts underlying the accepted rules of social structure. There may be changing alliances between one group and another, explosive utterances, or again special devices to prevent explosive and perhaps disruptive utterances, or special arrangements to forestall overt criticism of established authorities.²¹⁹

Kuper classifies the kinds of decisions made in a council meeting either as 'authoritative' or 'unauthoritative'.²²⁰ He identifies three categories of unauthoritative decisions, which, he suggests, are very common:

- Obvious failure to reach any resolution; a matter is debated, possibly at length, but it is finally dropped or postponed indefinitely, or the meeting breaks up in disarray. (Kuper suggests that this is characteristic of councils which lack effective sanctions, particularly when faced with a matter which is not very urgent, or which lack a strong chairman with an external power base.)

²¹⁸Audrey Richards, 'The Nature of the Problem', in *Councils in Action*, ed. by Audrey Richards & Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 1–12, pp. 1–3.

²¹⁹ Richards, 'The Nature of the Problem', p.5.

²²⁰ Kuper, 'Council Structure', p.21.

- The functionally ambiguous decision, which is calculatedly open to at least two reasonable but conflicting interpretations. (Kuper distinguishes this from the inadvertently ambiguous decision, which can be rectified by the council again debating the matter and issuing a clearer statement of its meaning.)
- The ceremonial decision, which presents itself as a decision though it is not one in the full sense. Kuper cites the example of British town council meetings, where decisions are not normally made on the floor of the chamber. ‘The effective decision is taken before the assembly meets by the caucus of the governing party. The formal debate and voting is a ceremonial affair. It has various functions – but they do not include decision-taking.’²²¹

Kuper explains: ‘Where an ambiguous decision is formulated, ... public dissention [sic] is minimized, conflicts are apparently resolved. However, as with the ceremonial decision, a decision is only apparently being made. If action is to follow an effective decision must be made elsewhere.’²²² He cites Max Gluckman,²²³ who noted in his work among the Barotse that their judicial processes tended to be conciliating, seeking to effect a compromise acceptable to, and accepted by, all the parties. Kuper explains that this reflected the authorities’ concern ‘to maintain the web of multiplex relationships within which the parties live.’²²⁴

²²¹ Kuper, ‘Council Structure’, p.21.

²²² Kuper, ‘Council Structure’, p.22.

²²³ Max Gluckman, *The Judicial Process Among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955).

²²⁴ Kuper, ‘Council Structure’, p.23.

The social anthropologist David Graeber cites a great variety of different contexts in which a form of consensus decision-making is practiced – from face to face societies to the US fire service and large manufacturers such as Harley Davidson. ‘But’, he warns:

examples like that also make it clear there’s consensus and there’s consensus; you do even very egalitarian-seeming process within what’s still a totally hierarchical, top-down organization and the process becomes a form of coercion or oppression, a way of constantly forcing you to pretend to agree with decisions in which you really had no say.²²⁵

Graeber²²⁶ and Jason Hickel²²⁷ have both observed the structure and functioning of the protest movement ‘Occupy’, which has as one of its cornerstones inclusive, shared decision-making. In his discussion, Graeber cites examples of face-to-face societies which have managed to sustain themselves over generations without any formal government, and where ‘most decisions were made by consensus by informal bodies, leadership was looked on at best with suspicion.’ He observes: ‘Egalitarian societies tend to place enormous emphasis on creating and maintaining communal consensus.’²²⁸ Graeber refers to the social anthropologist Pierre Clastres, who argued that non-hierarchical societies such as Amazonian Indian groups had not simply failed to evolve

²²⁵ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland Ca: AK Press, 2009), p.307.

²²⁶ David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*. (New York/London: Spiegel & Grau (Random House); Allen Lane (Penguin UK), 2004).

²²⁷ Jason Hickel, ‘Liberalism and the Politics of Occupy Wall St’, *Anthropology of This Century*, 4 (2012).

²²⁸ Graeber, *Democracy Project*, p.23.

into societies with a recognisable form of state power, but instead in many instances had taken active steps to prevent the accumulation of power.²²⁹

In his account of the protest movement 'Occupy', Graeber writes enthusiastically about his own experience of consensus-seeking, in terms which are excitingly familiar to a Quaker reader.²³⁰ He talks about the community building, trust-building process of consensus-seeking, and values the individual's right to veto a particular way forward, which thus leads to a general reconsideration and a new, widely-agreed, outcome. However, L.A. Kauffman, another academic observer of Occupy, points out that while the consensus process has considerable virtues, it also has flaws:

It favours those with lots of time to spend in meetings. Unless practiced with unusual skill, it can lavish excessive attention on the stubborn or disruptive. Occupy Wall St has opened up for question so much that was previously taken as given, may it do the same with its own methods.²³¹

Kauffman identifies an intrinsic limitation of consensus seeking, which one might suggest is also intrinsic to the Quaker business method:

Perhaps it's something about the reverence with which consensus is sometimes discussed in activist circles, leaving those who find it unwieldy to feel like apostates. Perhaps it's

²²⁹ Graeber, *Democracy Project*, p.22; Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, Robert Hurley, Abe Stein (translators) (New York: Zone Books, 1989 [*La Société contre l'État. Recherches d'Anthropologie Politique*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1974]).

²³⁰ Graeber, *Direct Action*, pp. 302–308. He quotes a workshop participant: 'Consensus is not just a way of coming to a decision, or, really, not even primarily a way of coming to a decision. It's a process. A way for people to deal with each other which puts the emphasis on mutual respect and creativity, and which tries to make sure no one is able to impose their will on others and that all voices can be heard. As a process, it's not even necessarily the most efficient way of coming to a decision. I think – I guess most of us think if we are involved with DAN [Direct Action Network] – that it's the process that will produce the wisest decision., but I'd actually say that even if sometimes it doesn't, it's more important to reach the decision through a truly egalitarian process than to come up with the absolute ideal course of action every time. Decisions can usually be changed later anyway and there are times when I'd even say it might be better not to reach a decision at all.'

²³¹ L.A. Kauffman, 'The Theology of Consensus', in *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* ed. by Astra Taylor, Keith Gessen (London: Verso, 2011), p.49.

the assumption embedded in the process that decision results from differing views (which can be reconciled) rather than competing interests (which often cannot).²³²

Also with reference to Occupy, Astra Taylor cites one of the speakers at a New York rally, Slavov Žižek: ‘He also said some stuff people need to hear, like acknowledging, for example, the fact that leaderless movements still have leaders, they’re just not out in the open.’²³³ In Occupy, ‘as with any ostensibly leaderless movement, there seem to be things happening behind the scenes’.²³⁴ Taylor concludes:

From what I can tell, decisions are being made by various committees and working groups and by a wide variety of autonomous actors, not just through publicly deliberated group consensus. All things considered, I’m most sympathetic, and impressed, when I think of the general assembly as a kind of political theatre.²³⁵

This imagery of theatre, performance and passive audience is also used by Søren Kierkegaardt in his critique of the Lutheran church. He described the tendency of the institutional church to view its members as ‘audience’ and the worship experience as a ‘show’. It is better, he said, to view God as the audience and all the people equally accountable for the ‘performance’ of worshipping in Spirit and in Truth.²³⁶

²³² Kaufman, ‘Theology of Consensus’, p.49.

²³³ Astra Taylor, ‘Scenes from an Occupation’ in AstraTaylor; Keith Gessen, and editors from n+1? (eds): *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* (London, Verso, 2011), pp. 63–73 p.64.

²³⁴ Taylor, ‘Scenes from an Occupation’, p.65.

²³⁵ Taylor, ‘Scenes from an Occupation’, p.65.

²³⁶ Søren Aarbye Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom’*, trans. Lowrie, W., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946 (1855), https://archive.org/stream/kierkegaardsatta00kier/kierkegaardsatta00kier_djvu.txt [accessed 23 April .2017].

Social anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz²³⁷ and Victor Turner,²³⁸ who focus on the role and performance of religious ceremonies in face-to-face societies, identify that in any religious or social group, a highly formalised large gathering – such as the Yearly Meeting – fulfils both its formally stated purposes and also other, unstated ones. This work has been taken forward, for instance, by Stanley Brandes, whose research on the social uses and purposes of ritual is grounded in his analysis of Mexican fiestas.²³⁹

Another social anthropologist, David Turton, points out that in many face-to-face communities (and organisations), whether or not a decision is made, or well made, the mere fact that deliberations happen is itself community-building: ‘In a debate we see the local community coming together not so much to make a decision as to make itself.’²⁴⁰ In his observations of the Mursi, in South Sudan, he notes:

debates are explicitly seen as ends in themselves, as a ‘good thing’ whether or not there is any particularly pressing matter to be discussed. The content of the debate, from this point of view, is less important than its form: the coming together of the men of the local community to reaffirm their commitment to a set of common values which are dramatized in the oral performance of the speakers. The feeling seems to be that ‘the community that debates together stays together.’²⁴¹

²³⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

²³⁸ Victor Turner & Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia, 1978).

²³⁹ Stanley Brandes, *Power and Persuasion: Fiestas and Social Control in Rural Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

²⁴⁰ David Turton, ‘How to Make a Speech in Mursi’, in Peter Ian Crawford and Jan Ketil Simonsen, *Ethnographic Film Aesthetics and Narrative Traditions*. Proceedings from NAFA 2 (Aarhus: Interventio Press, 1992), p.165.

²⁴¹ Turton, ‘How to Make a Speech’, p.163; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co; Finnegan, 1926), p.36.

In any ritual event, and indeed in any group or organisation, different members of the group have different roles. Some are initiators or authority figures; others may have minor or passive roles. Both Jean-Paul Sartre²⁴² and Erving Goffman²⁴³ talk about the wearing of masks – not literal ones, but occupational ones – and the easy fallacy that individuals and groups fall into, of responding to the mask, or to the persona associated with the role, rather than to the individual fulfilling that role. This can afflict the mask-wearer too, and the analysis in Chapter 6 of this study of decisions made by trustees or by individual staff members does not focus on the personalities of the individuals concerned, but on the way in which these individuals, aided and abetted by the organisation's responses, inhabit their roles.

2.3.7 Managing dissent

Sometimes it is easy for an outsider to see that a decision made in a committee or council is a poor one, and the question arises how this comes to happen, particularly if the group is not visibly subservient to a leader endowed with charismatic or status authority. The concepts of 'anchoring' and of 'groupthink' are both useful when analysing such situations. Anchoring is a form of cognitive bias, described by Jason Chertoff, Abhishek Biswas and Divva Patel as:

²⁴²Casey R. Bukala, 'Sartre's Phenomenology of the Mask', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 7:3, (1976), 198-203, DOI: 10.1080/00071773.1976.11006469.

²⁴³Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

the reliance of human beings on the first piece of information offered (ie the anchor) when making decisions. Once an anchor is set, there is a bias towards interpreting other information around the anchor.²⁴⁴

This is of course a delight to advertisers, politicians and other agents marketing products or particular viewpoints; but Chertoff *et al* point out that it is a real pitfall for doctors attempting clinical diagnosis – as it is indeed for any decision-making group or individuals.

Handy suggests that the Orwellian²⁴⁵ phenomenon ‘Groupthink’ occurs when too high a price is placed on harmony and the morale of the group, so that loyalty to the group and its policies or to the group consensus overrides the (common) sense of each member. He suggests that the doctrine of collective responsibility is invoked to stifle objection; and that victims of groupthink set themselves up as a body guarding the decision, for instance invoking phrases such as ‘he needs all the support we can give him.’²⁴⁶ Two French economists, Roland Benabou and Jean Tirole, have recently expanded upon the concept of ‘groupthink’, and their work, too, has resonance for anyone examining the conduct of Quakers in Britain. They suggest that groupthink is most extreme:

when people within groups face a shared fate; when choosing to break from a group is unlikely to spare an individual the costs of the group’s errors. If an individual politician’s fortunes rise and fall with those of his party’s, breaking from groupthink brings little individual benefit (and may impose individual costs). The group has an

²⁴⁴ Jason Chertoff, Abhishek Biswas & Divva Patel, ‘Anchors Aweigh’, *The Lancet*, 390:2 (September, 2017), p.922.

²⁴⁵ George Orwell, *1984* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1949; Repub. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2000).

²⁴⁶ Handy, *Understanding Organizations*, p.163.

incentive to delegitimise independent voices, such as statistical agencies or budget watchdogs. So the unanimity of views can be hard to escape until it contributes to a crisis.²⁴⁷

2.4 Chapter summary

A review of recent academic literature about the Religious Society of Friends in Britain shows that while there is quite a lot of material which informs this study, this project is addressing issues which have not yet been confronted by other researchers in the field of Quaker Studies, nor are they commonly dealt with in studies of other denominations or faith groups.

Academics such as Dandelion, Hampton and Montemaggi have traced a decline over the past thirty years in a shared understanding of Quaker beliefs and practices, continuing a tendency which, as in other faith groups, started well before the thirty-year span of this study. Dandelion has recently explored the phenomenon of internal secularisation due to shifting belief in greater detail, but he does not confront the phenomenon of internal secularisation in relation to organisational change, nor in relation to changes in state requirements.²⁴⁸ Yarlett's insight that the proliferation of non-theism within the group is incompatible with the practice of mystic religion is, I suggest, helpful to understanding how the practice of a 'gathered' meeting for worship for business (see Chapter 3) has been laid aside in the quest for efficiency.

²⁴⁷ *The Economist*, 10 June, 2017, p.74 ; Roland Benabou & Jean Tirole, 'Mindful Economics: The Production, Value and Consumption of Beliefs', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30:3 (Summer 2016), 141–164. https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/rbenabou/files/mindful_economics_jep_2016.pdf [accessed 9 September, 2017].

²⁴⁸ Dandelion, *Cultivation*.

The second part of this chapter discusses a fairly eclectic mix of academic writing in the disciplines of practical theology, sociology, social anthropology, and management studies; all, I hope, providing tools for understanding the phenomena occurring within the Religious Society of Friends, as discussed in the following chapters. It finds that in other religious groups too there has been little sustained work to examine how managerialism may have ‘crowded out’ theologically-infused or worshipful understandings about the congregation and the organisation of the church. Margaret Harris’s distinction between the role of members of a church or congregation and that of volunteers in an organisation is I think extremely helpful for understanding how the gifts and engagement of the individual church member may be marginalised through better management.²⁴⁹ The discussion of the strengths and flaws of consensus decision-making in the wider context, and of the role of the committee chair and company board will help inform the reader’s engagement with Chapter 3, which discusses the principles of Quaker decision-making as part of ‘Gospel Order’, and with Chapter 6 which focusses on the introduction of trustees within the Society of Friends. Adam Kuper’s typology of ceremonial and other ‘illegitimate’ forms of decision-making is particularly useful in the discussion in Chapter 5 of the management of Yearly Meeting sessions:²⁵⁰ as are the concepts of ‘anchoring’ and ‘groupthink’.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Harris, ‘A Special Case of Voluntary Associations?’

²⁵⁰ Kuper, ‘Council Structure and Decision-making’.

²⁵¹ Benabou & Tirole, ‘Mindful Economics’.

CHAPTER 3: GOSPEL ORDER: THE THEOLOGY OF AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

3.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter introduces the concept of ‘Gospel Order’: the theological understanding which informed early Quakers in their development of organisational processes and structures. The Quaker ‘business method’ of shared discernment of what might be ‘the will of God’ in any particular decision is discussed with reference to the insights of Quaker and other academic observers in terms of its actual use and application.

Some of the challenges to gospel order, and to discernment in Quaker meetings today are discussed; including the profile of modern Quakers as a group which does not have a uniform understanding of Quaker practice and of its decision-making practice as worship. Even the use of silence is not always simple, or constructive. The chapter briefly discusses the role of the clerk and of other Quaker leaders, and the ways in which personal ambition, or leaders’ commitment to a particular outcome, can render the process of discernment meaningless. It concludes with a discussion of the scope, or lack of it, for using the Quaker business method in a secular setting.

3.2 Gospel Order

Seventeenth century Quakers used the term ‘Gospel Order’ to describe the community and organisation of the Quaker movement, which they understood as reclaiming the life and fire of

the early Christian church.²⁵² Several twentieth and twenty-first century Quaker theologians have attempted to amplify and interpret this concept for modern participants.

Douglas Gwyn²⁵³ points out that the theology and practice of early Quakers was that of a ‘realising eschatology’ – in other words, they believed that the Kingdom of Heaven was unfolding, and, however partially, its fulfilment could be brought about through people living out Christ’s precepts in their daily life and in the organisation of their worshipping community.²⁵⁴

The 1656 ‘Epistle of the Elders at Balby’ provides a checklist of instructions about church organisation and practicalities.²⁵⁵ It concludes (without attribution) with a verse from Paul’s second letters to the Corinthians.²⁵⁶ John Punshon observes:

The use of this text, 2 Cor:3.6, summarises the whole approach to church order. The appeal is not made on the authority of the elders, as if issuing instructions. The appeal is from the light in them to the light in Friends. Their words are to be followed because they

²⁵² ‘So they come to inherit and possess the joyful order of the joyful gospel, the comfortable order of the comfortable gospel, and the glorious order of the glorious gospel, and the everlasting order of the everlasting gospel – the power of God which will last for ever and outlast all the orders of the devil and that which is of men or by men’. (George Fox, *Cambridge Journal*, ii p.128, quoted in William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1919), p.252.

²⁵³ Douglas Gwyn, *The Apocalypse of the Word: the life and message of George Fox* (Friends United Press: Richmond, Indiana, 1986); *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995).

²⁵⁴ George Fox, for instance, in 1658 enjoined Friends to: ‘keep your meetings and dwell in the power of truth, and know it in one another, and be one in the light, that you may be kept in peace and love in the power of God, that you may know the mystery of the gospel: and all that you ever do, do in love; do nothing in strife, but in love, that edifies the body of Christ, which is the church’. (QF&P (1996) 3.30; from George Fox, (1698) *Epistle 162*, 1658).

²⁵⁵ Available online at <http://qhpress.org/texts/balby.html>. Accessed 18 September 2018.

²⁵⁶ 2 Cor 3.6: ‘Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding these may be fulfilled in the Spirit – not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life’.

express Truth, not obeyed because they are written from the meeting, the question of disagreement will, therefor, not arise²⁵⁷

A twentieth century Quaker theologian, Sandra Cronk, explains that Gospel Order covers ‘three general areas: the inward life of worship and discernment, the interior functioning of the church-community (and the Quaker home which, in some ways, is seen as a smaller version of the meeting community) and the social testimonies of Friends’.²⁵⁸ Cronk notes that ‘George Fox’s teaching about Gospel Order explored what it meant to be a people of faith who listened and responded to the Inward Teacher in daily living’,²⁵⁹ and she describes Gospel Order as embodying a prophetic witness to the larger society, ‘the inbreaking of God’s new order’.²⁶⁰

Lewis Benson, another mid-twentieth century Quaker writer, explains that the organisation of the visible church contributes to this purpose of witness:

Quakers call this Gospel Order, and it is central to the way in which the Quaker church is organised; it is the one feature which all meetings and yearly meetings have in common. It is the working out of an ecclesiology in which Christ exercises his offices of leader, shepherd, priest, teacher, overseer, directly within the meeting, choosing whom he will to speak and act for him on each occasion. Gospel Order refers to the structures, the way in which meetings relate to each other; to the business, the maintenance of gospel life in the church and the world; and to the way in which the meeting is conducted, in worship seeking the will of God. At such a meeting, Christ presides and leads, and the meeting

²⁵⁷ John Punshon Portrait in Grey, *A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984) p.77.

²⁵⁸ Sandra Cronk, *Gospel Order* (Wallingford, PA., Pendle Hill, 1991 (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 297), p.3.

²⁵⁹ Cronk, *Gospel Order*, p.9.

²⁶⁰ Cronk, *Gospel Order*, p.9.

submits itself to his authority. This can be seen as a way of the cross for it requires the surrender of personal will and opinion in order to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When such a meeting is ‘gathered’ it can become a power-house of the Spirit; transformed itself, it becomes an instrument through which God can change the world.²⁶¹

Benson points out that the ways in which Quakers worship, order their church and make decisions are a living-out of how they understand their relationship to the kingdom of God. He adds ‘Though we may fail in our practice, we cannot lightly set aside our tradition: it is not a mere ‘heritage’ but a witness to the Truth that has been revealed to us’.²⁶²

A contemporary British Quaker theologian, Janet Scott, emphasises the importance to Quakers of ‘the presence in the midst’ (Matthew 18:20).²⁶³ That is to say, the locus of the church is the presence of Christ in the worshipping community itself, not in the sum of the individuals gathered together. Like Cronk and Benson, Scott is claiming Gospel Order as a resource for Quakers today, rather than describing the concept as an historical curiosity.

In a paper for the Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations, written in the 21st century, at least partly with the intention of reconciling ‘Christocentric’ and non-theist Quakers,

²⁶¹ Britain Yearly Meeting: *Book 1 of Documents in Advance of Yearly Meeting Gathering to be held 25 July–1 August 2009 at the University of York* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2009), p.4.

²⁶² Quoted in: Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance 2009*, p.5.

²⁶³ Janet Scott, ‘The Source of Authority, the “Presence in the Midst” and Quaker decision making’, in *Proceedings Quaker Theology Seminar 1996/7 ‘Authority and Tradition’*, ed. by Rex Ambler (QTS in Association with Woodbrooke College, Birmingham, August 1997), pp. 47–63. Scott describes what she understands as the Quaker hermeneutic: ‘that the Bible is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the minds and experience of people and communities, that these people have expressed their experiences in words and ways influenced by their own culture, not all of which are relevant to other cultures; that the Bible is a witness to the Holy Spirit, so that we must take it seriously, especially when it challenges us in ways that are uncomfortable: but that it is the experience of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and worship that enables us to read the Bible aright and to understand what it teaches’ (p.51).

Ben Wood refers to the Quaker insight that ‘Christianity is not a notion but a way’;²⁶⁴ pointing out that Jesus, in Matthew’s gospel doesn’t ask his potential new disciples whether they believe in God the Father Almighty, he simply says ‘Follow me’.²⁶⁵ In other words, suggests Wood, ‘this open invitation is not a call to adopt a particular theological stance, it is a call to loving-practice’.²⁶⁶ Early Christianity – and early Quakerism – is in its essence an experiential religion rather than one reliant on theological argument. Similarly, as Wood points out, generations of Quakers have had, and lived by, the insight, not always shared by their contemporaries in other denominations, that the Light of Christ, ie the presence of God, illuminates everyone of good will, regardless of whether they define themselves as Christian or have even heard about Christianity.²⁶⁷

Interestingly, the concept of ‘Gospel Order’ was referred to in a Yearly Meeting Minute in 2005, and it is reproduced in Chapter 15 of QF&P, in a chapter detailing the role and responsibilities of trustees:

The law may assume that authority for determining action passes to the trustees and the meeting may choose to do this. However, under **Gospel** Order, the ultimate authority will still lie with the gathered meeting.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ QF&P 1.2 .2 (Advices & Queries).

²⁶⁵ *The Bible*: Matthew 4:19.

²⁶⁶ Benjamin J. Wood, ‘*Declaring the Wonder of God in Our Own Tongues*’: *Framing a Theological response to Quaker Non-theism*, Paper for Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR October 2013), p.9.

²⁶⁷ ‘When Penn spoke of the “humble, meek, merciful, just and devout souls” being “everywhere of one religion” he was not expressing some tinselly religious relativism but rather articulating the character of the Spirit as he understood it through the Apostolic witness. The same can be said of the fondly quoted statement by Fox that ‘Christ hath enlightened every man that comes into the world; he hath enlightened the Turks, Jews and Moors’ (Wood, *Declaring the Wonder*, p.5).

²⁶⁸ QF&P 15:03.

The discussion in Chapter 6 of this thesis examines the extent to which this conclusion has been heeded in the subsequent history of trusteeship and of the role of the Yearly Meeting in the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

3.3. The Quaker Meeting for Worship, and Meeting for Worship for Business

Within the Religious Society of Friends, the Meeting for Worship has historically been understood to consist of a group of people sitting in contemplative silence, waiting together for divine inspiration - in which case they might speak a prayer or other ministry aloud.²⁶⁹ Only a small proportion of the formal, corporate, religious life of the Religious Society of Friends is conducted in Sunday or weekday meetings for worship. Since the inception of the Religious Society of Friends, meetings to discuss practical or strategic issues have been framed as 'Meetings for Worship for church affairs', taking only a slightly different format to the Sunday meetings for worship which are not expected to yield purposeful decisions.

²⁶⁹ An injunction from an early Friend, Alexander Parker, in 1660, is included in QF&P: 'The first that enters into the place of your meeting, turn in thy mind to the Light and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord, and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same Light, and wait in the Spirit, and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the Light. Those who are brought to a pure still waiting on God in the Spirit, are coming nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is a spirit and in the Spirit he is worshipped ... In such a meeting there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here; and this is the end of all words and writings to bring people to the eternal living Word'. *QF&P* (5th ed 2013 2.41 Alexander Parker, 1660).

One of the very earliest Quakers, Edward Burrough, offered counsel about the behaviours and attitudes which are preconditions for a Quaker business meeting to function successfully, and about how Friends should proceed in situations where there is disagreement or discord:

Being orderly come together, [you are] not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God, not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and over-reach one another in discourse as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, not deciding affairs by the greater vote. But in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of truth and righteousness all things [are] to be carried on; by hearing, and determining every matter coming before you, in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity; – I say, as one only party, all for the truth of Christ, and for the carrying on the work of the Lord, and assisting one another in whatsoever ability God hath given.

if at any time, any matter or occasion be presented to the meeting which is doubtful, or difficult, or not within the judgment of Friends then assembled (they not having full knowledge or experience of the matter depending) that then, on such occasions, the judgment be suspended.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Edward Burrough, 'A Testimony Concerning the Beginning of the Work of the Lord' (1662) in *Letters, &c. of Early Friends Illustrative of the History of the Society from nearly its origin to about the period of George Fox's decease, with documents respecting its early discipline, also epistles of counsel and exhortation, &c* ed. by Abram Rawlinson Barclay (London: Harvey & Doughton, 1841), p.305. *QF&P* 2.87.

Similarly, in 1678 the members of Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting provided advice about the conduct of meetings for church affairs:

For the preservation of love, concord, and good decorum in this meeting, 'tis earnestly desired that all business that comes before it be managed with gravity and moderation, in much love and Amity, without reflections or retorting, which is but reasonable as well as comely, since we have no other obligation upon each other but love, which is the very bond of our society; and therein to serve the Truth and one another; having an eye single to it, ready to sacrifice every private interest to that of Truth, and the good of the whole community.

Wherefore let whatsoever is offered be mildly proposed, and so left with some pause, that the meeting may have opportunity to weigh the matter, and have a right sense of it, that there may be a unanimity and joint concurrence of the whole, and if anything be controverted that it be in coolness of Spirit, calmly debated, each offering their reasons and sense, their assent or dissent, and so leave it without striving. And that but one speak at once, and the rest hear. And that private debates and discourses be avoided, and all attend the business of the Meeting. So will things be carried on sweetly as becomes us, to our comfort: and love and unity be increased: and we better serve Truth and our Society.²⁷¹

These two, relatively long, extracts are useful in that between them they lay out the understanding and processes of the Meeting for Worship for Business which were present in the very early days

²⁷¹*QF&P* 19:57 Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting, 1678.

of the Society of Friends, and which continued to be the canonical version of the purpose and conduct of Quaker business meetings at least until the end of the Twentieth Century. Indeed, the procedures for speaking in the Meeting advocated in the second paragraph of the Wiltshire extract, have been further formalised and elaborated in the Twenty-first Century. However, the context advocated by Burrough, the ‘wisdom, love and fellowship of God’ is arguably less well understood, and less central to the life of the Society of Friends today, given the high proportion of Quakers who do not subscribe to the imminence of God which seemed so obvious to early Quakers.²⁷²

An eighteenth century American Friend, John Woolman, whose ministry against slave-holding and other forms of exploitation was often unpalatable to his hearers in English and American meetings, understood very clearly that a meeting for worship for business was not a debating chamber. Participants in a meeting for worship for business should have minds that are rightly prepared, and to clearly understand the issue they are commenting about. He warned that ‘If selfish views or a partial spirit have any room in our minds, we are unfit for the Lord’s work’.²⁷³

Friends in the twentieth century affirmed that the insights and the assumptions in the advices quoted above still informed the decision-making deliberations of the Society of Friends in

²⁷² ‘The intent and holy design of our annual assemblies, in their first constitution, were for a great and weighty oversight and Christian care of the affairs of the churches pertaining to our holy profession and Christian communion; that good order, true love, unity and concord may be faithfully followed and maintained among all of us’. Yearly Meeting in London, 1718, *QF&P* 6:03.

²⁷³ John Woolman, *A Journal of the Life and Travel of John Woolman in the Service of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: John Cruikshank, 1774). Quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting, *Book 1 of Documents in Advance of Yearly Meeting Gathering to be held 25 July –1 August 2009 at the University of York* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2009).

Britain. Herbert G. Wood spoke in his Swarthmore²⁷⁴ lecture in 1920 about the place of the Quaker business method in Quaker religious thought and experience:

The essence of the method is not the absence of votes. It is the assumption that the right leading is to be expected from taking counsel together, from each one contributing his or her best. It takes it for granted that where men care for the common good and seek God's guidance, no majority will desire to coerce, and no minority to obstruct. It presupposes a teachable spirit in all, a shared conviction that the corporate decision may be and should be richer and truer than any individual judgement.²⁷⁵

The process of the assembled group identifying and then uniting in a shared decision is described as 'discernment', and it can be identified as a particular charism of the Religious Society of Friends, which has shaped its worship and its shared spiritual and community life. Anyone present at a business meeting, a 'seasoned' Quaker or a newcomer, someone with status within the group or with none, may speak to an issue; and it is incumbent upon them to do so if they feel inspired to. The 'clerk' of a meeting is not a chairperson in the secular sense; they have the task of drawing the deliberations together, and of reflecting back to the meeting the sense which they have developed of the probable decision. This is presented in the form of a minute, which the meeting may accept or reject, but will most probably modify until it is deemed to be an acceptable record of the emerging decision.

²⁷⁴ A keynote address given at the time of Yearly Meeting, usually by an eminent ('weighty') Friend, on spiritual, moral or social concerns of Friends.

²⁷⁵ Herbert G. Wood, *Quakerism and the Future of the Church* 1920 Swarthmore Lecture (London: The Swarthmore Press, Ltd., 1920), pp.61–62.

Quakers seek 'God's guidance'. Not only do they not vote, they do not seek consensus. The theologian John Punshon explains that although the word 'consensus' is often used to describe Quaker decision-making, it is not a useful term: 'It is not the value of consensus that is at issue, but whether that is what a Quaker business meeting should be seeking . . . Friends are concerned not to obtain a decision in their own wisdom, but intend instead to seek the guidance of God'.²⁷⁶ Similarly, Michael Birkel emphasises that in a meeting for worship for business, Quakers are looking for unity, not for consensus:

The experience of coming to unity can be a sacred moment, especially if the decision concerns a weighty matter. It can be a revelatory moment, when the community feels confirmed that it has been truly guided by the Holy Spirit. It might be compared with the words of consecration among Christians who observe the eucharist with a real belief in the presence of God.²⁷⁷

This understanding of the meeting for worship for business persisted at a national level throughout the twentieth century and beyond. In 1984 the Yearly Meeting affirmed that in this and in other business meetings, Quakers were seeking the will of God.²⁷⁸ The current version of

²⁷⁶ John Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition: Some Aspects of Quaker Spirituality*. Swarthmore Lecture (London: Quaker Home Service, 1990).

²⁷⁷ Michael Birkel, 'Leadings and Discernment' in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. by Stephen W. Angell & Pink Dandelion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.245–259, p.256.

²⁷⁸ 'In all our meetings for church affairs we need to listen together to the Holy Spirit. We are not seeking a consensus; we are seeking the will of God. The unity of the meeting lies more in the unity of the search than in the decision which is reached. We must not be distressed if our listening involves waiting, perhaps in confusion, until we feel clear what God wants done' (London Yearly Meeting, 1984 *QF&P* 2:89).

the Book of Discipline (QF&P), still describes ‘meetings for worship for business’ in theocentric terms, as summarised in No 14 of the Advices & Queries.²⁷⁹

However, QF&P is now seen to be ‘outdated’,²⁸⁰ and the introduction proffered in the *Documents in Advance* of the Yearly Meeting Gathering in 2009 is phrased in a way which is perhaps deliberately unthreatening to any Quakers uncomfortable with Christian or theological language:

Discernment is a spirit-led process, an experience for which we must be well-prepared, both personally and collectively. Our experience of discernment takes many forms: the sense of ‘right-ness’ we feel when a decision has been reached is the result of a disciplined process which may have taken many twists and turns, through silent expectant waiting at business meetings, social interaction, personal reflections and shared experiences of many kinds. When we engage in discernment we are committing to laying everything before one another, in a kind of spiritual listening by which we test the vision we discover and share together. Robust discernment does not end at the door of the meeting house, but permeates our lives.

The many facets of the Yearly Meeting Gathering are preparation for the business and therefore a part of the discernment process. Some Yearly Meeting business requires

²⁷⁹ Currently, 42 queries, advices, and aphorisms for individual and group self-examination (para. 1.1 to 1.42 in QF&P (5th ed 2013). These are the successors to what were originally [three] queries to be asked annually of each Monthly and General Meeting, and answered verbally in the Yearly Meeting. Para 1.14 reads: ‘Are your meetings for church affairs held in a spirit of worship and in dependence on the guidance of God? Remember that we do not seek a majority decision, or even consensus. As we wait patiently for divine guidance our experience is that the right way will open and that we shall be led into unity’.

²⁸⁰ The preparations for the next version of the Book of Discipline began formally in 2014. See Chapter 5.

deliberations in a Yearly Meeting session, but other issues may be explored more experimentally.^{281, 282}

This is a much more tentative understanding of meeting for worship for business than that of Alexander Parker, Herbert Wood or even the 1984 Yearly Meeting minute. Its reference to a ‘spirit-led process’ is at most universalist; proffering what might be interpreted as a New Age respect for spiritual impulses, but no longer expressing a faith in Christ, nor in a God with a discernible will. It is not a statement proffering the understanding by an explicitly theocratic group; rather, it asserts the value of mutual respect and sharing. I suggest that it expresses a markedly changed and secularised understanding of Quakerism.

3.4 Discernment and decision-making

The discussion above indicates that the process of seeking the Will of God, and of seeking unity, has historically been an important aspect of the spiritual life of the Quaker community. A distinguishing feature of the nested hierarchy of local, regional and national meetings (see Chapter 1) is that any member is eligible to take part, and to take a full part, in the business meetings.²⁸³ And since the early days of the Society of Friends, there have been committees for particular purposes, to which individuals are appointed, usually for their expertise or as

²⁸¹ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance 2009* p.44.

²⁸² Quakers use the term ‘experimentally’ in a very specific way, referencing a C17th usage perpetrated for instance by George Fox (‘And this I knew experimentally’).

²⁸³ Until 1898 meetings were gendered, and men and women met separately; the main Yearly Meeting was, of course, the men’s meeting (See Chapter 4).

representatives. These committee meetings, which have been expected to operate similarly to the wider business meetings in their prayerful seeking of the will of God, are not open to other members; though many of the committees have been appointed with a view to reporting to a local, regional or national Meeting (the Yearly Meeting or Meeting for Sufferings), sometimes in developing proposals for the wider body to consider, and accept or reject. The general principal in the management of the affairs of the church has been that the community as a whole, at local or at national level, makes decisions together, seeking the will of God about the issue under consideration.

In Meetings for Worship for Business, and in making decisions affecting their own daily life, early and more recent Quakers have sought to practice ‘discernment’, which the Quaker sociologist Alastair Heron describes as ‘the process of perceiving the will of God through close attention to the leadings of the Spirit’.²⁸⁴

The Quaker practice of discernment does not necessarily just occur within a single business meeting; another key component of Quaker decision-making has been that potential issues for action, ‘concerns’, are tested within a meeting for worship for business in the local meeting or committee within which the concern first arose, and that the concerns, and the recommendations for action, are forwarded to a higher, more authoritative body, for review and discernment by a wider group. This practice has been a distinguishing characteristic of the Society of Friends since its early days, and the discipline for an individual or of a committee of submitting one’s own enthusiasms, and what one might assume to be inspiration from God, for testing in a meeting for

²⁸⁴ Alastair Heron, *The British Quakers 1647–1997* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 1997), p.21.

worship has been one of the ways in which the Society has protected itself from the whims of forceful and charismatic individuals since at least the 1660s.²⁸⁵ Birkel points out that 'Discernment demands ongoing vigilance and the particulars of a leading may develop as circumstances change. Because of the human propensity for self-deception, the wisdom of the larger community enhances clearness'.²⁸⁶

Quakers recognise that a decision which is taken at a particular meeting, with a particular group of Friends present, is not necessarily the last word on the topic; it is only what the Meeting can concur on at that time.²⁸⁷ So some matters recur at local or national business meetings until they are eventually resolved.²⁸⁸

3.5 The Challenges of the Quaker Business Method

In its very essence the Quaker Business Meeting was conceived of as, has been understood as, a prayerful occasion, at which the individual and the group have sought to take forward the Will of

²⁸⁵ A notable early example is the separation of the Society in 1661 from John Perrot, who asserted that he was inspired by God to actions not endorsed by the worshipping community. Michael Birkel explains that 'Friends from their beginnings were aware of the need for interior vigilance, to sharpen one's awareness of the ever-present possibility of self-deception. For Quakers, discernment is the means to distinguish between an interior direction of divine origin and an impulse of lesser derivation, such as a desire to look clever or feel important'. Michael Birkel, 'Leadings and Discernment', in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. by Stephen W Angell & Pink Dandelion (Oxford: OUP, 2013) p.256.

²⁸⁶ Birkel, 'Leadings', p.255.

²⁸⁷ *QF&P* 3:07.

²⁸⁸ The Quaker stance on slavery, for instance, took years of deliberation at Yearly Meetings between 1722 and 1783. At local level a Meeting might change like a weathercock over the matter of whether children should come into Meeting at the beginning or at the end of worship.

God for that community at that time. But if that is not the premise, and intention, of the meeting, John Punshon points out:

Clearly, if people do not believe there is a God, or that God's word is ascertainable, this approach will be impossible. But Friends have always asserted that God's will *is* discoverable in this way. One of the ways of discerning it was through the guidance given to other members of the meeting. Hence they will attend meetings for business in a frame of mind which expects that the meeting will issue in unity, that guidance can come from anyone there, and, therefore, the participation of everybody is important.²⁸⁹

Regardless of the 'truth' of this theological position, it has an internal logic; and that where the members of the group share a common understanding that they are seeking 'the will of God' for that group at that time, the participants will be more likely to be sensitive to the insights of others, and to reflect carefully on their own opinions and preferences. However, given reality of the human condition, even in a group where all of the members are attuned to this theological understanding, on any particular day it is not necessarily true that they will all be 'waiting on the Lord', prayerfully, rather than giving expression to their own intellect and prejudices.

In the 1970s, an American Jesuit, Michael J. Sheeran, undertook a study of the way in which 'Meetings for Worship for Business' were conducted. He concluded that the key difference among Friends in their perception of the potential of the Quaker business method, and how it works in practice, is between those who have experienced a 'covered' (ie in England 'gathered')

²⁸⁹ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey; A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984).

meeting and those who have not.²⁹⁰ Similarly, in a handbook on the Quaker business method, a British Friend, Robert Halliday, describes his own early experience of business meetings:

It took me a while to understand the assumptions behind the Quaker business method; that the meeting gathered together to seek the will of God, or the Spirit, that there was no voting, that the individual inspiration was tested against the collective understanding of the meeting and that the collective understanding was not consensus but something much more vital, the will of the Spirit for the meeting. Like most people who come into the Society from outside, I learned the practice before long [*sic*] I learned much theory. I sat through my first business meetings feeling that there was a rightness about the process, but not always sure why, and to be honest, not much caring, what counted at that stage was that it *felt* right.²⁹¹

However, as Sheeran points out, there are many Quakers who have never experienced a gathered business meeting. Peter Wells refers to the findings of a Membership Review Committee in 1983, which sought the views of people who joined the Society in 1976. It found that:

Adverse comments were fairly numerous on our ways of doing business. Some thought our method of reaching decisions to be a placating of the argumentative, rather than a pooling of everyone's views, there being usually no effort to find if the silent majority

²⁹⁰ Michael, J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983). Sheeran (p.110) defines a 'covered' meeting as one where 'an awareness and presence of God is felt in its midst'.

²⁹¹ Robert Halliday, *Mind the Oneness: The Foundations of Good Quaker Business Method* Swarthmore Lecture 1989 (London: Quaker Home Service, 1991), p.7.

concurred. The absence of declared consent from those present was thought to be undemocratic and conducive to deviousness.²⁹²

Hampton, in her analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey, found that many Friends were sceptical of the Quaker business method, at least as they had experienced it for themselves. Among the three distinct categories which she identified among contemporary Friends, 74% of 'Traditional' Quakers, 39% of Liberal Friends, and 11% of Non-Theist Friends believed that Quaker business meetings 'sought the will of God'. Some 12% of Traditional Friends, 17% of Liberals and 30% of non-theists thought that Friends' business meetings sought consensus.²⁹³ This suggests a divergence from the traditional Quaker understandings charted above and expressed in in QF&P.

Robert Halliday comments that Quakers can be reluctant to voice dissatisfaction about the quality of a business meeting, charitably choosing to think that the problem may lie within themselves and their state of mind that particular day, rather than acknowledging that it was simply a boring meeting 'destructive of individual enthusiasm, producing decisions that were neither helpful nor responsive to the Spirit, where the atmosphere was closed and tense. Little power struggles erupted from time to time, and there was always the feeling of being rushed'.²⁹⁴ Halliday suggests that meetings which were 'not as bad as all that but not what they could be' were becoming more common.²⁹⁵ He concludes that if his observations were correct, the situation was

²⁹² Peter Wells, 'The Meaning of Consent in Quaker Business Meetings', *Friends' Quarterly*, (1996), p.207.

²⁹³ Hampton, *British Quaker Survey*, p.24–30.

²⁹⁴ Halliday, *Mind the Oneness*, p.2.

²⁹⁵ Halliday, *Mind the Oneness*, p.3.

serious, as the spiritual quality of business meetings is a reliable marker of the state of spiritual health of the group and of the organisation.

Keith Redfern²⁹⁶ observes that the level of corporate discipline in a Quaker business meeting will depend to a large extent on the level of understanding of the Quaker method within the group; it is so much harder to use it if it is not well understood by the people present at the meeting. He also points out that relatively few Friends have experienced the habits of more than one local or monthly meeting. So, whether its business meetings are good or poor, the individual will assume that this is the common Quaker practice.

It is almost impossible for a Meeting to achieve a satisfactory, discerned, decision if it is rushed. An American Friend, Barry Morley, is emphatic on this point: 'Quaker business procedure, subjected to a clock, is always corrupted'.²⁹⁷ This is illustrated in some of the cases discussed in Chapter 5.

In my own experience of Quaker business meetings both locally and nationally, at least some times, and in some committees or meetings on most occasions, neither prayer nor consensus-building is applied. This may or may not be a recent phenomenon. Sometimes really the only features of a Quaker meeting for worship for church affairs which are retained are the short silences at the beginning and end of the meeting, and contemporaneous minuting of any decisions –and even the contemporaneous minuting may fall away in local committee meetings.

²⁹⁶ Keith Redfern, 'Our Meetings for Business', *Friends Quarterly*, 28:2, (April 1994), pp. 60–66, p.61.

²⁹⁷ Barry Morley, *Beyond Consensus; Salvaging Sense of the Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet no 307, 1993).

For some Quakers, a straightforward committee meeting using standard committee conventions is likely to be more efficient and less obfuscatory than a meeting conducted within the shell of the Quaker business method. In a meeting where the form of a Quaker meeting is retained and its essence rejected, all of the cumbersomeness and other shortcomings of a Quaker business meeting are retained, and, if anything, amplified. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss instances of Quaker decisions where the phenomena of groupthink, anchoring and evasion of inquiry (see Chapter 2), have all occurred.

In Quaker business meetings, including those conducted by a clerk and congregation all committed to Quaker processes, there is perhaps an especially Quakerly tendency to groupthink: In a religious group where harmony is valued, the instinct is to assume the best of the speaker introducing the topic. Also, there is a very strong presumption against speaking unless one truly feels moved – and some of the most articulate and well-informed Quakers present may favour that spiritual discipline over the opportunity to freely express their opinions – or their reservations - about a particular proposal.

Further, there is a very strong convention that no-one should speak twice in the consideration of any particular item in the course of the meeting, also, if a point has already been made by someone else it should not be reiterated. So it is not unlikely that a perfectly sound view put forward early in the meeting will be overlooked when the matter is drawn to a close, unless the clerk is meticulous in their summing-up. There is also an expectation in a Quaker business meeting that agreement will be achieved.²⁹⁸ All of these factors inhibit debate and disagreement;

²⁹⁸ Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, p.93.

and a clerk who does not wish to foster critical analysis has ample opportunity for limiting a free-ranging examination of an issue.²⁹⁹

Among Friends, or indeed in any group seeking general agreement or consensus, there is a tendency to conservatism. It is unlikely that a radical solution to any concern will be adopted if it is necessary to obtain assent from everyone present. Ultimately, in a Quaker business meeting, the quest for unity is commonly deemed more important than achieving what might objectively be the best possible solution. Chapter 5 illustrates that there is a strong cultural history of suspicion when a meeting clerk (chair) drives through a decision to which even a small minority of the group are not reconciled. Instead, the accepted Quaker response is to delay the decision, and come back to it another day, perhaps after more research has been done, or more information is available (see Burrough's advice, above). However, Chapter 5 also shows that in recent years there have been instances where the clerks have discounted this principle, and have either finalised a decision based on a majoritarian view, or one which the group originating the item envisaged in the first place. In some American Yearly Meetings there is an opportunity for an individual with a strongly-held opinion to 'stand aside from the Minute' – in other words, assenting that the resolution reached is indeed the opinion of the Meeting as a whole, but one that they personally do not assent to.³⁰⁰ In Britain there is no such practice, and unless the clerk is willing to abide by traditional Quaker practice (see above) and lay aside the proposed decision or to keep the matter open until a more mutually satisfactory outcome can be attained, the only

²⁹⁹ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, pp. 203–207.

³⁰⁰ William P. Taber & Michael L. Birkel, *The Mind of Christ; Bill Taber on Meeting for Business* (Wallingford PA. Pendle Hill Publications, 2010).

option the strongly-opinionated individual has is, however reluctantly, to bow to the discipline of accepting what the group as a whole has agreed.

One of the reasons why the phenomena of groupthink and anchoring are so beguiling in Quaker business meetings is that nowadays the group as a whole rarely comes well-prepared to business meetings; perhaps especially to those meetings where the actual content of the meeting is only one among several reasons for attending. Other reasons, often more important to the individual, may include ritual behaviour (especially at Yearly Meeting), habit, status (eg in the case of national committees), and conviviality. The topic-introducers, the clerk and the Agenda Committee³⁰¹ are all aware that only a minority of those attending the Yearly Meeting will have read the papers in advance, and that a much smaller minority will have familiarised themselves with the topic more broadly, for instance by wider reading, discussion, debate, or practical engagement. This flies in the face of Burrough's advice mentioned above, to shelve consideration of any item which 'is doubtful, or difficult, or not within the judgment of Friends then assembled ('they not having full knowledge or experience of the matter depending') that then, on such occasions, the judgment be suspended'.³⁰² Modern Friends perhaps tend to interpret the requirement for informed judgement as simple assent to the introducer's proposals.³⁰³

³⁰¹ The committee which, nowadays, has spent about a year preparing for the Yearly Meeting. At the beginning of the twentieth century the agenda was assembled the day before the event began, from topics put forward by the various functional committees which had met during 'committee week', the week leading up to the Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends: *London Yearly Meeting during 250 years* London, Society of Friends, 1919)

³⁰² Burrough, *Testimony*, 1662.

³⁰³ Dandelion refers to a 'self-confessed cynic' who suggested that 'If Quakers voted, 22 per cent would carry the minute. The other 78 per cent are shy, fed up, or not listened to'. Dandelion comments 'Non-involvement can masquerade as piety in a group where sitting in silence is so highly valued'. (Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*) p. 252.

3.6 The uses of silence in Quaker business meetings

The Quaker discourse reiterates that silent worship is the medium within which Quaker Meetings for Worship for Business are held.³⁰⁴ As in any other meeting for worship, the rubric is that words (of ministry) arise from the individual and the group's silent waiting on God, the 'Inward Teacher', the 'Inner Light'. As Geoffrey Durham and Geoffrey Hubbard both observe, Friends often recount anecdotally that they were on the edge of their seat with a piece of ministry they felt moved to deliver, then found that someone else had just said it, perhaps better.³⁰⁵ Both in a 'regular' meeting for worship, and, nowadays, in a business meeting, there is a convention that even if an individual is burning with something to say, Friends leave a gap between each episode of ministry, giving it time to sink in, and to be absorbed by the group.

However, in real life, silence is not all worship, and other individual and group experiences are also occurring, as in any other committee meeting or decision-making gathering in human communities. The British theologian, and Quaker, Rachel Muers echoes the social anthropologist Audrey Richards (see Chapter 2) when she reminds us that:

Even if silence is not just the same as speech, particular acts of keeping silence do "say" something. We know that, sometimes, "silence gives consent," and that sometimes it rather refuses consent; we encounter silences of approval, disapproval, disquiet, contentment. Particular acts of keeping silence do not *only* indicate the element of the pre-

³⁰⁴ *QF&P* 3:02.

³⁰⁵ Geoffrey Durham, *Being a Quaker, a Guide for Newcomers* (London: Quaker Quest, 2013); Godfrey Hubbard, *Quaker by Convincement* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) *QF&P* 2.60–65.

given and of the non-determinate in all communication, they are also, themselves, communicative.³⁰⁶

Dandelion notes that the clerk is the primary agent with power to shape the processes and the outcomes of the business meeting. The clerk chooses which Friends to call to speak, how many may do so in the consideration of any particular item, how the draft minute is phrased, and how much time is allocated to correcting it. Dandelion observes that ‘the control of silence is fundamental to the clerk’s authority’.³⁰⁷ If a decision is contentious, the clerk may ‘call for extra silence to restore the worship mode and to help the meeting find unity’. Also:

Clerks decide whom to silence and whom to call. They decide when to interrupt a contribution and, equally contentious, when not to. If lunchtime is approaching, Clerks can either decide to finish before, or prolong the matter by carrying it over. It was observed that by carrying on to the end of a pre-determined agenda at the end of a long day, unity is often found through exhaustion.³⁰⁸

One way of preventing the discussion from becoming heated, and also of limiting the number of speakers in a session, is by the clerk inserting pauses up to several minutes in duration, before identifying the next speaker from the floor. This ponderous, highly ritualised behaviour is, however, a relatively new innovation within Britain Yearly Meeting. Up to the mid twentieth century, Friends stood to speak as they might in a meeting for worship – and whoever spoke first

³⁰⁶ Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.8–9.

³⁰⁷ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.204.

³⁰⁸ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.204.

took the floor. But at a fairly undisciplined Yearly Meeting, in 1960,³⁰⁹ John Harding, the staff member responsible for convening a session on ‘Central Africa; is there a Christian Contribution?’:

(with the Table’s consent) suggested that there should be a short pause between contributions from the floor, so as to give all Friends time to consider them carefully. This was also a matter of courtesy. Friends had tended to jump to their feet one after another without giving consideration to the words of the previous speaker, and without carefully weighing the possibility of a previous contribution making their own one inappropriate or unnecessary. John Harding’s humble plea was acted upon during the session to a helpful degree.³¹⁰

However, Friends in the body of the meeting can also influence the proceedings, though not with quite the same certainty that their will shall prevail. As Dandelion points out, ‘Timing is critical in business meetings’;³¹¹ and an experienced Friend may choose carefully at which point in the deliberations to stand and seek an opportunity to speak – too early and their contribution might be overlooked as the tide of comment sweeps onward, too late and the clerk may have already closed the opportunity for comment. Some Friends who think it likely that they may hope to speak on an item may plan ahead, and choose to sit in a part of the room which is easily visible to

³⁰⁹ See Chapter 5.

³¹⁰ *The Friend*, 10 June 1960, p.790.

³¹¹ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.217.

the clerk, or to wear bright colours so as to be easily identified. Occasionally, as Dandelion describes, silence may be used spontaneously by Friends as ‘an explicit method of control.’³¹²

One of the unintended functions of Quaker silence is that, unlike speech, it provides a veil for any divisions within the Meeting, and for any discrepancies in belief among the members of the group. Dandelion suggests that:

Through the invisibility of belief, fostered by the culture of silence, change in individual and group belief is both accommodated and concealed... The lack of a vocal confession of faith, or a structural requirement to subscribe to any set of words, allows silence over matters of belief to continue. This silence is supported by a fear of self-induced ostracism. Where Friends do speak out, it is individuals who, within the concept of continuing revelation, may change their view. The larger-scope picture of theological alliances remains obscured.³¹³

3.7 Authority and leadership in the Religious Society of Friends

The primary source of authority in the Religious Society of Friends has been understood by them to be the Divine, as directly experienced by each individual and by the worshipping group.

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, explains that:

³¹² ‘A loud and verbose Friend was stopped mid-sentence by the gradual entry of those around her into a position of worship during her contribution. Eyes were lowered, attention withdrawn. The difference between this diffuse sanction and the traditional prayerful listening to those giving ministry was really one of context, and the clear differentiation of the action made with the attention given to previous speakers’ (Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.257).

³¹³ Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p.110.

in these solemn assemblies for the churches' service, there is no one presides among them after the manner of the assemblies of other people; Christ only being their President, as He is pleased to appear in life and wisdom in any one or more of them; to whom, whatever be their capacity or degree, the rest adhere with a firm unity, not of authority, but conviction, which is the divine authority and way of Christ's power and Spirit in his people, making good his blessed promise, that he would be in the midst of his, where and whenever they met together in his name, even unto the end of the world. So be it. ³¹⁴

Lucy Beamish describes early Friends' understanding:

For them it [authority] did not lie either in Creeds and articles of Faith, or in the text of the Bible. It was inward rather than outward, dynamic and vital rather than dependent on form and order, and the duty of early eighteenth century ministers was not to uphold the discipline of the Society so much as to impress their hearers with the importance and authority of their own individual response to the Voice within, which, if they kept obedient, and above all, humble, would never lead them astray'. ³¹⁵

That final couple of clauses provides the caveat which allowed the Society to exonerate itself, and perhaps even to continue to perpetuate itself, in the wake of personality clashes, power-struggles, and embarrassing over-enthusiasm on the part of its leaders and other members;³¹⁶

³¹⁴ William Penn, *A brief account of the rise and progress of the people called Quakers in which their fundamental principle, doctrines, worship, ministry and discipline are plainly declared to prevent the mistakes and perversions that ignorance and prejudice may make to abuse the credulous : with a summary relation of the former dispensations of God in the world by way of introduction* (London: T. Sowle, 1694), *QF&P* 19:58.

³¹⁵ Lucia K. Beamish, *Quaker Ministry 1691 to 1834* (Oxford: Lucia K. Beamish, 1967).

³¹⁶ E.g. the Perrot separation in 1661, the Wilkinson-Storey separation in the 1670s, the entry of James Naylor into Bristol in 1656 (deemed blasphemous in a debate by the British Parliament, which sentenced him to 300 lashes and other torture). See Paul Anderson, 'Continuing Revelation, Gospel or Heresy?' *Good and Evil; Quaker*

Friends were enjoined to lay any ‘concerns’ or proposals for action before a gathered meeting, to be tested through the shared (Divinely led) insight of the group.

Simon Western, in his discussion of leadership, refers back to the very early history of the Society of Friends, and concludes:

There were certainly individual ‘Transformative leaders’ ‘personalities’ and ‘religious entrepreneurs’ in the Quaker movement. However the leadership was not a solo effort, nor was it held only by the most influential individuals in the movement; it was also co-created from within. As said before, the leaders were organisational synthesizers as well as charismatic preachers with organising skills. The movement itself evolved using the Meeting for Worship as its centrepiece, a place for community worship, reflection and discernment towards personal and collective action. The belief in a ‘priesthood of all believers’ meant that anybody could minister in the meetings and this socially embedded in the movement the concept of a dispersed leadership.³¹⁷

They didn’t attempt to gain political power nor to promote a programme of change but they lived and ran their communities as they envisioned a spiritual egalitarian society should be. For the Quakers it was a realised eschatology. They were creating the kingdom of heaven on earth in the present.³¹⁸

Perspectives, ed. by Jackie Leach Scully & Pink Dandelion (Ashford: Ashgate, 2000, Repub. London & New York: Routledge, 2016), pp.15–30.

³¹⁷ Simon Western, *A Critical Analysis of Leadership: How Fundamentalist Tendencies can be Overcome* (unpublished DPhil Thesis, Department of Organisation and Work Technology, Lancaster University Management School, 2004), p.344.

³¹⁸ Western, *Critical Analysis*, pp.344–345.

Whilst the locus of final authority in the Religious Society of Friends is not, and never has been, a single individual such as the Queen, Archbishop, or Pope, Quaker commentators such as Alf Barratt Brown³¹⁹ and Dandelion³²⁰ refer to ‘the paradox of leadership in a leaderless group’: the Religious Society of Friends is awash with leaders. There are Meetings for Worship for Business at local and monthly meeting levels, and at national level, either for the management and maintenance of that tier, or for the furtherance of a particular cause in national and local committees. Almost every Monthly Meeting has a committee of elders and of overseers, with responsibility, respectively, for the wellbeing of the corporate spiritual life of the group and of individuals within it. There are property committees, library committees, nominations, refreshment, funeral and garden committees; committees for the promotion of sustainability and for the attrition of slavery; there are committees for the care of children and for the care of finance and of meeting houses, and for the promotion of particularly Quaker concerns or ones which are shared with members of other faiths or the wider community. Every one of these committees has a clerk and committee members who have a particular sphere in which they have delegated responsibility either for the execution of a task or for making recommendations to the wider body at local, intermediate or national level. There is a high degree of leadership exercised in the activities of the Religious Society of Friends, if only by those individuals identified as office-bearers for the duration of a term of responsibility, usually a triennium, or sometimes just for a single year.

³¹⁹ Alfred Barratt Brown, *Democratic Leadership*. Swarthmore Lecture (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938).

³²⁰ Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, pp.194–195.

Also, in the Religious Society of Friends, as in any other organisation there are other, sometimes cross-cutting sources of leadership status as well as that derived from particular offices. Among Quakers, informal authority may be associated, for instance, with duration of membership, family antecedents, or historical or theological knowledge, and, perhaps most of all, personality. There are some individuals who, either in their own eyes or in the perception of others, are endowed with extra wisdom and spirituality. This phenomenon is demonstrated in situations where ‘weighty’ Friends, those with personal authority derived from their genuine holiness, forceful personality, or ancestral connections, may have more influence on the deliberations at a business meeting than a Friend whose source of authority derives from their position as, say, the clerk of a committee responsible for a particular agenda item. This is discussed in some detail by Dandelion,³²¹ who refers to the writings of a Swarthmore lecturer, Kathleen Slack:

[T]here are, always have been and always will be Friends who exercise greater influence than others, whose words are listened to with greater respect, whose guidance is sought more often, and whose views carry greater weight. In short there are those who exhibit certain qualities that mark them as leading Friends even if they should not be called leaders of the Society. These qualities may derive from a person as a person and not from the holding of a particular office or position and they may be controlled by the body corporate, but nevertheless they are there.³²²

It is clear that Quakers are not, as the rhetoric might suggest, a leaderless group. As well as a myriad of office-bearers there has always been a relatively small, informal, cadre of people who

³²¹ Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, pp. 212–215.

³²² Kathleen Slack, *Constancy and Change in the Society of Friends*, Swarthmore Lecture, 1967 (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1967), p.23.

have functioned as leaders and key decision-makers in the Religious Society of Friends.

Elizabeth Isichei wrote about the small group of people, mostly endowed with wealth, education, family tree and social position, who effectively formed a leadership caste in the Religious Society of Friends during the nineteenth century. In a body which consisted of some 14,000 to 15,000 people, Isichei identified that most of the deliberations at the Yearly Meeting, the central decision-making annual gathering, which then attracted between 700 and 1,100 people, were shaped by a mere 42 individuals, who spoke most frequently and who dominated the committees.³²³

In his 1949 Swarthmore lecture, Roger Wilson, the General Secretary of the Friends Relief Service during WW2, and one of the most accomplished and analytic leaders in the Religious Society of Friends in the twentieth century, reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of Quaker management. Rather than suggesting that Friends are a leaderless group, he describes the Society of Friends as an organisation where there is an equality of moral authority between all the members.³²⁴ This is reminiscent of St Paul's description of the church community as equally valuable, though differently endowed, parts of the body,³²⁵ However, Wilson is clear that this shared potential for moral authority is something that must be honed through the processes of discernment; and the discernment requires informed deliberation, not just simple good intentions.

³²³ Elizabeth A. Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³²⁴ Roger C. Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern*; Swarthmore Lecture (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1949), p.35.

³²⁵ 1 Corinthians 12: 12–20.

3.8 Personal ambition

Roger Wilson welcomed onto his staff and committees members endowed with insight and initiative, but he was wary about anyone with a propensity to exercise personal ambition in the context of Quaker work: '[T]here was one quality which, when manifest, was quite incompatible with Friends' relief work. That was hunger for personal power, or any sense of personal ambition'.³²⁶

Wilson presents his warnings about leadership and discernment in Yearly Meeting sessions in theocratic terms, but the principles of 'right ordering' which he discusses apply, really, to any general meeting which a committee or interest group hopes to influence:

To mortal man and fallible committees, all of whom often want to outrun the measure of their gifts, Yearly Meeting can be a sore trial. It can be very slow, even at times of true inspiration; it can be incalculable, either because material is badly presented or because it is tired, or because its membership is not faithful.³²⁷

If a Committee hides from Yearly Meeting the truth of its work, its work will be bad. It is not difficult, in the short term, to confuse or hoodwink Yearly Meeting. But to just the degree that this is done, those responsible are not laying their service before the Lord in Worship, and the work will not be what it purports to be. It becomes something else – the

³²⁶ Wilson, *Authority*, p.25. He adds: This seems to me almost, if not quite, the only weakness that disqualifies absolutely for Quaker Service as it should be – and for the very simple reason that those with ambition for power cannot see the work as the Lord's and themselves as His servants to use as He wills. They cannot consider objectively the situation and what is demanded by it of all those involved in it. For them prestige, authority, status, successful personal manipulation, matter more than God's will. And that will not do in a company of God's servants.

³²⁷ Wilson, *Authority*, p.37.

expression of the unanchored intelligences of the members, of the ambition of individuals, of the unreflecting traditionalism of those who have ceased to think critically of what they are doing. A good and sensitive committee will present its material helpfully because it has itself been aware of the need to develop the sense of the meeting under the guidance of God. It is one of the more remarkable evidences of the unifying and creative powers of God that a large gathering like Yearly Meeting can often almost effortlessly pick up a thread from any small group of its members who have truly wrestled and prayed beforehand about matters that were ripe for presentation to the large body. As a simple matter of experience, Yearly Meeting in a waiting and worshipping state is a wonderfully sure judge of what is truly of the Lord and what is merely notional, however intelligent.³²⁸

Wilson's remarks on Quaker leadership are entirely consistent with the assumptions and advices contained in the Book of Discipline.³²⁹ However, in recent years a different attitude to leadership in Quaker bodies appears to have taken precedence. This is perhaps encapsulated in the views put forward by an American Friend, Arthur M. Larrabee, a recent General Secretary of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In an address to Southwestern Yearly Meeting in 2007, and in a talk in an interest group meeting at the 2012 Britain Yearly Meeting, Larrabee spoke critically about 'Friends on the benches' who criticise or query decisions made by staff or in subcommittees, and he described the tension in a Quaker business meeting when what he described as 'spiritual entitlement' is present. This is the term he used to critically describe an individual's sense that their spiritual leading or concern should be taken account of, sometimes with a view to

³²⁸ Wilson, *Authority*, p.36.

³²⁹ The current version is QF&P (1996), 5th ed (2013). At the time of Wilson's lecture, the 1931 version of *Church Government* was in use: London Yearly Meeting, *Church Government; being the third part of Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain* (London: Friends Book Centre, 1931).

overturning decisions arrived at in committees, by Friends in paid or unpaid leadership positions.³³⁰

Larrabee gives expression to an attitude which has also been seen in Britain Yearly Meeting in recent years, an unwillingness for committee decisions to be scrutinised or changed by the wider body which thus finds that the advisory role of the committee has been replaced by the abstraction of decision-making power from the larger body to the smaller one.³³¹

3.9 The Quaker Business Method outside of a Meeting for Worship for Business

Nicholas Burton, a marketing lecturer at the Newcastle Business School, asks what the ‘distinctive Quaker Business Method’ can offer contemporary organisations, and wonders whether the Business Method is ‘a hidden gem, bequeathed by early Friends to contemporary business practice’.³³² However, at the very beginning of a paper laying out his proposition, he pinpoints the reasons why, I would suggest, it is either impossible or unlikely that the ‘Quaker way’ will or even can find purchase outside of a theocratic context:

While it is, frankly, a daunting task to try to capture the dense fabric of what characterises a ‘Quaker way’ of responsible business practice the *theology* and *process* by which Friends

³³⁰ Arthur Larrabee, *Leadership and Authority in the Religious Society of Friends*. J. Barnard Walton Memorial Lecture no. 44 (Melbourne Beach, Fla. Society of Friends, Southeastern Yearly Meeting, 2007), and Field Notes, Yearly Meeting 2012.

³³¹ This is of course not to contest that many committees have delegated authority for what is usually a limited range of operational decisions which need not come to the larger body except as matters for information.

³³² Nicholas Burton, ‘Quaker Business Method: A contemporary decision-making process?’ Friends Association for Higher Education Conference, 15 June, 2016, p.1.

conduct *Meetings for Business* deserves renewed attention given its potential relevance as a collaborative method of decision-making in today's increasingly complex business organisations.³³³

Although Burton identifies that the theology of a Quaker business meeting is important, he fails to recognise that the essence of the Quaker business method is in its theology, not in its processes, which, even in their ideal form but outside the theological frame, are little different from any consensus-seeking behaviour, or from a well-chaired meeting in any other context, where the chair is eager to reach the best-possible solution within the context, with contributions and eventual buy-in from the other meeting participants to the decisions reached (see the discussion in Chapter 2).³³⁴

A well-chaired meeting, attended by well-intentioned committee members respectful of each other's views and keen to agree on the optimal solution is not in itself a meeting using the Quaker business method. Nor can one say that a group such as Occupy is using the Quaker business method in its consensus-seeking. As Birkel explains,³³⁵ the Quaker business method is only practiced when all or many of the people present are prayerfully seeking divine guidance in the search for an appropriate way forward; and it also has to be recognised that there are many Quaker business meetings which are not conducted in this spirit. The main transferable characteristic of a Quaker business meeting is that the minutes of the meeting are composed and agreed, item by item, at the time, so there is no opportunity for an adroit committee secretary to skew the record of decisions

³³³ Nicholas Burton, 'Quaker Business Method' p.1. (original emphasis).

³³⁴ Also Charles Handy, *Understanding Organizations* (1976, 4th ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006); Adrian Cadbury, *Corporate Governance and Chairmanship, a Personal View* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³³⁵ Birkel, 'Leadings'.

made. This contemporaneous agreeing of minutes may be an admirable convention, but it can be time-consuming.³³⁶

So, in summary, while Burton proposes that Quaker decision-making practice might constructively be disseminated and used in other organisations, I am suggesting that this proposition is gratuitous. The essential feature of the Quaker Business Method is not that minutes are made and agreed in the course of the meeting, or that people's insights are dealt with courteously, but that it is a Meeting *for worship* for business, and, in Quaker theological terms the head of the meeting is not the clerk (or chair), but Christ.

Yet, as Burton suggests, there are plenty of features of a Quaker business meeting which are sensible good meeting practice, and which can easily be translated into a commercial, charitable, or public-sector setting. Several secularised versions of the Quaker business method have already been formulated, for instance Robert Greenleaf's conception of 'Servant Leadership', mentioned in Chapter 2, and in the work of a bestselling spiritual psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck.³³⁷ Also, closer in detail to the practices understood by Friends to be used in a Yearly Meeting session, there is the 'Q-bit' handbook,³³⁸ published in 2013 by the trustees of a Quaker NGO, Quaker Social Action, for its non-Quaker staff, clients and other stakeholders, reflecting on the Quaker conventions which infused the running of the organisation, and describing the Quaker business

³³⁶ Vide a meeting, ironically, of the 'Quakers and Business' interest group in 2017 attended by the author, which took just under an hour to agree a simple record of the day's events, which included no decisions.

³³⁷ Robert E. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977); M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

³³⁸ Quaker Social Action, *The Q-bit at the Heart of a Quaker-led Organisation* (London: QSA, 2013).

process in terms which someone outside of the Society of Friends might understand and find useful – just as Burton proposes.³³⁹

The handbook makes it clear that Quaker processes are ‘Spirit led’, but it acknowledges that that is a very general term, and that some Quakers find the concept of a personal God, or relationship with God, untenable. It asks of staff that they understand the Quaker position – or range of positions – but it does not ask of staff that they buy into it themselves. Their table of ‘The nuts and bolts of Quaker business methods – what is needed for them to work well’ extends in scope beyond the business meetings into the general running of the organisation.³⁴⁰

The key features which the QSA handbook identifies include:

- Trust: ‘Trusting the process includes fostering ownership of the process through involvement and engagement by members’; ‘holding outcomes lightly’ ‘Making sure that information is challenged and scrutinised so testing is seen to be alive in the process’.
- Skilful clerking: ‘The clerk is servant of the meeting with no personal agenda and is clearly an enabling role.’ ‘Good clerking models and encourages a quality of listening that ensures that everyone hears and feels heard equally’.
- Contemporaneous minuting: ‘The practice of writing, agreeing and owning the minute is vital. In this way the meeting owns the decision’.
- Clear and mindful processes: ‘Our own confidence in the process grows when we take care to make sure that there is clarity and transparency about: roles, responsibility,

³³⁹ Quaker Social Action, *The Q-Bit*.

³⁴⁰ QSA, *The Q-Bit*, pp.31–33.

processes, structures, delegation, representation, personal or professional tensions or dilemmas'.³⁴¹

While all of these features can be said to be integral to the canonical description of the Quaker business method,³⁴² none of them, except perhaps the contemporaneous minuting, are unique to the Society of Friends. Rather, they are aspects of any committee meeting in which integrity and mutual respect are valued.³⁴³

3.10 Chapter summary

It is important to understand the traditional view of the Quaker business method so as to understand the ways in which current practice and understanding might diverge from the original, and to formulate a view of the extent to which there has or has not been a fundamental shift towards the decision-making practices common in the wider society.

This chapter opened with a discussion of Gospel Order and other features of 'canonical' Quakerism. The term 'Gospel Order' has been used since the inception of the Society of Friends to refer to the community and organisation of the group, under the headship of Christ. Quakerism has been understood to be an experiential religion, in the practice of which the group seeks the guidance of God in its decisions. As recently as 2005 the Yearly Meeting minuted that whether or

³⁴¹ QSA, *The Q-Bit*, pp.31–33.

³⁴² See Peter Collins, *The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994).

³⁴³ Stanley Dixon, 'The Art of Chairing a Meeting', *Accountant's Digest* (Winter 1975/76).

not a new organisational tier, of trustees, was introduced to meet new legal requirements, ‘under Gospel Order’ the ultimate authority would still lie with the gathered meeting.³⁴⁴

The chapter explains that Quaker business meetings are traditionally held as meetings for worship for business, where the group seeks through ministry interspersing the silent worship, to discern God’s guidance, and to thus find unity on the way forward on any particular matter. This is not the same as arriving at a consensus, though in secular terms that may be what it is.

Historically the process of discernment about particular ‘concerns’ has generally been that a concern identified by an individual, a committee or a local meeting is gradually progressed upwards, for consideration in the widest group appropriate for making the final decision. At each tier, the meeting may modify a proposal before sending it onwards for decision, or they may decide that it does not have their backing; in which case the proposition may be abandoned, or it may be reflected on once again by the originating group.

A very real constraint to the meaningful practice of the Quaker business method, the waiting upon the Lord for guidance, is that an increasing proportion of Quakers ‘don’t do God’.³⁴⁵

Studies of belief and practice among modern Quakers, for instance by Heron,³⁴⁶ Dandelion³⁴⁷ and Hampton,³⁴⁸ show that at the vernacular level, many individuals do not subscribe to the Christian

³⁴⁴ *QF&P* 15:03

³⁴⁵ Vide the Labour Party in 2003; Colin Brown, ‘Campbell interrupted Blair as he spoke of his faith: ‘We don’t do God’’, *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2003, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html> Accessed 17 January, 2020.

³⁴⁶ Alastair Heron, *Our Quaker Identity: Religious Society or Friendly Society?* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 2000).

³⁴⁷ Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*.

³⁴⁸ Hampton, *British Quaker Survey*.

theology which informs the concept of Gospel Order, and, also, that many Quakers have not experienced a ‘gathered’ Quaker business meeting and are sceptical that it is possible.

Various researchers have observed that many Quakers nowadays do not perceive the business meetings as having any part in their spiritual life, nor in their experience of the Quaker community.³⁴⁹ In the 1980s Michael Sheeran observed that there were two kinds of Quakers, those who had or who had not experienced a ‘covered’ (in British parlance ‘gathered’) meeting for worship for business, and who were therefore sure or not that the decisions made in such a forum might lead to a spiritual unity and a successfully agreed outcome beyond what might have been achieved merely with the benefit of good will and good sense. At local or wider level, a Quaker group which does not include people who have themselves experienced the mutual satisfaction and surprise of an unexpected but appropriate outcome to gathered business meeting will not believe that it is possible, nor that it is possible for their group to achieve it.

As Kuper points out in relation to meetings in general, not just Quaker ones, it is difficult for a real decision to be made if the chair (or in Quaker terms ‘clerk’) and the presenters are over-invested in a particular outcome, and are steering the meeting towards it.³⁵⁰ It is also not generally possible to make a decision where there is real resolution and deep-seated agreement if the process is rushed, or halted abruptly due to the clock.

One of the challenges of the Quaker business method is that it is cumbersome and slow. In the worst case a Quaker business meeting can be tedious and boring. The silence of a business

³⁴⁹ Francesca Montemaggi, *The Spirituality of New Quakers* (London: QCCIR, 2018) pp. 3-56; Hampton, *British Quaker Survey*; Heron *Our Quaker Identity*.

³⁵⁰ Kuper, *Council Structure*.

meeting is not always worshipful; it can sometimes be a passive or resentful silence. It may be one which has been imposed by the clerk, perhaps to bring the meeting to order and back to worshipful reflection, or, as Chapter 5 shows, ceremonial silence may be imposed to limit the number of speakers on a contentious topic.³⁵¹

Within Christian terms, the primary source of authority in the Religious Society of Friends, both in terms of wisdom and of leadership, is held to be the Divine, as directly experienced by each individual and worshipping group. This understanding of course is modified or variably held in the less-explicitly Christian context of British Quakerism today. While there are no ordained leaders, many individuals occupy leadership roles in committees or local meetings; generally on a rotating-basis as appointments are usually for one or two terms of three years. There are also people who due to knowledge, wisdom or personality, have their own leadership status at least in some contexts. There is certainly scope within the Quaker community to exercise personal ambition, though neither that nor an individual or committee's commitment to achieving a particular outcome of a business meeting is conducive to a meeting's discernment nor to achieving unity and ownership of a decision.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the applicability, or otherwise, of the Quaker business method outside of the Quaker context, as advocated by contemporary academics such as Burton and Muers, and promulgated previously by authors such as Greenleaf and Peck.³⁵² While the Quaker business method does include features which are of course replicable elsewhere, such as respectful listening and contemporaneous minuting of decisions; its essence is in its theology

³⁵¹ Dandelion, *Sociological Analysis*, p.204.

³⁵² Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*; Peck, *The Different Drum*.

not in its processes. The core of the Quaker business method is that the assembled group is prayerfully seeking divine guidance in discerning the way forward.

Following this discussion of the Quaker Business Method and its relation to Gospel Order, Chapter 4 reviews the role of the Yearly Meeting in the structure and organisation of the Religious Society of Friends.

CHAPTER 4: THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN: QUAKER STRUCTURES AND THE ROLE, CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF THE YEARLY MEETING

4.1 Chapter Outline

Following the discussion of Gospel Order and of the Quaker business method in Chapter 3, this chapter discusses how the worshipful understanding of Gospel Order has been translated into the structures and organisation of the Religious Society of Friends.

The chapter opens with a brief history of the development of Quaker structures, and continues with a consideration of organisational changes which have occurred over the years. It then addresses the place of the of the Yearly Meeting in the life of the Religious Society of Friends; and it includes a discussion of some of the changing roles and processes associated with ‘leadership’ in the Society of Friends.

This all helps to inform the reader in preparation for Chapter 5, a discussion of case studies of events at Yearly Meetings marking some of the cumulative changes in the Religious Society of Friends over the past 30 years.

4.2 The History of the Organisation of the Religious Society of Friends

The outlines of the organisation of the Religious Society of Friends were already in place before the charismatic preacher George Fox, met up with the nascent group in 1652. The local

worshipping groups of the ‘Westmoreland Seekers’ were grouped geographically into ‘monthly meetings’, which met, monthly, to worship together and to deal with practical issues.³⁵³

As the Society of Friends evangelised elsewhere in Britain in the 1650s and 1660s, the monthly meetings became gathered geographically into Quarterly Meetings (and in some parts of the country ‘Half Year’ meetings).³⁵⁴ Every (male) Quaker was entitled to attend their Monthly Meeting, the relevant Quarterly Meeting and the Yearly Meeting; and to take part in the decision-making.³⁵⁵

Meetings operated on a principle of subsidiarity, and decisions were taken at the lowest appropriate level in a nested hierarchy. National advice travelled downwards from Yearly Meeting, or, during most of the year, from Meeting for Sufferings, to Quarterly Meetings to Monthly Meetings, and finally to the Preparative or Particular Meetings, the local worshipping groups. Information and also ‘concerns’ for which wider Quaker assent was required, travelled upwards.

Christopher Greenfield explains that ‘This process clearly established a ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ model (in human terms) of settling the most important matters that could be discussed

³⁵³ For instance, in stepping away from the Anglican church, the Quakers and other non-conformists rejected their responsibility for paying church tithes, and also their right to apply to the parish for poor-relief. The fellowship within each Monthly and Quarterly Meeting became responsible for meeting the welfare needs of members of their group. See the recommendations in the second printed edition of the Book of Discipline (London Yearly Meeting, *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution. Second Edition* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1802)), particularly the recommendations concerning the Poor (pp.136-137), Removals and Settlements (pp.160-168); and Women’s Meetings (pp.208 – 211).

³⁵⁴ (London Yearly Meeting, ‘Quarterly Meetings’ *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution. Second Edition* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1802) pp.140-141.

³⁵⁵ William Penn, *The Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia: Friends’ Book Store, Arch St, (undated reprint of Penn, *A Brief Account*, 1694)), p47.

by humans; that is, the very meaning of life, and God's purpose for mankind'.³⁵⁶ He comments: 'Once the model was established for such profound questions, it was a natural development that the model should be applied to decisions of a more worldly nature, such as how a community should regulate its life, or how the necessary but trivial questions of existence should be settled.' For instance Michael Birkel and Stephen Angell describe a meeting of elders from the north of England, at Balby in Yorkshire. as one where 'The elders found unity in what would become a prototype of Quaker Discipline'.³⁵⁷ The Epistle produced at that meeting set out the communal and individual responsibilities of members of the Society of Friends ('the children of Light'); covering matters such as worship, the care of children and of the poor or afflicted, marriage, burials, record-keeping, a commitment to truthfulness and honesty, and procedures for dealing with members who fall away from faithful behaviour.³⁵⁸

But while there is certainly truth to Greenfield's observation, nothing is simple, and from the seventeenth century the nested structure of the organisation operated in tandem with a national committee which negotiated directly with magistrates and the state. The historian Rosemary Moore observes that 'There never was a golden age of universal participation in Quaker decision-making. The system devised by George Fox and his colleagues was intended to facilitate rule by experienced, reliable Friends, and was heavily weighted towards a London centre'.³⁵⁹ She points out that 'Quakerism was a unitary body from its very early days – first because of the national

³⁵⁶ Christopher Greenfield, 'Quaker Management Method: Is There a Distinctive Method?' *The Friends' Quarterly*, 28:2 (April 1994), pp. 80–89, p.81.

³⁵⁷ Michael Birkel, & Stephen Angell: 'The Witness of Richard Farnworth, Prophet of Light, Apostle of Church Order', Chapter 5 p.83 –100, p.91 in *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought 1647 – 1723*, ed. by Stephen W. Angell & Pink Dandelion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁵⁸ *Epistle of the Elders at Balby*, 1656.

³⁵⁹ Rosemary Moore, Letter, *The Friend*, 3 January 1997, pp.23-24.

mission based in Swarthmoor,³⁶⁰ and second because it soon became obvious that a spirit-based church needed some agreed-upon means of distinguishing between true and false leadings if the movement was not to disintegrate'.³⁶¹

During the religious persecution which Quakers suffered in the 1650s and 1660s, financial help was also dispensed through national networks. There was very soon a national system for identifying instances of persecution and for lobbying parliament and, subsequently, also the king, for changes to the legislation and the ways it was implemented. From 1656 there was a committee based in London, for this purpose. In 1675 this work was passed to Meeting for Sufferings, which consisted of geographic representatives from Quarterly and Monthly Meetings.³⁶² A Yearly Meeting Minute of 1747 enjoined that, given 'nature and importance of the affairs transacted by the meeting for sufferings', the appointees should be 'grave and weighty friends ... adorning the doctrine they profess, in their lives and conversation'.³⁶³ The Yearly Meeting in 1833 affirmed that the remit of Meeting for Sufferings had broadened from that of identifying and seeking to ameliorate the sufferings of Quakers persecuted for their faith; it was by then 'a standing committee of this meeting ... entrusted with a general care of whatever may

³⁶⁰ Swarthmoor Hall in what is now Cumbria. It was the home of Margaret Fell, who later married Fox. The wealthy Fell was a formidable organiser, and much of the early correspondence about the life of the Society of Friends passed through her hands. (All of the records and correspondence of the early years of the Society which was held in London was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666).

³⁶¹ Rosemary Moore: 'Gospel Order; the development of Quaker organisation' in Moore & Allen *The Quakers 1656–1723*. (University Park, PA. Pennsylvania State University, 2018), pp.54–75, p55.

³⁶² *QF&P 7.01*. Initially the people representing the Quarterly Meetings all lived in London, and served as a communication-channel for the Meetings they represented.

³⁶³ London Yearly Meeting, 'Meeting for Sufferings' *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution. Second Edition* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1802) pp. 75–79, p.76.

arise during the intervals of this meeting, affecting our religious society and requiring immediate attention'.³⁶⁴

In a faith group which believed in 'the priesthood of all believers'³⁶⁵ and read St Paul's declaration, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'³⁶⁶, the place of women in the Society of Friends was, until the twentieth century, not actually equal to that of the men, although somewhat less disempowered than in most other religious groups in Britain. From the start women provided spoken ministry in meetings for worship, travelled in the ministry, and were imprisoned and martyred.³⁶⁷ However they did not sit on national committees such as Second Day Meeting or Meeting for Sufferings, though they did initially provide half the membership of Six Weeks Meeting, the main administrative meeting for London Friends³⁶⁸; and they took part in Monthly Meeting business.³⁶⁹

Women also attended the first national gathering of Quakers, in 1658, when some 3,000 participants met for a week at Beckerings Park in Bedfordshire.³⁷⁰ However, this event took place just before the restoration of King Charles II and the inception of a new period of religious

³⁶⁴ London Yearly Meeting, 'Meeting for Sufferings' *Rules of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends, with Advices: Being extracts from the Minutes and Epistles of their Yearly Meeting, held in London from its first institution. Third Edition* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1834) pp. 107 – 110, p.107.

³⁶⁵ Bible; Peter 2: 5-9.

³⁶⁶ Bible: Galatians 3: 28.

³⁶⁷ Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646-1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

³⁶⁸ It consisted initially of 34 men and 34 women, augmented by the presence of any Ministering Friends who chose to attend.

³⁶⁹ Rosemary Moore, 'Gospel Order; the development of Quaker organisation' in Moore & Allen *The Quakers 1656 – 1723* (University Park, PA. Pennsylvania State University, 2018) pp.54 – 75, p.55; citing William Beck and T. Frederick Ball *The London Friends Meetings* (London: F. Bowyer Kitto, 1889), repr. with introduction, illustrations and index by Simon Dixon and Peter Daniels (London: Pronoun Press, 2009) pp. 252, 253-54, 386.

³⁷⁰ *QF&P* 6.01

intolerance during which thousands of Quakers were imprisoned or otherwise persecuted; so any thoughts of national assemblies of Quakers were suspended. The next national meeting was held in 1668, after the passing of the Toleration Act that year. The participants finished that event with the hope, hitherto achieved, that this should become an annual event.³⁷¹

4.3 The History of the Yearly Meeting

Looking back at the early days of the Society of Friends, the Quaker historian William Charles Braithwaite notes that the Yearly Meeting

was not established swiftly and surely, under strong religious concern, as had been the case with the setting up of the Monthly Meetings; it was superadded to an existing system, and was due, at first, to the practical convenience of calling in representatives to bring in reports of sufferings, control collections, and settle the proportions in which counties should receive Quaker books. Its higher value lay in training and consolidating the membership. To bring together from all parts of the country the men of most weight in the movement, for conference and fellowship and the re-kindling of vision, was a true way of developing a corporate life which should carry the Society forward in one common service³⁷².

³⁷¹ QF&P: 6.02. At the time of writing, May 2020, the residential Yearly Meeting Gathering planned for August 2020 had been cancelled due to the corona virus. But the Yearly Meeting clerk's letter of cancellation held out the hope that a briefer meeting might be held in London at some point in 2020.

³⁷² William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1919) p.278.

If the intention in 1668 of a national gathering was ‘to see each other’s faces, and open our hearts to one another in the Truth of God’,³⁷³ it soon came to be understood in more ponderous terms:

The intent and holy design of our annual assemblies, in their first constitution, were for a great and weighty oversight and Christian care of the affairs of the churches pertaining to our holy profession and Christian communion; that good order, true love, unity and concord may be faithfully followed and maintained among all of us.³⁷⁴

From at least 1672³⁷⁵, the most time-consuming business of the Yearly Meeting was to receive triennial reports from Quarterly Meetings, responding to a set of standard queries about the state of the Society at local levels. There were initially just three queries, but they multiplied to sixteen over the course of the eighteenth century.³⁷⁶ Very soon these reports became remarkably stereotyped, and tedious to the listeners. But when the answers to the queries revealed that disputes and potential schisms existed, deliberation about these issues was sometimes extremely time-consuming – and tense; for instance at the Yearly Meeting in 1681 over the Wilkinson-Story separation, or in 1694 and 1695 over the case of George Keith³⁷⁷. The time spent on the Queries was reduced from 1872, and they were finally laid down in 1905.³⁷⁸

The Yearly Meeting also received the financial accounts; initially mainly recording moneys received and expended on members suffering imprisonment or persecution, and on paying

³⁷³ *QF&P*, 6.02. Minute of Yearly Meeting 1668.

³⁷⁴ *QF&P*, 6.03. Minute of Yearly Meeting 1718.

³⁷⁵ The earliest YM Minutes held in Friends House library.

³⁷⁶ London Yearly Meeting, *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution. Second Edition* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1802) pp.142–151.

³⁷⁷ Two early and bitter schisms in the Society of Friends, both ostensibly on the basis of theology, but also power-struggles with George Fox. See Braithwaite, *Second Period*, p.24.

³⁷⁸ Edward Grubb, ‘Third Period’, in Society of Friends, *London Yearly Meeting During 250 Years* (London: Society of Friends, 1919).

ransom for travelling Quakers taken by pirates³⁷⁹. From the earliest days, an Epistle was prepared, sending loving greetings to Quarterly and Monthly Meetings in Britain, Ireland and North America, and also communicating any decisions of the Yearly Meeting.³⁸⁰ On Sundays, Friends would attend local Meetings for Worship, and London Quakers invited out-of-town visitors to lunch and to spend the afternoon with them, possibly attending another Meeting for Worship later that day.³⁸¹

For many years, the formal Yearly Meeting sessions were officially a masculine preserve, though from 1697 it was agreed that ‘such faithful Women Friends that have a public testimony’ might join the Men’s second-day morning meeting for worship at Yearly Meeting.³⁸² And possibly from the beginning, there was a parallel, informal, women’s meeting, dealing, like the local women’s Box Meetings, with the needs of the poor and those persecuted or ‘imprisoned upon Truth’s account’.³⁸³ The first surviving Minute Book for Women’s Yearly Meeting dates from 1759, though the Meeting was only eventually formalised in 1784, with a system of geographic representatives and authority to correspond with Quarterly Meetings. Representatives from the women’s meeting were invited in the C19th and earlier to hear speakers in the Yearly Meeting sessions who were deemed to be particularly edifying or addressing important topics. Very

³⁷⁹ Epistle of London Yearly Meeting 1691, quoted by Justin Meggitt, *Early Quakers and Islam; Slavery, Apocalyptic and Christian-Muslim encounters in the seventeenth century* (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2011) p.55.

³⁸⁰ London Yearly Meeting, *Epistles from the Yearly meeting of Friends held in London, to the Quarterly and Monthly meetings in Great Britain, Ireland, and elsewhere, from 1681 to 1857, inclusive: with an historical introduction and a chapter comprising some of the early epistles and records of the Yearly Meeting*. (London: E. Marsh, 1858).

³⁸¹ A. Neave Brayshaw, ‘Second Period 1725 – 1825’ in Society of Friends, *London Yearly Meeting During 250 Years* (London: Society of Friends, 1919) pp. 29 – 68), p.63.

³⁸² Mary Jane Godlee, ‘The Women’s Yearly Meeting’ in Society of Friends: *London Yearly Meeting During 250 years* (London: Society of Friends, 1919) pp.93-124 p.103.

³⁸³ Godlee, ‘The Women’s Yearly Meeting’ refers to William Crouch, writing about 1660 (1712) p 22-23; and to an epistle from Edward Burrough (1662) about the decision to establish Women’s Meetings.

occasionally women, such as Elizabeth Fry in 1794, addressed the men's Meeting on topics of mutual concern.

Isichei³⁸⁴ describes the agenda of the Yearly Meeting in the mid-C19th as highly formalised, consisting mainly of Monthly Meeting and Quarterly Meeting representatives reporting on the health of their local meetings in response to the Queries. She comments that:

In theory, information about the condition of Quakerism was meant to rise like sap, from one meeting to the next, until it reached Yearly Meeting, to provide the basis for its deliberations. Many hours work at Monthly and Quarterly meetings in the first half of the nineteenth century was devoted to supplying this information, and much of the time of Yearly Meeting was spent listening to it.

Isichei points out that this procedure was both cumbrous and ineffective: 'It might have worked if the answers sought were simply statistical, but many hours were spent on debating fine distinctions of language',³⁸⁵ in Quarterly Meetings' responses to queries such as 'Are Friends preserved in love towards one another?' These formulaic queries and responses were eventually dropped in 1861.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁴ Elizabeth Isichei *Victorian Quakers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)

³⁸⁵ Isichei *Victorian Quakers*, p.74.

³⁸⁶ This and other substantial changes in Quaker custom and practice occurred after the Yearly Meeting/RSF had reflected upon the contents of a prize-winning essay by John Stephenson Rowntree, *Quakerism past and present; being an enquiry into its decline in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Smith Elder & Co. 1859). The changes included revoking the rule of endogamy which has arisen as a consequence of the State's insistence that though it recognised in date the validity of Quaker marriage, only Quakers and not their partners from any other denomination, might marry in a Quaker Meeting.

Elizabeth Isichei argues forcefully that in the nineteenth century and earlier ‘the whole system of governing by business meetings always had an intrinsic injustice’ in that:

Since members attended these meetings at their own expense, they were governed, in effect, by those who could afford the cost of the journey. This was especially true of the higher levels – Quarterly and Yearly Meetings. Attendance at the latter was ‘a luxury of the rich or of those who lived in London’³⁸⁷. The relationship between prosperity and activity in the Society went further than this; only those whose time was largely their own could serve, for instance, on a Yearly Meeting committee, the work of which would continue, with intermissions, for months on end. The wealthy naturally dominated the work of a church with no clergy and practically no secretariat³⁸⁸.

Richard Vann similarly observes: ‘This was one of the predictable, yet probably unanticipated consequences of Friends’ rejection of a salaried ministry. If they were to do all their business by committee, the more business-like would naturally assume power’.³⁸⁹

The first joint session of the Men’s and the Women’s Yearly Meetings was held in 1880, to consider the problem of the Opium Trade.³⁹⁰ The first Yearly Meeting held jointly was in 1896,

³⁸⁷ *The British Friend*, 1897, p.125.

³⁸⁸ Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* pp. 76–77. She refers, p.77, to a letter in *The Friend* in 1853, which approvingly notes a proposal by the New York Association of Women Friends to raise a fund to enable Friends otherwise prevented by reasons of cost to attend their sessions, and concludes: ‘I believe that this principle has to some extent been acted on in some of our meetings, but it has often struck me that if it were generally recognised in the Society with reference to Monthly and Quarterly as well as Yearly Meetings, it would render a wider circle of Friends eligible who are now only disqualified by their comparative poverty’.

³⁸⁹ Richard Vann, *The Social Development of English Quakerism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969) p121. Vann adds: ‘The ‘bourgeoisification’ of the Society of Friends, so much oftener described than proved, does have certain reality in the meetings for church affairs, which had a decidedly more ‘bourgeois’ complexion than the membership as a whole. In giving cachet, no matter how slight, to prudence as a quality requisite for church government, Friends ran the risk of eliminating that eminently Christian type, the holy fool, from the range of religious experience which Quakerism could encompass’.

³⁹⁰ Godlee, ‘The Women’s Yearly Meeting’, p.116.

and in 1898 a Yearly Meeting Minute recorded that ‘in future, women Friends are to be recognized as forming a constituent part of all our Meetings for Church Affairs equally with their brethren’.³⁹¹ Some women Friends were reluctant to merge the two Meetings, as they were sceptical that women’s voices would be heard in the joint meeting. So a Women’s Meeting event was retained until 1907, as one of the events held in ‘committee week’ preceding the Yearly Meeting.³⁹²

The first time the Yearly Meeting was clerked by a woman occurred in 1918, a decade after the separate men’s and women’s Yearly Meetings were united. This was when the assistant clerk, Lucy F Morland, stood in for the Yearly Meeting clerk, John Henry Barlow, while he attended the trial of three Quakers charged with treason (See Chapter 5).³⁹³ The first time a woman was appointed as Yearly Meeting clerk was in 1943,³⁹⁴ but it took another thirty-five years before the next woman, Gillian Hopkins, was appointed in 1978. In 2019, for the first time, the Yearly Meeting clerk and also the first and second assistant clerks were all women.³⁹⁵

For many years the agenda for the Yearly Meeting was prepared during the ‘committee week’ which preceded the Yearly Meeting. During that week the various national committees would meet to finalise the topics which they wished to present to the Yearly Meeting for comment, information or resolution. The agenda was only finalised the morning before the meeting began, when the list of agenda items was chalked up on a board outside the Large Meeting House.

³⁹¹ Godlee ‘The Women’s Yearly Meeting’, p.120.

³⁹² Godlee ‘The Women’s Yearly Meeting’, p.120.

³⁹³ For their failure, endorsed by the 1917 Yearly Meeting, to comply with wartime censorship requirements. (*The Friend* [May] 1918).

³⁹⁴ Winnifred Brayshaw

³⁹⁵ In 1991, for the first time, the Yearly Meeting clerk, the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings, and the Recording Clerk were all female (Christine Davis, Jane Chattel and Elsa Dicks).

From 1905, the Yearly Meeting was held outside of London every fourth year, with a view to increasing participation by Friends who lived locally to the venue and who were unlikely to travel far. These gatherings soon became residential ones, held on a university campus with the majority of out-of-town visitors accommodated in student housing on-site, in the summer school holidays for the convenience of families.

The first time that Yearly Meeting business was transacted on a Sunday was at the Adjourned Yearly Meeting in January 1916, which was held over a single weekend, to discern the Society's response to the Conscription Act of 1916.³⁹⁶ Normally, the Yearly Meeting is held in May; for most of its history it was held over Whitsun,³⁹⁷ but from 1973 it was moved to the spring bank holiday weekend, from Friday to Monday. The date of London meetings now vacillates between the early and the late May bank holidays.

The 1968 volume of the procedural part of the handbook, *Church Government*, describes the mid-20th century situation:

Yearly Meeting is an occasion when the concerns of one group of Friends or another can be shared with the meeting as a whole as it seeks God's guidance and relates each particular insight or service to the others brought before it...The twentieth century witnessed a considerable growth in the standing committees of the Society and increasingly the agenda of Yearly Meeting was built up round their concerns.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ The 1915 Yearly Meeting had been adjourned rather than ended, in anticipation that the January meeting might be necessary.

³⁹⁷ The feast of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-4. The apostles were gathered in Jerusalem, and were filled with the Holy Spirit. A welcome analogy for the early Quakers.

³⁹⁸ London Yearly Meeting, *Church Government* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1968) para. 784.

The Yearly Meeting in 1971 noted that decision-making was more effective if more Friends were present for the whole of the Yearly Meeting, or at least attended most of the sessions. One speaker emphasised that there was a ‘need in Yearly Meeting for a sense of corporate unity, which was difficult to achieve unless there was stability in attendance’³⁹⁹.

The current, 5th edition, of the Quaker book on church government, *Quaker Faith and Practice* (QF&P) contains the summary prepared by the 1999 Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee, describing the role and content of the Yearly Meeting:

We see Yearly Meetings as events in the life of the institution of Britain Yearly Meeting which can involve:

- Constitutional decision-making;
- Annually overseeing and guiding the stewardship exercises between Yearly Meetings;
- Settling policy on major areas of work or witness;
- Promoting teaching and learning;
- Offering inspiration and leadership;
- Celebrating together;
- Re-dedicating ourselves;
- Calling us to action;
- Creating and sustaining a community, including those both under and over 19⁴⁰⁰,⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ *The Friend*, June 9 1972 p. 695 (quoting Nicholas Sims).

⁴⁰⁰ Depending on their age and the structure of the Yearly Meeting event, children and teenagers spend part or most of the formal session time in separate activities, away from the adults.

⁴⁰¹ *QF&P* 6:05.

Since the mid-twentieth century the Agenda Committee has planned the content of a Yearly Meeting a year or more in advance. Recently, the outline of the Yearly Meeting has been known for several years ahead. There were two over-arching themes for a six-year cycle of meetings from 2012 to 2017. The series on ‘What it means to be a Quaker Today’ began with the 2012 theme of ‘Economic Justice and Sustainability’;⁴⁰² the second series, ‘Living Out Our Faith In the World’ finished in 2017 with a Yearly Meeting focussed on ‘movement building’.⁴⁰³

The annual statements of attendance in *The Friend* show that the numbers present at a Yearly Meeting vary widely from day to day, more markedly at the London events than when the participants are gathered in a residential setting. In London, the Friday evening and the Monday afternoon, both usually given over to ritual appointments and minute-reading, are generally the least-well attended sessions.⁴⁰⁴

4.4 Residential Yearly Meetings, Summer Gatherings and Yearly Meeting Gatherings

The programme of the Yearly Meetings held outside of London has always provided the opportunity for community-building events outside of the formal sessions. At the earliest provincial Yearly Meetings, in Leeds and in Manchester at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were rival garden-parties on the Sunday afternoon; and in recent years an entire day in the middle of the week has been laid aside for convivial outings to local Quaker sites, stately homes and other attractions. On other days, the business sessions have been interspersed by time allocated for optional activities such as singing, Bible study, or family games. In the

⁴⁰² Britain Yearly Meeting: ‘Epistle’ *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 2012* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2012).

⁴⁰³ Britain Yearly Meeting: ‘Epistle’ *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 2016* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2016).

⁴⁰⁴ *The Friend*, usually the first issue after the Yearly Meeting.

evenings there have been formal talks, movies and community dancing or concerts to choose among.⁴⁰⁵

Notwithstanding, the Documents in Advance for residential Yearly Meetings usually included a couple of paragraphs enjoining Friends to remember that however much fun they were planning to have that week, the primary purpose of the event was as a Yearly Meeting:

We are attending a Yearly Meeting, not a family conference, and our first commitment should be to the main sessions and our worship together...

Yearly Meeting is fundamentally a gathering of those Friends who are able to be present, not a 'delegated' or 'representative' conference. It helps the continuity of the Yearly Meeting if most Friends attending come to all of the sessions.⁴⁰⁶

In the late 1980s it was recognised that residential yearly meetings were increasingly well supported by families, 'with Friends appreciating the events alongside the sessions as much as the business'.⁴⁰⁷ to hold a Summer Gathering in Bradford in 1991, with a view to nurturing the participation of parents, children and other adults at an all-age Quaker event, which would provide opportunities for fun and community building; reflection on issues which the Yearly Meeting didn't have time to deal with at leisure; and 'the time and facilities for study and real learning'.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ In 1989 at Aberdeen, for instance, the mornings were devoted to a range of options such as Quaker history, circle dancing, pottery, and 'fun with mathematics' (London Yearly Meeting, 'Programme Options' *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1989* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1989).

⁴⁰⁶ Britain Yearly Meeting: *Documents in Advance, Yearly Meeting 1997* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1997) p.5.

⁴⁰⁷ QF&P 6:01.

⁴⁰⁸ QF&P (1995) 3rd Edition (2005) 6:25.

That first Summer Gathering was hugely successful, and became the first of a series, held every fourth year on a cycle alternating with the residential Yearly Meetings. These events attracted whole families, and at the residential Yearly Meetings of that period, the daily records of Friends' attendance at Yearly Meeting sessions showed that Friends were more consistently present than in London.

However, in 1998, rather than rejoicing in the scale of participation in the residential meetings, the co-clerks of the Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee noted:

We are continually confronted with the practical difficulties and mounting expense of holding Yearly Meetings, as the Recording Clerk's office struggles to keep pace with Friends' increasing expectations [especially for suitable and affordable residential ym accommodation].⁴⁰⁹

The last Summer Gathering was held in 2007, after which it was deemed that the pattern of having a residential gathering in the same year as a Yearly Meeting held in London was unsustainable, and put too-large a burden on staff.⁴¹⁰ The next residential event was a Yearly Meeting Gathering, held in 2009.

This is an identifiable moment of change in the function and purpose of the Yearly Meeting. At the first, experimental, Yearly Meeting Gathering, the Yearly Meeting business was placed into a total of four three-hour sessions – providing little time for anything other than the routine items, such as committee appointments, agreeing the Epistle, and hearing accounts of the children's

⁴⁰⁹ Britain Yearly Meeting: *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1998*, p.289.

⁴¹⁰ *QF&P* 6.01

activities during the gathering. The shape of the week was, explicitly, not driven by the demands of the business to hand. The Documents in Advance for the first Yearly Meeting Gathering explained that it was envisaged as ‘a fusion of Yearly Meeting, Summer Gathering, Junior Yearly Meeting and a children and young people’s programme’⁴¹¹.

At the first Yearly Meeting Gathering, the difference between it and a residential Yearly Meeting was most apparent in that there was no expectation that every Quaker present at the gathering - as opposed to their non-Quaker partner or other family members accompanying them - should aspire to attend every Yearly Meeting session. A programme of parallel events, such as guided walks and a watercolour-painting workshop, ran throughout the day while the Yearly Meeting was in session. The injunction familiar from the Documents in Advance for previous residential Yearly Meetings, enjoining Friends to faithfully attend each business session, was omitted from the documents circulated in advance of the gathering. Rather, it explains that ‘We will gather for a week of worship, friendship, enjoyment, learning, celebration, Yearly Meeting business, spiritual growth and fun – and the connection between all these’⁴¹². Instead of being encouraged to attend the business meetings, Friends were told that ‘The different strands of the event will be interwoven throughout the week, so that each gatherer can find their own path’⁴¹³.

There has long been a charge for attending those residential Yearly Meetings held on university campuses, even for day-visitors. This has been paid either by the individual concerned, or with assistance from their local or Area (Monthly) meeting, or a centrally provided bursary. However there has not yet been any charge associated with attending the Yearly Meetings held at Friends

⁴¹¹ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009 Documents in Advance*, p.6.

⁴¹² Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009 Documents in Advance*, p.6.

⁴¹³ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009 Documents in Advance*, p.6.

House, which any Friend can attend as of right. Friends were first asked to register in advance to attend Yearly Meeting held in London in 2016.

4.5 Management of the Yearly Meeting

The Religious Society of Friends is structured in such a way that there is no single individual at its apex, in local communities or at national level. The ‘clerk’ of a Meeting, at local level or a national committee, or of the Yearly Meeting itself, is responsible for facilitating and coordinating business meetings, but their role is seen as one where their own opinions are subordinated to the decision of the group. As William Penn explained:

In these solemn assemblies for the church’s service, there is no one presides among them after the manner of the assemblies of other people: Christ only being their president.⁴¹⁴

At Yearly Meeting level, the clerk’s authority even to set the agenda for the meeting is subordinated to the decisions of the Agenda Committee.

Initially, at Yearly Meeting business sessions, the meeting was clerked by the Recording Clerk, the paid administrator or secretary to the Society, the first of whom, Ellis Hookes, was appointed in about 1657.⁴¹⁵ In 1703 the meeting decided that these responsibilities should be split, and that the separate role of Yearly Meeting clerk was created.

⁴¹⁴ *QF&P*, 19.58. William Penn, 1694.

⁴¹⁵ Society of Friends, *London Yearly Meeting during 250 years* p.138.

QF&P explains that the role of the clerk is that of ‘servant of the meeting’, who, ‘by your very attitude and your arrangement of the agenda, set the pattern of worshipful listening which should characterise our meetings for church affairs’.⁴¹⁶

However, it is easier to describe than to enact this delicate role. An American Quaker, David Stanfield warns against the pitfalls associated with it:

While Quakers have a popular reputation for being a gentle and self-effacing people not given to public display of their virtues, this does not mean that all Friends are exempt from the temptations of seeking political power and public praise. The presiding clerk is above all a servant of the Meeting, and refrains from seeking privileged status as a power broker, influential pacesetter, or descendant of previous Meeting leaders⁴¹⁷.

Clerks should not allow themselves to assume an attitude of knowing what is best for the Meeting and its business affairs. Such pride gets in the way of the Spirit’s communications. A good clerk will demonstrate trust in others by being ready to pass along the ministry of clerking to another with the happy expectation that whoever succeeds to the office will also find it an opportunity for spiritual growth and gratifying service⁴¹⁸.

Nowadays in BYM, draft minutes are commonly prepared, especially for routine matters, such as appointments. This helps to reduce the time spent during the meeting itself preparing minutes of

⁴¹⁶ QF&P 3.13.

⁴¹⁷ David O. Stanfield, *A Handbook for the Presiding Clerk* (Greensboro, North Carolina: North Carolina YM of Friends, 1989) p.9.

⁴¹⁸ Stanfield, *A Handbook*, p.9.

which the contents are already pretty-well known before the meeting starts, and are likely only to need confirming. Some clerks also prepare draft minutes too for matters for discernment, sometimes in two or three versions to take account of the likely range of outcomes. However, this is open to abuse, if the clerk (and the agenda committee) have a preference for a particular outcome, there is a distinct temptation to read back to the assembled meeting a draft minute which reflects the outcome the clerk hoped for rather than the ministry and discernment which actually occurred. If the meeting is tired, or if it is just before lunch or another pause in the day, either the Friends in the body of the meeting may be willing to let the matter go, or the clerk may even pre-empt comment by announcing that there is no more time for discussion or for review of the minute.⁴¹⁹

In an ideal world, when the clerk senses that the Meeting is beginning to repeat itself, or that it has reached a level of agreement, this is the time for formulating, and presenting, a Minute about the resolution reached.⁴²⁰ In its detail – or in its general thrust – the draft Minute may not accurately reflect what the Friends present perceive to be the conclusion; they may tinker with it for a while, until the clerk is able to read out a version which is accepted as ‘good enough’.

However, this does require that sufficient time is made available for consideration of the item, both initially and in finalising the minute.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of events at the Yearly Meeting in 1989, when both the clerk and the body of the meeting failed to observe the behavioural code for participants in a Quaker business meeting. A group of elders from various Monthly Meetings convened, and formally

⁴¹⁹ See Chapter 5; the 2014 decision to revise the Book of Discipline.

⁴²⁰ *QF&P* 3:13.

chastised both the clerk and the meeting. Following on from that incident, possibly evidencing a residual fear of loss of control rather than a simple desire for right-ordering, a group of elders is now appointed to serve at Yearly Meetings.⁴²¹

Also in the debriefing after the strident 1989 Yearly Meeting in Aberdeen,⁴²² the Agenda Committee recognised that some of the tensions had been due to the clerk's attempts to hold the Yearly Meeting to its pre-agreed timetable, rather than allowing deliberations to continue until a properly discerned outcome was arrived at.⁴²³ So, for several years from 1990, the itinerary was designed as a 'flexible agenda'. The amount of business to cram into the available time was reduced, and unprogrammed time was built into the agenda, so that if items over-ran the time initially estimated for them, the other items of business would not be compromised.

However, as in a secular context, the clerk and the Agenda Committee can to a large extent control the outcome of a decision by limiting the time available to it, or by scheduling the agenda item in a slot when participants are tired or hungry, or have inexorable time constraints, such as the requirement to fetch children from child-care. Chapter 5 discusses instances of time-management on the part of the Clerk in ways calculated to limit and control the outcome of a business session.

⁴²¹ *QF&P*, 6:21. The elders' responsibilities are: To uphold the meeting in prayer; Support the right-holding of the meetings for worship and meetings for church affairs in the course of the Yearly Meeting; If they feel it necessary, to draw the attention of the clerks or the agenda committee to an issue, which might need to be communicated to the body of the yearly meeting; Occasionally, they might feel it necessary in their capacity as elders rather than as individuals, to minister (*Documents in Advance* (1999) p.34.

⁴²² See Chapter 5.

⁴²³ London Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1990* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1990).

Over the past decade, the clerks in Britain Yearly Meeting have usually strictly controlled the timetable of the Meeting; and when there is dissent to a proposal brought forward by the Agenda Committee, one of the techniques used to limit the opportunity for dissent and for repudiation or even modification of the proposals brought forward is to use silence as a ceremonial device. By stretching the silences between identifying the next speaker from the floor, the clerks have been able to limit the number who spoke before the session ended, and to limit the range and depth of consideration of the topic by the body of the meeting.

The technique, which has been imposed since the early 1990s, is that after each speaker, the clerks keep their eyes lowered to the table, enforcing a shared silence in the meeting. Once they look up again, individuals stand to indicate that they would like to speak, one is identified, the microphone is passed to them, and the process is repeated. This has been elaborated, since 2015, with the addition of verbal cues for the partially-sighted; even further restricting the opportunities for standing, and helping to spin-out the lengthening imposed silences between the spoken contributions.

In previous times, when there was no microphone to be passed, the decision to speak next was down to the individuals who felt moved to do so. Instead of six or seven brief contributions being made over the period of an hour, there were eleven or fifteen – some of them up to ten minutes long.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ Penelope Cummins, 'To See One Another's Faces': The Role and Purposes of Yearly Meeting in Britain in 2012 and 1912' Paper Presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association 'Differences' Conference. July 2012, Woodbrooke, Birmingham.

4.6 Revisions to the Structure of the Religious Society of Friends, and to the role of the Yearly Meeting since the mid-20th century

The distribution of responsibility or initiatives between the different national committees has never been discrete, nor neatly rational. The report to the 1965 Special Yearly Meeting by the Church Government Revision Committee notes:

Each generation of Friends has been faced with a structure in some degree or another untidy, and the clear-minded amongst us have tried to set our house in better order. But order without life does not work, as we know in experience from the magnificent attempt in the 1920s to create a Central Literature Council, a concept combining the tidiness of an administrative pyramid with a mount for vision – but a concept that failed because there was no united will to make it work. For two years in the same decade there was a weighty Committee on the Overlapping of Committees: its final report wistfully noted that ‘it would have been possible, though perhaps not profitable, to make suggestions involving much more drastic change’ but that ‘we have had evidences, both in public and private interviews, that such changes would not be welcomed, and it has seemed to us to be a pity to put forward proposals which, whilst almost certain of defeat, might nevertheless have caused a certain amount of unrest’⁴²⁵.

Nevertheless, the Revision Committee made some radical proposals, which were accepted:

⁴²⁵ London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (LYM), *Christian Faith & Practice*, (CF&P) 1968, para. 826.

the Special Yearly Meeting agreed that the membership of Meeting for Sufferings should be revised; Quarterly Meetings were replaced by General Meetings, with a less onerous range of responsibilities, and the work of many smaller committees, addressing sometimes peripheral concerns, was absorbed into the responsibilities of the major central committees.⁴²⁶

Changes to the organisation continued into the following decade. A Constitutional Review Committee was set up by the Yearly Meeting in 1971, ‘to survey the constitution of Meeting for Sufferings and of the Friends’ Education Committee, Friends’ Service Council and the Home Service Committee’.⁴²⁷ The terms of the review were later extended by Meeting for Sufferings, to consider fundraising for the standing committees, and ‘the present structure of our Society, with its various committees pursuing their way independently, overlapping in routine, and competing for support’.⁴²⁸

From the outset of these new arrangements, it was already clear that the old system for raising and allocating funds, undertaken independently by each of the functional committees in competition with the others, would have to change. A working party was set up by Sufferings in November 1979, to consider the mechanisms for financing the Society’s central work. Reports on *The Nature and Variety of Concern* and on *Financing the Society’s Central Work* were circulated in advance of the 1986 Yearly Meeting at which they were considered.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁶ *CF&P*, para. 826.

⁴²⁷ London Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1972*, (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1972) p.19.

⁴²⁸ London Yearly Meeting, *Proceedings 1972*, p.19.

⁴²⁹ London Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1986* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1986).

The Constitutional Review Committee concluded that it was ‘convinced of the central unity of the work undertaken in the name of the Yearly Meeting’⁴³⁰, so found it anomalous that the office staff at Friends House in London were ‘employees of no less than seven different committees’⁴³¹. It acknowledged that its recommendations might be problematic to implement, but it did believe that all staff should be employed by, and answerable to, Meeting for Sufferings.

The 1986 Yearly Meeting accepted the recommendations of the Constitutional Review Committee; and decided to set up three new functional departments: Quaker Peace and Service, Quaker Home Service, and Quaker Social Responsibility and Education. The staff of these departments, together with those of three ‘common service’ departments: Finance, Personnel, and Premises & Services, were all to be answerable to Meeting for Sufferings, their employer. However, policy-making for each of these departments was still largely to be undertaken by the functional committees, which were now no longer freestanding but were answerable to Sufferings.

The longstanding status of paid staff as supporting the work undertaken by the different committees, rather than managing it, was illustrated in the disquiet at the Yearly Meeting in 1988 which accepted revisions to *Church Government*⁴³² which acknowledged the Meeting of Secretaries (i.e. secretaries of the central committees) as a consultative meeting within the structures of the Society of Friends. *The Friend* reported that the item ‘provoked some discussion

⁴³⁰ London Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1972*, p.25.

⁴³¹ London Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1972*, p.25.

⁴³² The volume of the Book of Discipline then current which dealt with governance issues; the three-volume format was replaced in 1994 by the single-volume *QF&P*.

on whether Q departments could have ‘heads’. Use of this ‘authoritarian sounding’ word was eventually avoided’.⁴³³

In 1989, the Friends assembled at the Yearly Meeting reviewed the 1965 centralisation, conscious that any possible increases in efficiency may have been outweighed by the loss of direct engagement in the work among local meetings and individuals:

It is possible that the change in our structures made in 1965 has reduced the opportunities for local initiative and overloaded our central committees. We recognise, however, that no amount of structural change will release the spiritual and creative energy if this is not being tapped in our preparative meetings. Our problems are not only financial and organisational but also spiritual; we need to nurture the experience and habit of silence which will enable us truly to discern the will of God, in all our meetings for business. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, chasten us, and enable us to show what we have to lay aside, so that we can see clearly what it is we have to do⁴³⁴.

Looking back, the 1998 report of the Memorandum Group on Constitutional Review (itself set up at the Yearly Meeting of 1996), noted that the previous constitutional review had been almost continuous from 1961 to 1978:

⁴³³ *The Friend* 3 June 1988, p.685.

⁴³⁴ Yearly Meeting Aberdeen 1989 Minute 14: The Work of Meeting for Sufferings.

It was not, however, consciously designed to take that long. Instead, what happened was that one set of changes left unfinished business which was referred to the next group to take constitutional review forward, and so on.⁴³⁵

In the last report from Administrative Committee, before it was laid down in January 1998, there is veiled reference to the management and strategic planning processes which had been practiced:

In recent years we have learned much about the value of openness between staff and committee members, and between committees when presenting issues, also the need for clarity when making decisions. This clarity *has been partial*⁴³⁶ when dealing with:

- the sources of YM funds;
- the purposes for which money has been given; and
- decisions about priorities for the use of available resources.

Partly this arises because Britain YM has no single means of examining and planning the direction of its central work over a longer period. We contributed to the preparation of a three- year programme over this year but did not complete a strategic statement of objectives and policies which we designed in 1996 to form the link between our detailed programme of work, and Meeting for Sufferings statement of purpose.⁴³⁷

At that stage, it would appear that while there was a push to institute standardised strategic and financial planning processes, the intention was to delineate responsibility for executive decision

⁴³⁵ Britain Yearly Meeting: 'Report of the Memorandum Group on Constitutional Review, *Documents in Advance, Yearly Meeting 1998* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1998) p.5.

⁴³⁶ My emphasis.

⁴³⁷ Britain Yearly Meeting: 'Administrative Committee Report' *Documents in Advance, Yearly Meeting 1998* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1998) p.222.

making, and to locate it in the remit of the central committees, their committee secretaries, and the associated staff:

Plans to transfer work from the Recording Clerk have progressed so that the new post-holder may concentrate on Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings, and its committee meetings for church affairs. Ensuring that all executive action for Britain Yearly Meeting is handled by the central committees, their secretaries and departments has yet to be completed. Determining the correct level of support for the new Recording Clerk is still being considered by Meeting for Sufferings Committee⁴³⁸.

Next, the Society of Friends began to consider rationalising their geographic groupings of Preparative, Monthly and General Meetings, to take account of geographic shifts among the Quaker population. A 'Recast' committee, the Working Party on Local & Regional Groupings, was appointed in to bring forward recommendations for boundary refinements and for mergers of geographic clusters of Quaker meetings, in response to demographic changes.

In the introduction to its report to the 2002 Yearly Meeting,⁴³⁹ the Working Party on Local & Regional Groupings described its mission:

We set out to find what meetings and groupings Quakers need in today's conditions. We asked the wider question: 'Why do we meet?' and we received answers from all quarters.

⁴³⁸ Documents in Advance 1998, Administrative Committee Report, p.223.

⁴³⁹ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Supplement to Documents in Advance of Yearly Meeting to be held 3-6 May 2002; Report of Local and Regional Groupings working party* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2002).

The time has come to clean and restore our structures rather than change them and build them anew. Whether this is seen as a reason to conduct a constitutional review with a radical set of changes will depend on your point of view. However, we hope there are enough recommendations and suggestions to free up our traditional channels which have become choked by the accretion of habit and serve as acceptable evolutionary ways forward for a new generation.⁴⁴⁰

Its proposals included the introduction of a formalised three year planning cycle. The first strategic plan was approved by Meeting for Sufferings in 2000. Introducing the processes for developing the second strategic plan, for approval by Sufferings in November 2002, the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings Committee, Richard Porter, acknowledged that the first plan had been generated by a small team, and that for the next plan it was recognised that a wider range of Friends should be able to ‘influence the plan more widely, more relevantly, and at the right time’.⁴⁴¹

The Recast considerations occurred at the same time that Britain Yearly Meeting was preparing to meet the Charity Commission’s governance requirements, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, and it was suggested that the two processes should be elided into the work of a single committee.

⁴⁴⁰ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain: *Supplement to Documents in Advance of Yearly Meeting to be held 3-6 May 2002; Report of Local and Regional Groupings working party* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2002).

⁴⁴¹ *The Friend* 14 June 2002, p.7.

While the Recast Committee may have been enthusiastic about its recommendations, not all Friends on the benches concurred. Some, such as Diana Sandy, writing in *The Friend*, deplored the drift into secular rather than spirit-led decision-making:

The Society of Friends in Britain is now a microcosm of the parliamentary ‘Westminster Village’ model, although much less democratic even than that. If the Society were able to counter the processes which are so destructive in that model – centralisation rather than community interests, in powerlessness, hierarchies, cliques and the like, it might be more able to offer some hope for the rest of the world and especially for those who see this country as sliding inexorably into dictatorship. Friends would have to learn again to trust the former method of coming to decisions by waiting on the guidance of the Holy Spirit – however long that might take – and then obeying it whether they understood it or not. Would that be so hard? A Society of Friends that reacquainted itself with the power of God – however that entity was perceived – could find it easier to redress some of its structural problems more effectively.⁴⁴²

Similarly, a Quaker civil servant, David Lewis, points out the similarities between the values, language and recommendations contained in the Recast proposals to those in government reports and those from other secular organisations. He concludes emphatically that the Recast report is not informed by any assumption that members of committees might be seeking the will of God on the matters before them, and expresses anxiety that at Area Meeting level the introduction of trustees would remove decision-making from the worshipping group into the hands of the few.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴² Diana Sandy, ‘The Society of Friends of the Truth’, *The Friend* 14 May 2004, p.10–12. p.11.

⁴⁴³ David Lewis, ‘RECAST in Context’ *The Friends Quarterly* July 2005, pp.297–306, p.304.

He also suggests that ‘the QBM (Quaker Business Method) will simply decay in the larger worshipping group because those present will be both uninterested and have few ‘real’ decisions to make.⁴⁴⁴ Lewis concludes that Recast had anticipated the requirements of the Charity Commission, and ‘has opted for a small and powerful executive to provide unity of action, using the argument that a yet-to-be-enacted Charities Bill requires the change.⁴⁴⁵

In 2005 Recast recommended that a new tier of governance, Britain Yearly Meeting trustees, should be introduced to comply with the imminent Charities Act of 2006, and the associated requirements of the Charity Commission for the governance of charitable bodies.⁴⁴⁶ The trustees’ role, and its effect on the roles of Meeting for Sufferings and of the Yearly Meeting, are discussed in some detail in Chapter 6.

4.7 Meeting for Sufferings

The power and engagement of Meeting for Sufferings is at least partly a function of how often it meets. In the late 1990s, around the time of the introduction of Meeting for Sufferings Committee, a proto-trustee smaller body, the number of meetings of Sufferings diminished. With the longer gaps between meetings, and diminished total meeting time available, it was obviously necessary that Meeting for Sufferings Committee must take greater day to day responsibility. In 1999 some Sufferings members were outraged that the Sufferings clerk cancelled a meeting

⁴⁴⁴ Lewis, ‘RECAST’, p.305.

⁴⁴⁵ Lewis, ‘RECAST’ p.301.

⁴⁴⁶ UK Public General Acts: The Charities Act 2006 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/50/contents>. [accessed 20 May 2020].

because the central agenda item was not yet ready for consideration. This left a four-month gap between meetings, a gap so long that it was inevitable some matters which would otherwise have been considered by Sufferings were resolved in the interval. The meeting resolved that there should never be a gap longer than 2 months.⁴⁴⁷

The less frequently a committee meets, the less opportunity and power it has to oversee operational decisions. It has even less time available for plenary deliberations and decision-making if the agenda when it does meet is arranged to include small-group and getting-to-know-each-other events, which have been built into the programme since about 2000. In April 2004, on a day when a particularly contentious decision had been announced to Sufferings by the clerk of Quaker Life,⁴⁴⁸ *The Friend* reported that the plenary time spent together in the afternoon session lasted barely forty minutes.⁴⁴⁹

In 2006, the last year in which it held trusteeship responsibilities, Sufferings met nine times,⁴⁵⁰ including a special meeting in October to explore a vision for its new role, including being ‘a crucible for sharing and testing all the witness that is going on throughout the Yearly Meeting,

⁴⁴⁷ *The Friend*, 12 November, 1999, pp.11–12.

⁴⁴⁸ The decision to cancel the 2005 Junior Yearly Meeting (JYM), an event for teenagers aged 16 to 18, was particularly baffling in view of the popularity of the event; the difficulty of engaging young people of that age in local Meetings; the Society’s 350-year commitment to the education and spiritual nurture of the young people in their community (vide the Books of Discipline, from the handwritten book in 1735 to *QF&P*). The reasons put forward by the Clerk of Quaker Life for cancelling a gathering due to take place almost a year ahead were the ‘sudden resignation’ of the head of the Children & Young People’s section, and that ‘it is an enormous event and very, very complex’ (*The Friend*, 7 May 2004 p.6). JYM is a five-day event, with a long-established timetable, attended by about 140 teenagers aged between 16 and 18 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junior_Yearly_Meeting [accessed 15 May 2020]). It is the kind of event for which in another context – ie one in which the will was there – a six- or even four-month planning period might be deemed ample; even if undertaken by new or by contract staff.

⁴⁴⁹ *The Friend*, 7 May 2004, p.6.

⁴⁵⁰ Britain Yearly Meeting, ‘Meeting for Sufferings Report in the Year 2006 *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2007* (London, Britain Yearly Meeting 2007) p.4.

and a bridge between local meetings and central work'.⁴⁵¹ Since 2007 Sufferings now has an explicitly 'visioning' role rather than one with responsibility for oversight of operational issues.⁴⁵²

In 2011, following the recommendations of Recast, the size of Meeting for Sufferings was reduced, from more than 200 members to slightly less than half that figure.⁴⁵³ The number of representatives from an Area Meeting (ie previously a Monthly Meeting) was no longer proportional to its number of members. Each Area Meeting now has only one representative; with an 'alternate'. The role and function of 'alternates' has been left unclear.⁴⁵⁴ Some Area Meetings assume that the representative will attend every meeting unless they are prevented from doing so, in which case their 'alternate' will ensure that the Area Meeting is represented. However, others have interpreted the term as meaning just that, and the two individuals appointed literally alternate in their appearances at Sufferings. Generally a specific effort is made to ensure that the alternate does have experience of attending Suffering; guidance from the Recording Clerk's Office suggests that if a representative has responsibilities on Sufferings which require that they attend regularly (eg as a member of the 'Meeting for Sufferings Support Group'), then the Area Meeting can apply for a second individual to be present at least once a year.⁴⁵⁵ In other words, there is no presumption of consistency of attendance and therefore of the majority of representatives having a longitudinal memory of the progress of longstanding or recurring agenda items.

⁴⁵¹ Britain Yearly Meeting: *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 2006*, Minute 20 (London: Britain Yearly Meeting 2006).

⁴⁵² *QF&P* 7.02.

⁴⁵³ *QF&P* 7.05.

⁴⁵⁴ *QF&P* 7.06.

⁴⁵⁵ Memo signed by the Deputy Recording Clerk, Juliet Prager, in the September 2017 mailing to Area Meeting clerks.

4.8 Rationalisation of committees and their members

Recast also recommended the merging of the three central committees down to two, and rationalisation of other committees. One proposal which was eventually dropped was that the Quaker Life and Quaker Peace and Social Witness representative councils should be wound up, and their role be incorporated into that of Meeting for Sufferings – which, relieved of its past responsibilities, would have spare time. Recast suggested that this would be ‘a more effective way of monitoring central committees and maintaining good communication between Area Meetings’, adding that it would ‘also serve to simplify our structures’.⁴⁵⁶ It also recommended that the Quaker World Relations Committee and the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations should be integrated. The process of rationalising the numbers of committees and of their members has been almost continuous since Recast, but by Autumn 2019 there were still 491 Quakers serving on central committees.

There has been a marked shift recently in the words used to describe the role of those Friends who serve on central committees. In the past, this service was perceived as arising from the engagement of Friends in the service to the Society and in the world as part of their responsibilities as members of a worshipping community which identified itself as ‘a priesthood of believers’.⁴⁵⁷ Now, the British Quaker website describes the organization thus:

Quakers in Britain have a complex structure made up of different meetings, groups and committees. Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) is the charitable organisation which supports

⁴⁵⁶ *The Friend* 11 February 2005, p.4.

⁴⁵⁷ 1 Peter 2:5-9.

and works on behalf of all Quakers in Britain. Most of our work is run by volunteer members with support from Britain Yearly Meeting's paid staff.'⁴⁵⁸

In other words, active Friends are depicted as 'volunteers' within a charitable organisation, not as members of a church living out their faith. The website conspicuously avoids describing the Society of Friends as a church, and emphasises the range of individual belief and experience among Quakers. The clerk of trustees has described proposals for the rationalising of committees as being necessary so as to ensure that 'valuable staff time is not taken up by serving committees'.⁴⁵⁹

The recent alterations include the redistribution, from 1 January 2007, of responsibility from Sufferings and also from the Yearly Meeting in session, to the small group of Britain Yearly Meeting trustees. Revisions to chapters 6, 7 and 8 in the most recent edition of QF&P describe the new distribution of governance responsibilities deriving from decisions agreed during Yearly Meeting sessions since 2006.⁴⁶⁰ This 5th edition of QF&P describes trustees as the body responsible for managing the central resources and assets of Britain Yearly Meeting; and Sufferings as having a 'visionary and prophetic'⁴⁶¹ role rather than the decision-making, management and governance responsibilities which it held up to the inception of trustees in January 2007.

⁴⁵⁸ <https://www.quaker.org.uk> [accessed 29 September 2018].

⁴⁵⁹ Joseph Jones, 'Its going to be an evolution but we need to get on with it'. *The Friend* 2 August, 2019, p.8-10, p.10. (An interview with the Clerk of Trustees, Caroline Nursey, whose words are quoted).

⁴⁶⁰ *QF&P*, 8:16-19.

⁴⁶¹ *QF&P*, 6.28.

4.9 Paid staff and the role of the recording clerk

Historically, the Recording Clerk has served as ‘keeper and interpreter’⁴⁶² of the regulations and procedures of the Religious Society of Friends, and from the late nineteenth century as the senior member of paid staff, most of whom were employed directly by the committees, such as the Home Mission Committee, to which they answered. Up to and including the first half of the C20th, the main standing committees were directly responsible for managing the pieces of work they identified, and for appointing and financing the costs of any staff appointed to help take forward the work of the committee. In the first instance, these committee secretaries were responsible to the committees which employed them.

By 1967, when the *Church Government* volume of the Book of Discipline current at the start of the study period was agreed, the role of the Recording Clerk was still so discrete, and so subordinated to the work of the central committees, that there was no section in that book which directly discussed either the role of the recording clerk or the management of paid staff in London Yearly Meeting. The references to the ‘Recording Clerk’ in the index relate entirely to routine record-keeping tasks.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² *QF&P*, 8.20.

⁴⁶³ London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, *Church Government* (London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1968). The index entries for Recording Clerk are: Monthly meetings to send him annual returns of marriage according to our usage, 922; and tabular statements by early February, 747; and inform him of any change of registering officer, 911; of elders or overseers, 856; or of prison ministers, 747; he is to inform monthly meetings triennially of attendance of their representatives on Meeting for Sufferings, 815; and give information on meetings and Friends resident abroad, 841; to supply registering officers with marriage forms, 923.

Since then the role of the Recording Clerk as operational manager and as line manager to staff has developed and become emphasised. The role now includes that of secretary to trustees, and responsibility for ensuring their decisions, generally made in consultation with the Recording Clerk, are executed.

The status of the Recording Clerk has changed since the inception of trustees. In March 2008, the trustees agreed to change the title of the role-holder to ‘Recording Clerk and chief executive’, effectively inserting a secular understanding of the role into the title.⁴⁶⁴ This was not a matter which was brought to the Yearly Meeting, and it would appear that once the then-current Recording Clerk retired, the new title was quietly dropped from daily use, as the phrase ‘chief executive’ is not mentioned in the job description in the 5th edition of *QF&P*, published in 2013.

QF&P does, however, note: ‘In more recent times, oversight of the management of the departments has become an important function of the Recording Clerk.’⁴⁶⁵ The day-to-day ‘oversight of the management of departments’ has not historically been the same as the role of chief executive, which in a commercial or non-profit organisation usually entails full operational responsibility and autonomy; with the incumbent being answerable to the trustees or board of directors. As well as Meeting for Sufferings, the members of standing committees such as Quaker Communications, Quaker Life, Finance & Property Central Committee, and Quaker Peace & Social Witness all made operational and strategic decisions which paid staff were tasked to execute. Since 2008 the scope of committees’ autonomy has become more circumscribed; Finance & Property became a subcommittee of the trustees, and with the appointment of a joint

⁴⁶⁴ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Appendix 3 to Documents in Advance for the 2011 Yearly Meeting*, pp. 83–87, p.85.

⁴⁶⁵ *QF&P* 8.20; see also *QF&P* (3rd ed. 2004), 7.14.

head of department over the staff of Quaker Life and Quaker Peace & Social Witness in 2016, the activities of the two departments have been increasingly harmonised.⁴⁶⁶ The Recording Clerk and Trustees together determine the (diminishing) size and Terms of Reference of committees.

The current Recording Clerk, Paul Parker, is the twenty-second incumbent of that post.

4.10 Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of the history of the organisation and structures of the Religious Society of Friends from its inception. Since the late seventeenth century a nested hierarchy of Meetings in geographic areas has sent representatives to a national committee, Meeting for Sufferings, which until advent of the small group of fourteen trustees in 2007, was ‘entrusted between Yearly Meetings with the general care of matters affecting the Society as a whole. It [was] both deliberative and executive’.⁴⁶⁷ The Yearly Meeting in session was the ‘final constitutional authority’ of the Religious Society of Friends.⁴⁶⁸

Simon Western describes the situation as one where

An organisational hierarchy of decision-making business meetings exists but there is no form of institutionalised leadership hierarchy. No priests exist nor any managers with executive power. The Quakers provide one of the longest surviving consensual or collectivist organisations in the world, surviving and evolving over a 350-year history.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ Recording Clerk’s report, Meeting for Sufferings Agenda, 2 April, 2016.

⁴⁶⁷ London Yearly Meeting, *Church Government*, 812.

⁴⁶⁸ *QF&P* 6.12.

⁴⁶⁹ Western, S (2004) Western, Simon, ‘A Critical Analysis of Leadership: How Fundamental Tendencies can be Overcome’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, Lancaster University, 2004).

It is telling that Western's comment was written in 2004, before decision-making power was concentrated in 2007 into the hands of a few, fourteen, trustees, usually acting in consultation with the lead member of staff, the Recording Clerk. This fundamentally changed the role of the church members attending the Yearly Meeting and of the representatives attending Sufferings, to one which is inevitably more passive, with little scope for the shared discernment, 'seeking the will of God', which was up to that time a characteristic of Quaker corporate life, an important part of shared worship and of building a spiritual community.

The chapter also considers some of the changing roles of particular groups and individuals in the management of the Yearly Meeting and thus also of the life and work of the Religious Society of Friends; these include the participation of women since the beginning of the C20th, and the role of the clerk and of the Recording Clerk.

The chapter discusses the place of the Yearly Meeting in the authority structures of the Society of Friends, particularly since the advent of 'flexible agendas' in 1990 and of trustees in 2007. A new event, Yearly Meeting Gathering, is now held every third year, in little expectation that it will be a decision-making occasion. Also in quest of efficiency, especially at Yearly Meeting, many of the routine items are nowadays taken on draft minute; illustrating the fact that they are, in Kuper's terms, 'ceremonial' items rather than items requiring or even enabling real discernment.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁷⁰ Kuper 'Council Structure' p.21.

The chapter refers to the re-organisations of committees which have occurred at intervals since the 1960s, and of the loss of agency of committee members, who were in the past responsible for envisioning and ensuring the execution of the work for which they were responsible, sometimes with the assistance of staff, whose salaries were paid out of funds raised by the committee. The relationship between the committees, the staff, and the work undertaken in the name of Quakers has changed. This is illustrated by a comment in 2019 by the clerk of trustees, to the effect that committees needed to be rationalised so as to free up valuable staff time.⁴⁷¹

This exhibits another (worrying) shift in understanding about the organisation and structure of the Religious Society of Friends and of Quaker work. In times past, as Roger Wilson illustrates in his account of Quaker relief work during the Second World War, Quakers understood that their participation in the work of Quaker committees or organisations was a manifestation of their spiritual engagement and participation in the Religious Society of Friends.⁴⁷² They were living out their faith, not merely ‘volunteering’; and in most instances this was true too for the paid staff, who, through receiving the income necessary to support themselves and their families, were ‘released for service’; in other words, released from the need to earn their living in another context.

Gradually, over the past half century, though particularly since the advent of trustees, the understanding among the ‘Quaker leadership’, not just among staff, appears to have changed

⁴⁷¹ Joseph Jones, ‘It’s going to be an evolution but we need to get on with it’. *The Friend* 2 August, 2019, p.8-10, p.10.

⁴⁷² Roger C. Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern*; Swarthmore Lecture (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1949).

markedly. The role of committee members is now seen as advisory and to some extent extraneous, while the 'real work' and policy-making is typically undertaken by paid staff and trustees. This can be seen in the history of 'Whoosh' and the Vibrancy Project which emanated from it, discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5: YEARLY MEETING CASE STUDIES

5.1 Chapter Outline

Following from the discussion in Chapter 3 of the theology and theory of Quaker Business Meetings among the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, and the discussion in Chapter 4 of the place of the Yearly Meeting in Quaker structures and practice, this chapter examines some examples of what has actually happened in Yearly Meeting, particularly since the introduction of Yearly Meeting trustees in 2006.

The chapter opens with a brief discussion of the content and management of some of the Yearly Meetings in the past, to give some flavour of the conduct and content of the occasion in earlier times, before focussing on the events at Yearly Meetings since the introduction of trustees and the associated changes in authority and governance arrangements in 2006.

An exploration of case studies relating to Quaker decision-making practice concerning governance, financial stewardship and property is held over to Chapter 6.

5.2 Earlier Yearly Meeting case-studies

No Yearly Meeting can be seen as complete in itself. Not only is it a bead in the sequence of such events stretching back for more than 370 years, it is also the forum at which concerns already current among local meetings and central committees are aired. By now, after almost four hundred years, there are few Yearly Meeting topics which are completely fresh; most have a history of past consideration and past decisions at central and local levels. It is helpful to be

aware of that history when considering the topics dealt with, or the characteristics of any particular Yearly Meeting.

This section opens with a discussion of three twentieth-century cases. The Yearly Meeting in 1912, roughly a hundred years before the current period, is discussed in some detail, demonstrating the range of topics which used to be brought to the Yearly Meeting for discernment. Many items were put forward by various national committees, which sought advice or confirmation about their decisions and proposed activities. It was not necessarily easy to foresee the outcome of the Yearly Meeting's deliberations, most of which led to further action on the part of members of the Yearly Meeting as well as of the relevant committee.

The mood and discipline of different Yearly Meetings is very variable, and a cluster of mid-twentieth-century meetings are cited, showing that while one was celebrated for its holy, gathered, 'waiting on the Lord', the meeting only two years later was described as one where 'the devil enters into... good, concerned, sensible people'.⁴⁷³ The second in-depth case is the Yearly Meeting of 1989, which is presented as a turning-point, after which agendas became lighter and the decision-making function of the Yearly Meeting gradually diminished.

5.2.1 The 1912 Yearly Meeting

If one is looking back over roughly a hundred years, the 1912 Yearly Meeting is the last which was not occluded by the preoccupations of the first World War. It was also exactly a century

⁴⁷³ Ormerod Greenwood, 'Some Thoughts on Yearly Meeting', *The Friend*, 17 June 1960, pp.850-851; p.850.

before the 2012 Yearly Meeting, discussed below; the first in that entire period in which absolutely no material decisions were made.

The 1912 Yearly Meeting, in Manchester, was only the second since 1656 to be held outside of London.⁴⁷⁴ It included eighteen business sessions over eight days, and the peak attendance was 1,300 people, 6.8% of the total membership (19,000 members). Some 259 of those attending were formally appointed representatives from Monthly and Quarterly Meetings. They did not have any more authority than their companions to speak or be heard; they had been appointed to ensure that there was at least a basic minimum attendance from each geographic area.⁴⁷⁵

The event was immediately preceded by two days of committee meetings, during which the Agenda for the Yearly Meeting was finalised, incorporating matters put forward for national consideration by committees such as the Friends' Foreign Mission Association. On one of the preliminary days a 'Women's Meeting' was held, successor to the Women's Yearly Meeting which had been laid down in 1896.

At that time, two Quaker periodicals, *The Friend* and *The British Friend* functioned almost as a *Hansard*⁴⁷⁶ for the Yearly Meeting, and between them almost every speaker is named and the gist of their message is recorded. The reports show that there were several items which required thoughtful consideration, leading to decisions about a way forward which had been shaped in the course of the meeting's deliberations, and which were owned by the group as a whole. In other

⁴⁷⁴ The first, in 1905, was at Leeds, following a decision to occasionally change the venue, with the hope of attracting more Quakers from the surrounding geographic area.

⁴⁷⁵ *The Friend*, 7 June 1912.

⁴⁷⁶ *Hansard*: The official daily *verbatim* reports of parliamentary proceedings in the British House of Commons and in the House of Lords.

words, the Minute, and the way forward, emerged, sometimes slowly, out of the ministry in response to the report. It was not necessarily easy to predict the outcome of an Agenda item.

Examples of such items include:

- Minute 30-31: Anti-slavery #
- Minute 46: Report of the Friends' First-day Schools Association
- Minute 47: Report of the Friends' Foreign Mission Association
- Minute 50-52: After considering how we take forward the Kingdom of God on earth, the Yearly Meeting looked at the State of the Society (of Friends);
- Minute 56: The Opium Trade#
- Minute 64: An Inter-church invitation
- Minutes 77 and 84: Colonial Defence Acts#
- Minute 82: Friends Association for Promotion of Social Purity#
- Minutes 88-92: Education

The way forward for the checked items (#) included submitting memoranda, minutes and petitions to government and to members of parliament. The recipients including the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Office, the India Office, the Colonial Office; and, generally, the Quakers sought to deliver their missives in person.

Obviously, the deliberation process took time. A table in *The Friend*⁴⁷⁷ charts the time spent on the four main topics considered at the Yearly Meeting. It is not complete, as it does not include

⁴⁷⁷ *The Friend*, 7 June 1912, p.376.

the time spent correcting the draft minute for two of these topics. The intention of the table was to show how effective a new '7-minute rule' had been on limiting the length of the ministry offered by individual garrulous speakers. It would appear from the reports in *The Friend* that the 'longest address' on each topic was that by the person introducing it, speaking from the podium.

One of the longest sessions, with the highest number of Friends ministering, was the wide-ranging deliberation about the State of the Society of Friends (Minutes 50–52), which took account of the reports received from the different committees, including Sufferings, and covered practical as well as spiritual issues.

The biggest surprise item of the Yearly Meeting was the matter of the Colonial Defence Acts, which had been presented as a matter for information, but which was soon recognised as a matter of substantial importance, on which time needed to be spent, as well as, the Meeting resolved, expertise and finance for work in the field.⁴⁷⁸

Another unexpected, and contentious, item had not even been on the planned Yearly Meeting agenda: an 18-minute presentation by a Quaker under concern, about the Moral and Spiritual Reasons for the Women's Vote. This item was heavily controlled and strictly clerked, with little opportunity given to the meeting for the abrasive discussion which the clerk feared would break out. Despite this control, the Meeting returned briefly to the topic the following morning.

⁴⁷⁸ The Colonial Defence Acts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa were to impose conscription, four years before it was imposed in Britain during WW1. The Yearly Meeting resolved to designate a Quaker with legal expertise to visit each of the colonies and to engage with peace churches and other pacifist groups and with the government, with a view to seeking to incorporate into the legislation scope for conscientious objection. The legislation which eventuated in each of the four countries (each with its own local conditions and legal history) continues today to be the basis for the (varying levels of) protection offered to conscientious objectors in those countries.

In 1912, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Yearly Meeting functioned as “the prime meeting for church affairs” for British Quakers. The meeting received reports and financial statements from all of the major committees, including Sufferings, the Friends Foreign Mission Association, and the First Day Schools Association; commented on them, and gave guidance for the way forward in the coming year. It gave guidance about spending and about the management of assets, and about the circumstances under which it would provide financial support for Friends travelling under concern, or released for service. On some topics, such as slavery, the opium trade, and newspapers which promoted betting, it encouraged the relevant committees to engage with government departments, MPs and business leaders. Some items required continued action, or engagement, by Friends in their Quarterly or Monthly Meetings over the course of the coming year; and both the State of the Society session and the session on Christians in Business challenged individual Friends as well as the different levels of meeting community to review and perhaps change their own spiritual practice and their behaviour in very practical ways.

The considerations demonstrate that in 1912 the Yearly Meeting participants, the clerks and the agenda committee took seriously the Yearly Meeting’s role in providing guidance for the way in which Meeting for Sufferings and other committees took forward their work in the coming year.

5.2.2 A cluster of Yearly Meetings in the Mid-Twentieth Century

The experience of three Yearly Meetings in the mid-twentieth century shows how variable they can be, and that a constructive Yearly Meeting depends on the commitment and engagement of the participants.

After the 1958 Yearly Meeting, an editorial in *The Friend*, titled 'In Gratitude' was a paen of joy about the occasion:

It has been, above all, a Yearly Meeting of major deliberation on profoundly important issues; our sovereign legislative body (composed of all our members who come to legislate) operative and alive.⁴⁷⁹

But just a couple of years later, in 1960, Ormerod Greenwood commented forcefully, also in *The Friend*, that:

The main sessions of LYM of 1960 were, largely, failures – some of them literally what the current slang calls a 'dead loss'.⁴⁸⁰

We simply cannot risk another Yearly Meeting like 1960. But no proposals for reform can make any difference unless we can find a sense of discipline in the Meeting, and some kind of contact with the age in which we live.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ *The Friend*, 'In Gratitude'. Editorial, 6 June, 1958, p.694. It continues: 'In previous years one has sometimes been aware of an assembly rather than a gathering. But this year there was surely a miracle. Notes were sounded, and lo! They were repeated on another scale, and formed a growing harmony. Words were used, and we were aware of a reality beyond words.....'

⁴⁸⁰ Ormerod Greenwood, 'Some Thoughts on Yearly Meeting'. *The Friend*, June 17 1960, pp.850–851; p.850. He adds (p.850): 'The successes of the gathering were on the periphery', in events such as the Swarthmore Lecture, a sculpture exhibition by Peter Peri, the Elders' and the Overseers' events, and a programmed Meeting for Worship, with readings and music, on the Sunday evening.

⁴⁸¹ Greenwood, 'Some Thoughts on Yearly Meeting'. He asks (p.850) 'Should not the YM Elders discharge a more active function in wrestling (behind the scenes & between the sessions) with those who 'outrun their guide', speak too frequently, at too great length, and in wrong ordering? Perhaps this is done; if so, we need still more desperate measures. But the offenders, we know, are in ordinary life good, concerned, sensible people; when they get into the LMH [the Large Meeting House] the devil enters into them. At some stages it really seemed as if the only remedy would be to have a Catholic priest come and exorcise the place. When appeals for discipline and brevity were made from the table and the floor, it was comic and pathetic to hear the offenders joining in, plucking notes out of other people's eyes instead of beams out of their own'.

'What is so galling, so appalling, is to know that in the Society, and even in any Yearly Meeting session, there is stored-up knowledge, first-hand experience, spiritual insight, which we cannot get at, because of the confident

Perhaps counterintuitively to the modern reader, the Editorial in that issue of *The Friend* ascribes at least some of the blame for the disarray on the over-controlling by the planning group:⁴⁸²

Altogether, there are distinct signs that the wedding of programming and spontaneity in Yearly Meeting is none too happy a one. It is tempting to blame the body of the Meeting for indiscipline, and to rely on more planning and control as the solution. But the body of the Meeting and its search together for the will of God are the real and original Yearly Meeting; and the unrestful quality of this search in recent years may be due, among other things, not least to the unforeseen limiting effects on the general spontaneity of the increasing element of skilled planning.

And the following year, in 1961 after the Saturday evening session, *The Friend* noted:

Our impression is that a mist suddenly descended in the Large Meeting House, setting 500 people groping. And, what was worse, there was bog underfoot, and the best intentioned gropers became smeared with it as they struggled.⁴⁸³

twittering and anecdotage of a set of self-important parish counsellors; to know that if we would be quiet and listen, if we would repent, and really humble ourselves, we might hear ...*the voice of God*. [emphasis in text].

⁴⁸² *The Friend*, 'Editorial: This Fragile Experiment', 17 June 1960, pp.842–3, (p.843).

'Deeper than the need to produce orderliness is the need to release genuine spontaneity in the body of the Meeting; to re-create such conditions as will produce deep ministry out of the unexpected guidance of God there and then, instead of the repetition by a few, year after year, of things they have always thought and often, too often, said. '

⁴⁸³ *The Friend*, Report of Saturday Evening Session: 'Social & Economic Affairs Committee: Towards a Christian Attitude to Work' Introduced by Leslie Laycock', 2 June, 1961, p.730.

5.2.3 Yearly Meeting 1989: Aberdeen: the comportment of the clerk and of the Yearly Meeting

One of the pivotal Yearly Meetings of the past half-century was that held at Aberdeen in 1989. Its deliberations can be seen as a case study of the management of a contested topic among British Quakers at their Yearly Meeting. I suggest that the events of the Aberdeen Yearly Meeting still have repercussions in the way in which Yearly Meetings are planned and managed, as well as in the consequences of decisions made then.

Aberdeen was a residential Yearly Meeting, the first held in Scotland since 1948. Participants were accommodated on one university campus, and the morning activities and interest groups took place at another.⁴⁸⁴ The business sessions of the Yearly Meeting were held at yet another site, the Old Music Hall in the town centre. Each afternoon, the participants were moved by a fleet of buses to and from the town venue. The buses, and the music hall, had been hired for precisely limited time slots, with no scope for sessions over-running.⁴⁸⁵ So the time available for the Yearly Meeting business sessions was highly circumscribed, just three hours a day. In an Agenda of 53 items, the issues of membership of the Religious Society of Friends and membership of Churches Together took up a significant chunk of three of the six sessions available for Yearly Meeting business that year.

⁴⁸⁴ These activities incidentally ranged from Quaker history workshops to ‘fun with mathematics’ and playing with clay. Organised opportunities for family fun at residential Yearly Meetings long predates their 2009 re-branding as ‘Yearly Meeting Gatherings’.

⁴⁸⁵ ‘After lunch, however, came the business of the day. A well-organized fleet of buses swept us down from the Old Town to the New where, in the stately Music Hall, Yearly Meeting held its 3 hour sessions. These were punctuated by a 5 minute ‘shuffle’, with fruit juice thoughtfully provided. The long two-part sessions were, as it turned out, not long enough for the business, but they were as much as the human frame of most of us could stand – the afternoon can be a sleepy time and we are often not at our brightest and best.’ (D.F [David Firth, the Editor] *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1011.

After what was reported in the Quaker press as a ‘stormy’ Yearly Meeting,⁴⁸⁶ the editor of *The Friend*, David Firth, wrote:

What a strange Yearly Meeting! While we could all enjoy the positive features of the week... the actual sessions seemed during the first four days to be spiralling downwards, and the whole beautiful concept of the Yearly Meeting seemed in jeopardy. Many Friends, like the present writer, must have gone to bed on Wednesday evening in near despair at the sense of undisciplined, ungenerous irritation which had developed; and with perhaps the fear that the Yearly Meeting, having thrown out the proposals of the Membership Review Committee, might also in its black mood decide not to join in the Inter-Church process. And if so, why had we come all this way!⁴⁸⁷

Firth does not cast himself as a dispassionate observer, and his phrasing betrays his sympathies. But his juxtaposition of the Membership Review deliberations and the Churches Together sessions is a helpful key to understanding the events and the repercussions of this Yearly Meeting. Plain practical circumstances created some of the context for the ‘undisciplined, ungenerous, irritation’. *The Friend* reports that the Quakers present felt frustrated by the limitations on the time available for agenda items. It was hard to gain a sense that decisions had been made with any deliberation if they were made with an eye fixed on the clock, and there was only time for a very few individuals to speak from the floor:

⁴⁸⁶ *The Friend*, 25 August, 1989, p.1083.

⁴⁸⁷ *The Friend*, 11 August, 1989, p.1012.

The introductions were without exception thoughtful and helpful, and not over-long. But if, as did happen, there was only time for six or seven subsequent contributions, the Meeting had no sense that it had truly considered the subject.⁴⁸⁸

In other words, the exigencies of a long agenda, coupled with strict time-management by the clerk, meant that the participants were conscious, again and again during the week, that the conditions for the right-holding of business meetings had been suspended, and that time-management had been given precedence over the Quaker process of reflective discernment.

The Meeting resisted: during the periods set for agreeing the content and wording of a minute, instead of confining themselves to matters of phrasing, voices from the floor re-opened matters of contention. And if that didn't work, ministry during worship sessions aired points which would have been more appropriately dealt with in the previous day's deliberative session.⁴⁸⁹ Dandelion records that:

At Yearly Meeting in 1989, Friends shouted out at the Clerk following what they saw as a premature acceptance of an incomplete minute. The Clerk was able to restore order through the use of the microphone and the peer group pressure of the large numbers present.⁴⁹⁰

The Churches Together item appeared first, on the Monday afternoon. It was introduced by Val Fergusson, who responded to comments and requests for clarification. The real deliberation of the

⁴⁸⁸ David Firth, *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1012.

⁴⁸⁹ Minute 38, from Friday 4th August, amended Minute 25, on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, from Wednesday 2nd August. Minute 39, also from Friday 4th August, clarified the decisions recorded in Minute 28, on Membership matters, from Tuesday 1st August.

⁴⁹⁰ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.206.

issue was reserved for Thursday. Consideration about membership of the Religious Society of Friends was timetabled for a single session on Wednesday afternoon, as the Agenda Committee had assumed that this topic had been well-rehearsed at Meeting for Sufferings and in local meetings, and that the recommendations would be accepted with little quibbling.

However, *The Friend* reports that there was a distinct air of adversariality in the hall as Peter Eccles, the clerk of the Membership Review Committee, introduced the changes which that committee proposed in the regulations concerning membership of the Religious Society of Friends.⁴⁹¹ He explained that the committee had been constituted in 1984 at the request of Meeting for Sufferings, as the latest in a series of enquiries and reports on the topic since 1964. The issues had been discussed in local Meetings and in Area Meetings around the country, with comments sent to the committee for consideration. In April 1988, the committee had submitted its proposals to Meeting for Sufferings, which had modified and accepted them, and sent them forward to the 1989 Yearly Meeting.

The Yearly Meeting accepted that the members of the Membership Review Committee had worked hard, for several years, in good faith. It was thankful for all the comments received from local meetings. It recognised that Meeting for Sufferings had accepted the committee recommendations. It understood that both Sufferings and the Membership Review Committee had been faithful to the Quaker business method, prayerfully discerning the way forward. But the Yearly Meeting did not agree with the recommendations.

⁴⁹¹ *The Friend*, 11 August, 1989 p.1053.

Eventually, an unusual proposal was accepted with relief: rather than defer the matter for further consideration at a subsequent Yearly Meeting ‘it was suggested from the floor that the Yearly Meeting should not be pressed to make a decision, that the committee should be thanked for its work, that we should accept the recommendations about the choices for children and then leave it alone’.⁴⁹² The Minute which was eventually agreed said:

We acknowledge that we are not in unity over many of the recommendations contained in the report... We agree that it is not right to ask Meeting for Sufferings to consider this matter further. We wish to record our thanks to those Friends who have laboured to produce the report....⁴⁹³

At the end of the session, Eccles described the decision-making process as ‘snakes and ladders’, and said that the proposals had fallen at ‘snake no. 99’, the last possible snake on the board.⁴⁹⁴

It is possible to perceive that the rebelliousness of the Yearly Meeting, the unwillingness to be dragooned into decisions, and the irritation with artificial time-limits to deliberations, were all signs of corporate, spiritual, good health – indicating that the participants in the Meeting laid greater value on the Quaker business processes of which they had been deprived than the agenda committee and clerks had demonstrated in providing such abbreviated decision-making opportunities. But some ‘public Friends’ felt strongly that the truculence of the Yearly Meeting

⁴⁹² *The Friend*, 11 August, 1989 p.1053.

⁴⁹³ London Yearly Meeting, ‘Minute 25, Membership Review Committee Report’ *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1989*, (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1989).

⁴⁹⁴ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1053.

needed to be dealt with. An informal group of Monthly Meeting Elders composed a paper on the Wednesday evening, which they presented in the following day's session:

The letter drew attention to several unhelpful practices which had developed, and emphasised that though all were responsible for the right holding of Yearly Meeting the clerks carried a particular burden of responsibility and needed Friends' support.⁴⁹⁵

Firth reports that 'Elders were rightly anxious about the discipline of the meeting, and the letter quoted some relevant parts of Church Government,⁴⁹⁶ drew attention to the burden carried by the clerks, and ended with some healing words of Isaac Pennington.'⁴⁹⁷ Off-stage, it is apparent that the clerks were eldered too; *The Friend* notes that:

The clerk then said that YM agenda committee had become very aware that not enough time was being allowed for 'unhurried deliberation' and that this had been the cause of many of the week's problems. The afternoon session would therefore give as much time as possible to the inter-church process, and only a brief period for Epistle drafting suggestions.⁴⁹⁸

Firth recounts that:

In the ensuing consideration of whether to apply for membership of the new ecumenical bodies, there was no longer a sense of rush, and this important decision, the climax of the

⁴⁹⁵ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1013.

⁴⁹⁶ London Yearly Meeting, paras 715, 786 *Church Government* (London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1968); London Yearly Meeting, Para 404, *Christian Faith & Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1960).

⁴⁹⁷ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1013.

⁴⁹⁸ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1060.

Yearly Meeting, was made in that Quaker sense of unity which is not the same as unanimity⁴⁹⁹.

However, not everyone present remembered the final Churches Together session quite so benignly. Almost a decade later Heron recalled that:

Unfortunately, the 'inter-Church process' had its own deadlines to meet, which accorded ill with traditional Quaker ways of reaching decisions, already under strain through the time-constraints of the heavy agenda facing the Yearly Meeting. In theory, if the clerk of any Quaker meeting for worship for business cannot feel that unity – as distinct from both 'unanimity' and 'consensus' – has been reached, the matter should be deferred to 'a later time or date'. In the prevailing circumstances, that would have meant re-opening consideration of the matter at the next yearly meeting. Against this background, it is obvious that when a decision was reached to apply for full membership of the new ecumenical body, there would be some present at that session who doubted whether it had been in 'right ordering'.⁵⁰⁰

In other words, it was not necessary to disagree with the decision itself – though some did – to have reservations about whether the decision was well-made. Though John Southern observes that:

the feeling that Friends were rushed into a decision or that Aberdeen Yearly Meeting was not representative of the concerns being expressed elsewhere. This of course is not a

⁴⁹⁹ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, p.1014.

⁵⁰⁰ Alastair Heron, *The British Quakers 1647–1997* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 1997), p.38.

matter of fact but of sensitivity, who among us can be sure we are witnessing the Holy Spirit at work? But are we so unfaithful and untrusting?⁵⁰¹

During the deliberation, the clerk, very unusually, called upon a ‘weighty Friend’⁵⁰² who had not stood in the hope of being called to speak:

Erica Vere reminded the meeting of the Quaker concept of unity, which was not unanimity. She had a sense that Friends were near to understanding God’s will in this matter and that they were being called to unity with other churches, and towards a unity which would deepen as the years went by.⁵⁰³

At the end of the last business session of the Yearly Meeting, Hugh Pyper, a theology lecturer and a member of the arrangements committee which planned the gathering, was asked to provide a concluding ‘Reflection’. *The Friend* reports that:

he began by saying that he was reluctant to be standing there, in fact, for quite a lot of the Yearly Meeting he would rather not have been there. He had seen mention of a ‘Celebration’ at the end of the programme and asked himself what there was to celebrate. He did not celebrate the Yearly Meeting’s commitment to the inter-church process, which would involve hard work and might be a mistake, but he would not say that the decision was hasty and taken out of the Light.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰¹ John Southern, ‘Working with Other Churches’, *Friends Quarterly*, 27:2 (April 1992), pp.80–85, p.84.

⁵⁰² A ‘weighty Friend’ is one whose personal authority, wisdom or charisma is tacitly or overtly acknowledged by other Quakers.

⁵⁰³ *The Friend*, 11 August, 1989, p.1062.

⁵⁰⁴ *The Friend*, 11 August, 1989, p.1065.

‘Two months on from Yearly Meeting in Aberdeen’, said an editorial in *Friends Quarterly*:

the impact of the occasion is still very much alive... However, it was widely felt that the plenary sessions, ie the deliberative and worshipping main purpose of Yearly Meeting, was not the most satisfactory aspect of the week’s gathering, though the subjects were certainly weighty enough and for the most part well presented...Perhaps the session in which we began to grapple with this was the one on the inter-church process, where there was considerable wrestling and pain and mistrust on the part of some Friends. Scotland General Meeting had already indicated its desire and intention to join the new ecumenical body for Scotland, so a decision by London Yearly Meeting not to join would have been, to say the least, embarrassing.⁵⁰⁵

Three years after Aberdeen Yearly Meeting, the matter was still not resolved within the Religious Society of Friends. Alex Tindall reports that:

In September 1989 London Yearly Meeting (LYM) became a full member of Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland (CCBI) and other ecumenical bodies. Many have been unhappy with this development ever since, and recently Friends of several preparative meetings have so crystallised their concerns that they have asked their monthly meetings to forward to the recording clerk a minute to this effect.⁵⁰⁶

In other words, the matter was not done and dusted at Yearly Meeting in 1989. The discussions continued to percolate in other parts of the London Yearly Meeting structure, indicating that there

⁵⁰⁵ *Friends Quarterly*, 25:8, 1989, pp.386–387.

⁵⁰⁶ Alex R. Tindall, ‘Friends and Churches’ *Friends Quarterly*, 27:2 (April 1992), pp.69–80, p.70.

was no sense of completion or full resolution at the Yearly Meeting, even after the decision had been acted upon, and the Religious Society of Friends had joined CTBI. I would suggest that this failure of commitment is not simply because there was disagreement over the decision itself, or because it exemplifies the wide span of theological understanding within the Religious Society of Friends, but also because of the failure of process in the way it was made.

In his analysis of the Religious Society of Friends in the late twentieth-century, Dandelion discusses the proceedings in terms of two grieving groups of Friends painfully negotiating their future. He describes as ‘paradoxical’⁵⁰⁷ the decision by London Yearly Meeting to join Churches Together at a point in Quaker history when:

Quakers no longer maintain a normative Quaker-Christianity at a popular level, and exhibit patterns of popular belief which are best described as post-Christian.⁵⁰⁸

He puts forward five possible reasons why the decision was taken; these include ignorance on the part of the promoters of the proposal of the post-Christian nature of the group; defiance to the non-Christian Quakers; deference by the non-Christians to the Christians; and conflict avoidance either within the group or with the churches.⁵⁰⁹

Dandelion is referring to the content of the decision, but there are two systemic factors, both identified by Audrey Richards in her discussion of ‘councils’ within social organisations; likely to have been relevant both in the Aberdeen Churches Together decision and in a range of other decisions made in other Yearly Meetings: one is the vested interest or partisanship on the part of

⁵⁰⁷ Dandelion *A Sociological Analysis*, p.183.

⁵⁰⁸ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.179.

⁵⁰⁹ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, p.184.

members of the group responsible for proposing the decision; and the other is the general conservatism and inertia of a large group making, or ratifying, a decision proposed by the appointed leaders.⁵¹⁰

Already, in the course of that Yearly Meeting, Friends had broken the behavioural code, and disconcerted the clerk and the other officials of the gathering, both by challenging the recommendations of at least one committee (Membership), and also through their resistance when the clerk had rushed the meeting through a decision. Under the circumstances, it would have been especially difficult for the Yearly Meeting community to have ignored the injunctions of the Yearly Meeting elders earlier in that same afternoon, to adhere to Quaker discipline in the conduct of the Meeting for Worship for Business; or for the Meeting to have insisted that the Churches Together decision be deferred, even if only for further consideration on the Friday afternoon.

Most if not all of the appointed ‘leadership group’ (ie the clerks and the Agenda Committee) was committed to promoting the Society of Friends’ joining Churches Together.⁵¹¹ The pronouncement by Erica Vere, the weighty Friend asked by the clerk to speak, conveyed to the meeting that she was privy to the will of God, which was that the Society of Friends join the inter-church body. This kind of prophetic statement, if it is accepted by the group, is remarkably powerful, and it diminishes the authority of any speaker arguing for a different outcome. As Dandelion points out, making this kind of pronouncement can be very risky for the ‘weighty’

⁵¹⁰ Audrey Richards, ‘The Nature of the Problem’, in *Councils in Action*, ed. by Audrey Richards and Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) pp.1–12. See Chapter 2.

⁵¹¹ Christine Davis (the Assistant Clerk at the 1989 Yearly Meeting) and Rowena Loverance both subsequently served as presidents of Churches Together – posts which would not have been open to them without the participation of the Religious Society of Friends in those bodies.

Friend concerned, as, if the pronouncement is not accepted, the authoritative ‘mouthpiece’ risks losing respect and status as well as the current argument.⁵¹²

The Yearly Meeting of 1989, in Aberdeen, has been remembered as the Yearly Meeting when the contentious decision was made to become a member of the local body of the World Council of Churches: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.⁵¹³ It is less vividly remembered for the eldering received by the body of the meeting and by the clerk, for their behaviour; nor for an event which has become increasingly unlikely in recent Yearly Meetings: not just the repudiation of a committee’s recommendations, but the decision that the committee should be laid down rather than bring forward revised recommendations.

Tucked among the reflections in *The Friend* in the week after the Aberdeen Yearly Meeting, there is an insight about the wider causes of the ‘black mood’ of the Yearly Meeting:

One reason must be that London Yearly Meeting is going through a complex crisis, so that it would have been unrealistic to expect a Yearly Meeting of unalloyed sweetness and light. This crisis is not centred on that familiar, centuries old, divergence between Christian and Universal, but on the more mundane problems of raising the money for Quaker work, deciding how much of that work should be laid down, and what to do about Friends House, the eternal cry of ‘grassroots good, centralisation bad’. None of these items was specifically an agenda item, but they kept surfacing.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² I am not conscious of similar ‘prophetic’ statements having being made in Yearly Meetings in Britain over the past decade, invoking the mind of God. Perhaps this is associated with the diffusion of belief within the Society of Friends over the period.

⁵¹³ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*, pp.184–185.

⁵¹⁴ *The Friend*, 11 August 1989, pp.1012–1013.

Rather than confront these issues head-on – and thereby helping to reinforce the role of the Yearly Meeting as an engaged, authoritative decision-making body; the Agenda Committee took another route. In planning the immediately subsequent Yearly Meetings, and recognising that at least part of the unsatisfactory nature of the 1989 meeting was due to the limited nature of the time available, the Agenda Committee determined that the deliberations should not be constrained by time.⁵¹⁵ The agenda for 1990, and subsequently, was reduced in length – and scope, with fewer items for discernment, and sufficient unallocated time built into the programme for the agenda to be ‘flexible’, in case deliberations over an item were to overrun their allotted slot. These reduced agendas, and the diminution in the number of items presented in any one year for meaningful decision by the Yearly Meeting became, as it turned out, a step in the process of diminishing the decision-making role and responsibilities of the Yearly Meeting.

5.3 Yearly Meetings since the introduction of Trustees

This chapter does not suggest that there has been a sudden change in the content or management of Yearly Meetings since the introduction of trustees, effective from January 2007. However, it is certainly true that the Agenda Committee, the clerks of the Yearly Meeting and the Recording Clerk have been aware that the locus of authority has shifted from Meeting for Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting towards the new, small, group. The cases discussed below all illustrate the diminished opportunities for meaningful discernment in the Yearly Meeting, and the gradual

⁵¹⁵ London Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1990* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1990).

translation of the event into that of a ‘gathering’. The partial exception, the (heavily managed) 2009 decision on same-sex marriage, was for many of the people present at that Yearly Meeting, their first experience of a ‘gathered’ meeting for worship for business, in the course of which many participants discarded the preconceptions with which they had arrived, and in which the meeting found unity.

5.3.1 Yearly Meeting 2008: Censorship on the part of the Agenda Committee

It has been the Quaker practice since the seventeenth-century to compose an Epistle at each Yearly Meeting, to send to Meetings abroad and to those who did not attend the Yearly Meeting. The Epistles have sometimes been exhortatory, more recently they have tended to be (sometimes banal) letters of greeting. Sometimes they have been the source or focus of Quaker conflict, as in the Epistle received by London Yearly Meeting in 1912 which was sent back unopened to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, with which British Friends were not in charitable agreement.⁵¹⁶

Currently, there are more than 80 Yearly Meetings around the world, far too many for each Epistle to be read out at a Yearly Meeting session.⁵¹⁷ In Britain there has been a practice that excerpts from a couple of Epistles each year should be read.⁵¹⁸ All of the Epistles, and the Testimonies to the Grace of God in the lives of deceased Friends, are traditionally included in the *Documents in Advance* of a Yearly Meeting, for British Quakers to read at leisure.

⁵¹⁶ London Yearly Meeting: *Yearly Meeting Proceedings, 1912* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1912).

⁵¹⁷ <http://fwcc.world/calendars/calendar-of-yearly-meetings-2019>.

⁵¹⁸ These always include the Epistle from Ireland Yearly Meeting, which encompasses both sides of the Irish border, and which co-operates with Britain Yearly Meeting in some concerns, such as the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations.

However, the Agenda Committee for the 2008 Yearly Meeting had chosen not to include in the Documents in Advance all the Epistles which had been received, but only those ‘felt to be uplifting in their spiritual content’.⁵¹⁹ An Epistle from East Africa Yearly Meeting North (EAYMN) was omitted, together with ‘a few other epistles’ from Yearly Meetings with a conservative mind-set’.⁵²⁰ The EAYMN Epistle from 2006 contained views on homosexuality which a young British Quaker, Jez Smith, later described in *The Friend* as ‘anathema to ours’.⁵²¹ This, effectively, was censorship. The whole presentation of the Epistles item in the Yearly Meeting session and in the Documents in Advance was, effectively, duplicitous, in that it did not make clear that any Epistles had been omitted, and that censorship had been practiced.⁵²² Whilst a commitment to Truth is part of Quaker values, this had not been paramount in the minds of the Agenda Committee members preparing for the Yearly Meeting. They had put cultural sensitivity above transparency. Susan Robson, a member of the Agenda Committee at the time, recalls of the deliberations in the Yearly Meeting session that:

It soon became clear that this decision was not acceptable, and requests were made that the Agenda Committee should explain itself to the yearly meeting. The assistant clerk, who had clerked the decision in Agenda Committee, had the difficult experience of three former occupants of the yearly meeting table rising to deplore the decision.⁵²³

⁵¹⁹ *The Friend*, 30 May 2008, p.3.

⁵²⁰ Susan Robson, *Living with Conflict: a Challenge to a Peace Church* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2014), p.179.

⁵²¹ Jez Smith, *The Friend*, 13 June, 2008.

⁵²² Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2008, Epistles and Testimonies* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2008).

⁵²³ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.181. ‘occupants of the yearly meeting table’ ie clerks or assistant clerks from previous years.

It was eventually decided that the full set of epistles should be made available in the Friends House library for perusal; but the epistles omitted from the Documents in Advance would not be obtainable over the internet. The Yearly Meeting Minute is discreet, and gives little indication of the disquiet, or of the values which prompted it. Minute 35 of the 2008 Yearly Meeting reported that a Friend had read from a selection of Epistles, and had provided ‘an interesting summary of their contents.’⁵²⁴ It says:

We have heard an explanation from the Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee of their decision not to publish epistles received from all other Yearly Meetings this year. We thank Agenda Committee for wrestling with this issue on our behalf, and recognise their care for gay and lesbian Friends who share an equal place in our Yearly Meeting.⁵²⁵

The matter provoked correspondence in *The Friend* for several weeks after the Yearly Meeting. One correspondent pointed out that the entire discussion had been held in the absence of the text in question, which almost no-one but the Agenda Committee had actually read.⁵²⁶ Altogether, for a faith group which celebrates its commitment to ‘Truth’⁵²⁷ this was a puzzling instance of censorship and of the concealment of censorship. In their paternalist decision to protect Quakers sensitive about homophobia from offence, the agenda committee created an even bigger problem through their practice of censorship and the lack of transparency. Further, this

⁵²⁴ Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, ‘Minute 35’ *Proceedings; Yearly Meeting 2008* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2008).

⁵²⁵ Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, ‘Minute 35’ *Proceedings; Yearly Meeting 2008* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2008).

⁵²⁶ *The Friend*, 13 June 2008, p.15.

⁵²⁷ An early name for the Religious Society of Friends was ‘Friends of the Truth’—referencing John 14:6: Jesus’ statement ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Light’. Truth-telling has long been one of the Quaker ‘Testimonies’ (*QF&P*, 19:32 coda; 19:37).

judgemental ‘solution’ did absolutely nothing towards acknowledging the views of other Quakers around the world, which is surely a necessary step towards mutual understanding. Effectively this action demonstrated a lack of respect for the Quakers who had sent the unpalatable letters. By refraining from engagement with the content, and with the views of those Quakers abroad, mutual bigotry was reinforced. If anything, this incident made it even more unlikely that Quakers in Africa and elsewhere might just come to appreciate the views of British Quakers, and, more importantly, refrain from judging the sexuality of their own members.

5.3.2 Yearly Meeting Gathering, York 2009: Same-sex Marriage

Many Quakers who were at the Yearly Meeting Gathering in York in 2009 perceive the decision at that Yearly Meeting, for to Society of Friends to advocate for the legalisation of same-sex marriage, as a prime recent event which demonstrates that Quakers may still be ‘moved by the Spirit’ to take a decision which is courageous and which is not necessarily the outcome expected by the organisers of that meeting.⁵²⁸ Some of the people present were awed by the experience:

There was a gentle, slight breeze which flowed through the room as we made that decision. It really felt that it was the wind of the Spirit.⁵²⁹

It was such a gathered session. It was so, so gathered. I came away just rapturous.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁸ Penelope Cummins, *So was it the wind of the Spirit or just a gentle summer breeze? The Quaker decision to embrace same-sex marriage*. Paper presented at the Oral History Society Conference, Leeds, 2017.

⁵²⁹ Cummins, *So was it the wind of the Spirit?* p.9.

⁵³⁰ Cummins, *So was it the wind of the Spirit* p.9.

To have someone come up to me in quiet conversation and say ‘I’ve changed my mind, I want to go along with the same terms for everyone’ was one of the many special moments of this week. Such openness is inspiring.⁵³¹

When the meeting started I was doubtful about using the word ‘marriage’ for these ceremonies. The process of the Yearly Meeting has helped me to see that we can only call them marriages.⁵³²

However, the same-sex marriage decision can also be seen as one which was heavily managed and crafted; and one which was announced to the world before it had actually been concluded.⁵³³

There was a long history to the matter in the Religious Society of Friends. Quaker consideration about marriage long-precedes any consideration of same-sex marriage. The insight expressed in 1669 that ‘marriage is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses’ has been a continuing understanding, which has informed the Society of Friends’ decision to advocate for and to embrace the legalisation of same-sex marriage.⁵³⁴ Marriage affects property rights and the legitimacy of children, as well as being the formalisation of a relationship between two individuals. Early Quakers took care that any marriage took place in the presence of multiple witnesses, so that marriage promises were made in public within the community.⁵³⁵ Neither of the individuals concerned nor any other party could later assert that the promises had not been made and that the relationship was temporary or unofficial. By the 1690s the custom had been

⁵³¹ *The Friend*, 7 August 2009, p.11.

⁵³² Janet Scott, *The Friend*, 7 August 2009, p.7.

⁵³³ Personally, I do not see it as an exception to the general trend of centralised decision-management, except in that the Yearly Meeting was more radical than the agenda committee had dared to expect; and, importantly, the body of the meeting had a real sense of ownership of the decision:

⁵³⁴ *QF&P*, 16:01.

⁵³⁵ *QF&P*, 16:03–16.04.

established that everyone present at a meeting for worship at which marriage promises were made, wrote their names on the marriage certificate, as witnesses to the marriage.⁵³⁶

This practice continued even after the Marriage Act of 1753 recognised Quaker marriages as legal. In terms of the Marriage Act of 1949, while Friends continued to be able to marry according to Quaker custom, they were required to appoint one of their number as a registering officer, to be present at the marriage and to ensure that legal documentation was properly completed and submitted.

The first really detailed consideration of human sexuality in London Yearly Meeting occurred among a small, self-selected committee of eleven people, mainly academics and people with a professional interest in human sexuality. After more than four years of discussion, they produced a pamphlet, *Towards a Quaker view of sex* (TQVS),⁵³⁷ which was adopted by the Yearly Meeting in 1963 for publication under Quaker auspices, though not necessarily as the expressed view of the Society as a whole.⁵³⁸ At the time, much of the comment which the TQVS pamphlet attracted

⁵³⁶ The Woodbrooke archive holds a printed Quaker marriage certificate from that date, with space for signatures by multiple witnesses.

⁵³⁷ Alastair Heron, ed., *Towards a Quaker View of Sex: An Essay by a Group of Friends* (London: Home Service Committee, Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting, 1963).

⁵³⁸ In 1962, for instance, a newcomer to Yearly Meeting had observed a squeamish reticence about the topic: 'Admiration at the conduct of affairs throughout the four days was tempered with some disappointment in the 'Personal Standards' session. I share much of the distaste for the subject of sex, but it presents Friends with a major practical and spiritual challenge today, and the rapidity with which Friends changed the subject (let's talk about something else) seemed to me a not untypical example of Friends' evasion of stern and unpleasant reality (*The Friend*, 'Newcomers look at Yearly Meeting', 15 June, 1962, p.747).

was about its compassionate attitude to divorce among heterosexual couples, then still a relatively unusual and stigmatising event in British society, especially among church members.⁵³⁹,⁵⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, in a context where many churches preached homophobia, the public stance of the Society of Friends attracted many LGB people as participants. In 1973 the Friends' Homosexual Fellowship was formed.⁵⁴¹ And in 1987 the matter of same-sex marriage was brought for the first time to Meeting for Sufferings as a concern. At that stage, the matter didn't come to Yearly Meeting, but excerpts from the Sufferings minute were later included in *QF&P*.⁵⁴²

The Sufferings minute reminded Friends that even though same-sex marriage was not legal, it was perfectly possible for Friends to host a celebration of commitment for couples. Robson notes that this option was rarely used, even in meetings where there was a sizeable gay community.⁵⁴³

⁵³⁹ David Blamires, *Pushing at The Frontiers of Change; A Memoir of Quaker Involvements With Homosexuality*. (London: Quaker Books, 2012); Susan Robson: *Living with Conflict; a Challenge to a Peace Church* (Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2014), p.175.

⁵⁴⁰ Two paragraphs from TQVS which made it into QF&P succinctly illustrate the contents of the pamphlet, and the view of human love and sexuality which has informed the corporate Quaker position over the past sixty years:

We see no reason why the physical nature of a sexual act should be the criterion by which the question whether or not it is moral should be decided. An act which (for example) expresses true affection between two individuals and gives pleasure to them both, does not seem to us to be sinful by reason alone of the fact that it is homosexual. The same criterion seems to us to apply whether a relationship is heterosexual or homosexual (QF&P, 22:15).

Where there is genuine tenderness, an openness to responsibility, and the seed of commitment, God is surely not shut out. Can we not say that God can enter any relationship in which there is a measure of selfless love? – and is not every generalization we make qualified by this? (QF&P: 22:18).

⁵⁴¹ Latterly 'Quaker Lesbian and Gay Fellowship'; now, since 2017, 'Quaker Gender and Sexual Diversity Community'. <https://qgsdc.org.uk/quaker/>

⁵⁴² 'We recognise that many homosexual people play a full part in the life of the Society of Friends. There are homosexual couples who consider themselves to be married and believe that this is as much a testimony of divine grace as a heterosexual marriage. They miss the public recognition of this in a religious ceremony even though this could have no legal significance.

'We have found the word 'marriage' difficult, but we are clear that we have a responsibility to support all members of our meetings and to uphold them in their relationships. We can expect that some committed homosexual couples will ask their Meetings for a celebration of their commitment to each other. Meetings already have the means whereby meetings for worship can be held for this purpose but we recognise that many find this a difficult matter. The acceptance of homosexuality distresses some Friends' (QF&P 23:45).

⁵⁴³ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.178.

This was presumably due to the ambivalence of the Society as a whole, and to the presence in many meetings of at least one conservative Friend who might not be expected to support a decision to hold such an event. The matters of sexuality and marriage came before the Yearly Meeting again in 1994, when it was considering new text, to be included in *QF&P*, but the meeting was still fairly conservative in its response.⁵⁴⁴

Under the Civil Partnership Act of 2004, the government had stopped short of legislating to permit same-sex marriage, partly in deference to the Anglican and other churches which held that marriage was only possible between male and female. This was not a consideration which necessarily impeded Friends; they have a long history of non-conformity to state marriage regulations, and a longstanding testimony to equality.

According to Susan Robson⁵⁴⁵, writing about her recollections as a member of the Agenda Committee for the 2009 Yearly Meeting; the committee had decided to place the issue of same-sex partnerships on the Yearly Meeting agenda simply with a view to raising the consciousness of Friends to the discrepancy in the legislation affecting heterosexual and same-sex couples; leading eventually perhaps, in a few years' time, to a decision to adopt same-sex marriage.

She explains that:

At the beginning of the Agenda Committee's run-up to Yearly Meeting 2009, the item about same-sex marriage looked rather tedious, about administration and processes,

⁵⁴⁴ Part of the minute from that session, expressing the situation of the Society at that time, was incorporated into the book: 'The Yearly Meeting has struggled to find unity on this [subject of sexuality] (*sic*), which comes so close to the personal identity and choices of each one of us. We are still struggling for the words which will help us, so that we may come to know the balance which allows us both to deal with the personal tensions of our own response to sexuality and also to see ourselves as all equal in the sight of God' (*QF&P*, 22:19).

⁵⁴⁵ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.181.

rewriting QF&P, while overlaying rumbling and unsettling differences. Unconfident from the handling of the excised epistle the year before,⁵⁴⁶ the table almost doubted that it could get this right or that there was a right to be got. It was decided that efforts should be made to get it as near right as possible, so every stop had to be pulled out to make the process a live and participatory one such that any ultimate discernment, if it reached that stage, was soundly based. Therefore, the subject was inserted at several points in the programme.⁵⁴⁷

If one looks at the Yearly Meeting agenda for 2009, however, this avocation appears somewhat specious. The topic of same-sex marriage was the main item for consideration on the Yearly Meeting agenda, and the timetable for the Yearly Meeting showed that it had been allocated space in no less than four separate sessions of the Yearly Meeting: on the Monday a speaker introduced the topic; on Tuesday a panel of speakers presented their personal life-stories in a worship-sharing context; on the Wednesday morning the Yearly Meeting participants were divided into groups for ‘threshing’ sessions.⁵⁴⁸ The topic was also considered by the young people aged 16–18 attending the Junior Yearly Meeting programme. On Thursday, the matter came before the meeting for discernment.

And then the clerk, very unusually, prepared a draft Minute overnight rather than during the course of the meeting session. The Minute was deliberated and accepted on the Friday morning. With the exception of the two 1994 Yearly Meetings tasked with interrogating and accepting the

⁵⁴⁶ See Above.

⁵⁴⁷ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.181.

⁵⁴⁸ Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends: ‘Agenda’, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2009* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2009).

revised book of discipline, no other topic over the past thirty years had ever been allocated so much space at a single Yearly Meeting.

All this time, staging, and careful planning, for an item advertised as one that the agenda committee ‘did not expect resolution on’ that year. However, for some participants in the Yearly Meeting it appeared from very early in the week that a decision would be reached: the final words of the speaker introducing the topic on the Monday were far from neutral, he ‘hoped that the decision would be made’.⁵⁴⁹

It was, of course, an important, ground-breaking, decision that Britain Yearly Meeting eventually reached, to advocate for the right to celebrate same-sex marriages. And a very appropriate one, given the long Quaker history of non-conformity to state marriage regulations and also their not-quite-so-long – only forty years – stated position on human sexuality and committed relationships, so different to that of most mainstream churches. But was it one reached in innocence, ‘led by the Spirit,’ or was the heavy hand of human manipulation intervening?

This scene-setting was unusually powerful, because it came directly from the experience of the individual Friends speaking, who did so with an honesty which elicited respect, willingly or unwillingly given. The personal experience, humiliations, hopes and griefs of the five speakers could not be challenged, undermined or discounted by preconceptions or prejudice, however entrenched.⁵⁵⁰ As a participant in these sessions, it seemed to me at the time simply impossible

⁵⁴⁹ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.181.

⁵⁵⁰ The person introducing the consideration was the father of four adult children, each with a different experience of sexuality, weddings and marriage; but each beloved by their father. On the Tuesday the speakers included a man who had married his husband in Canada, where same-sex marriage was already legal, and who had been able to fulfil their longing to become parents; a woman who had attained a civil partnership and had a baby; a mature man who, with

that, having heard these heartfelt stories, the meeting could do anything other than respond, emotionally. Interestingly, this was, apparently, not the perception of the Agenda Committee, nor of the clerking team.

However, Susan Robson, the second assistant clerk that year, a member of the Agenda committee, and convenor of the Arrangements committee, wrote in 2014:

The clerking team was wrong-footed by the Yearly Meeting, the decision went much further than they had expected or even hoped for. The [Deputy Recording Clerk] was in a flap.⁵⁵¹

Yet in a later comment, she reveals that while the agenda committee may not have necessarily expected the outcome they achieved, they certainly hoped for it:

Originally the table was worried, they thought it wouldn't be easy. I was worried about the session, then about two days beforehand, we received the draft of Colin Billet's [the Introducer's] speech. I thought 'OK, this will be so much easier'. We still thought the decision would be a fudge – probably 'send it off to another committee for consideration'. But it flowed. When people discussed it in workshop groups, we sent people from Arrangements Committee into the groups to hear what they were saying. The clerks didn't go because we feared it would look as if we might be going to interfere in the deliberations. People kept coming back, saying 'it's moving, it really is moving.'

his partner, had chosen a commitment ceremony; and a heterosexual couple who had married in their sixties, long after procreation might have been a reason for marriage (*The Friend* xx)

⁵⁵¹ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.181.

It was the telling of the stories that did it. The Yearly Meeting took it in. You can quarrel with ideas, but not with people's own experience.⁵⁵²

Robson describes members of the Agenda committee returning from visits to the threshing meetings on the Wednesday excitedly reporting 'It's moving'.⁵⁵³ Actually, I suggest that the 'movement' on the Wednesday was simply articulation of the response to the Tuesday speakers. In other words, the 'movement' did not arise during the course of the Wednesday meetings, the change had already occurred, and was merely expressed there.

By Friday morning, there was a sense of inevitability. After all, Friends – and the whole of Britain – had woken up to the BBC *Today Programme* that morning, announcing that British Quakers were about to advocate for same-sex marriage. Robson describes how the BYM Press Officer and the Recording Clerk had spent a long evening briefing the media, and that they were shocked that the BBC had broken the embargo on a too-early announcement of the decision before it had been ratified by the Yearly Meeting.⁵⁵⁴

Robson doesn't say it, she doesn't see it that way, but, effectively, the media briefing pre-empted the decision of the Meeting. It had already been announced to the world.

A member of the agenda committee, Rowena Loverance, wrote in *The Friend* that:

⁵⁵² Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.182

⁵⁵³ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.182

⁵⁵⁴ Robson, *Living with Conflict*, p.184.

Numbers are of course immaterial, but Friends not present might be reassured to know that the clerk took twenty-two contributions on the Thursday, and, after reading a draft minute composed overnight, thirty-four more on the Friday morning.⁵⁵⁵

Numbers are far from immaterial. On this topic, for a decision of national importance which would bring Quakers into international scrutiny; where it was very important for the authority of the decision to be seen to be widely accepted and agreed by the Friends present; it was important to the Agenda Committee, with the ghost of the contested decision at the 1989 Yearly Meeting in Aberdeen hovering over the table, that they were seen to take the fullest possible account of the opinion of anyone dissenting from the probable decision.⁵⁵⁶

Also, given the briskness with which many other items actually tabled as ones for discernment have been clerked in recent years, it is highly unusual that fifty-six people were permitted to speak on the matter.⁵⁵⁷ The minute was finalised only when the clerk had ascertained that the meeting was united. This of course is appropriate, practice; but in this instance it is worthy of comment as it has been so unusual in recent years for the necessary time to be given to the discernment process so that unity has time to emerge.

This careful cultivation of contributions from the floor contrasts markedly with the reluctance of the clerks over the past decade to provide opportunity for, or to permit, long deliberations over internal issues; even extremely important ones such as the decision in 2012 to re-design the large meeting house (see Chapter 6) or in 2014 to embark on a revision of the Book of Discipline (see

⁵⁵⁵ *The Friend*, 7 August 2009, p.3.

⁵⁵⁶ The controversial process (see above) of the decision to join Churches Together.

⁵⁵⁷ *The Friend*, 7 August 2009, p.3.

below), or in the presentation of accounts and annual reports from trustees and other committees in, for instance, 2012 and 2013.

I would suggest that the same-sex marriage item was an anomaly on recent Agendas in that the Meeting reached a position which the Agenda group had not had the confidence to believe it would be willing to attain. However, it was not an anomaly in that this item, like almost all of the other decisions to be made in recent years, had been presented as the only possible way forward, either implicitly or in position papers read aloud to the Meeting.

5.3.3 The 2012 Yearly Meeting – The Shortest Yearly Meeting in History; the First at Which Only Ritual Decisions Were Made

The 2012 Yearly Meeting was held in London, from Friday to Monday. Like the meeting held a hundred years earlier (see above), it too attracted a number equivalent to 6.8% of the membership. Some 950 people attended, none of them in the role of appointed representatives, and some were attenders rather than members of the Society.⁵⁵⁸

In 2012, even though the Yearly Meeting was still described as the ‘the prime meeting for church affairs’, and ‘the final constitutional authority’ in QF&P,⁵⁵⁹ it was not possible to identify one item in the entire Agenda, or in the Minutes, as one which required the active engagement of the Quakers present in discerning a way forward. There were reports, there were matters which required formal approval, but there were no items which were laid before the meeting for

⁵⁵⁸ By that time the membership of the Society of Friends had dropped to 14,000, though the total number of members and attenders was 23,000. Some 250 of the 950 people at Yearly Meeting in 2012 were not in membership.

⁵⁵⁹ *QF&P* 6:12.

reflective decision-making. It was the first Yearly Meeting of which I am aware in the past thirty years in which no substantive decisions were made.

Effectively, this was also the shortest Yearly Meeting ever recorded. The date, over the last weekend of May, had been finalised before the late May bank holiday was moved to coincide with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebration. The Agenda committee took the decision that no substantive business would be dealt with on the Monday, in deference to any Friends of working age who might not choose to use a day of their annual leave for the purpose.

In 2012 there were two main items for consideration: "What it means to be a Quaker Today", and "Economic Justice and Sustainability". The *Documents in Advance* explained that neither of these items was for decision that year, but they were to be aired for "sharing of experiences" and "developing an understanding" of the issues. Altogether, these two items were allotted approximately four of the seven Yearly Meeting sessions; time spent in shared spiritual reflection rather than (worshipful) discernment.

One of the striking features of the 2012 Agenda and of its clerking, was that it kept very strictly to time. A single hour, on Sunday morning, was allocated for the receipt of three key items: the Stewardship Committee's report, the Trustees' report, and the Treasurer's report. Barely a quarter of an hour was made available for clarification or for any reflection or potential discernment by the Meeting about the policies, priorities and spending of Britain Yearly Meeting in the previous year and whatever was proposed for the year to come.

In marked contrast to the clerking which enabled 56 speakers at the 2009 Yearly Meeting to express an opinion about the same sex marriage decision; negligible time was made available for

participants to engage critically with the work undertaken centrally by Britain Yearly Meeting, to learn about successes and failures, or about areas of work identified for expansion or contraction, or to advise about future action or priorities. Rather than extending the time for consideration of these core matters, the clerk ensured that the next activity, a guided meditation, started promptly.⁵⁶⁰

Only in the Swarthmore lecture, not officially part of the Yearly Meeting, did Friends have the opportunity to hear a reflective report on an aspect of Quaker work; as that year the lecture happened to be given by Rachel Brett of the Quaker United Nations Office.

Up to about 1994, one might reasonably have expected that the content of this lecture would have been communicated not in the Swarthmore lecture, an annual lecture ‘held at the time of the Yearly Meeting, on some subject relating to the Message and Work of the Society of Friends’,⁵⁶¹ but in a report to a business session of the Yearly Meeting. As a report, it would have been followed by time for reflective consideration, enabling the meeting to own the work and to, potentially, influence decisions about future actions. When the material was presented in the guise of a Swarthmore lecture, it was received as a testimony from the speaker. It was an inspirational, devotional, talk rather than a report delivered for critical comment on the work achieved or the priorities pursued. And as such, any engagement by the Friends present in critically appraising the content and nature of Quaker UN work was not solicited. Rather, it was acknowledged as remarkable work, best left to the professionals.

⁵⁶⁰ Each participant was given a cardboard footprint on which to write; the meditation was one suitable for any New Age Spirituality or Mindfulness event: about footprints on a beach (*The Friend*, 31 May 2012 p.9).

⁵⁶¹ Standard prefatory statement to printed Swarthmore lectures, e.g. Ben Pink Dandelion, *Open for Transformation: being Quaker* (London: Quakerbooks, 2014).

The 2012 Yearly Meeting may have been a landmark in that it was the first Yearly Meeting in the past 30 years which did not contain any items for considered discernment. However, it would appear that it was no anomaly, as the Yearly Meetings in 2017 and 2019 were similarly short of items for active decision by the Quakers assembled.

In 2012, committee reports were received as ‘ceremonial’ items’,⁵⁶² matters to be noted rather than, as in 1912, reviewed and digested, with the committee’s proposals for future action commonly changed or modified.⁵⁶³ So, with no decisions and with no responsibility for interrogation of committee reports, the Quakers present at the 2012 Yearly Meeting can be described as having a passive rather than an active role. This contrasts with the engagement of the participants at the 1912 meeting in the processes of discernment and appraisal, and, it is suggested, in an active sense of ownership of the collective work of the Religious Society of Friends.

If this is a reasonable analysis, it would seem also reasonable to conclude that, at least in 2012, the Yearly Meeting had more the role of a national gathering of a membership organisation rather than that of a national meeting for consideration of church affairs.⁵⁶⁴ This indicates that there has been a profound shift in the nature and structure of the Religious Society of Friends over the past century; a shift away from its unusual history as a faith community in which the governance

⁵⁶² Adam Kuper, ‘Council Structure and Decision-making’, in *Councils in Action*, ed. by Audrey Richards & Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 13–28). See Chapter 2 of this document.

⁵⁶³ Penelope Cummins, ‘To See One Another’s Faces’: *The Role and Purposes of Yearly Meeting in Britain in 2012 and 1912*. Paper Presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association ‘Differences’ Conference. July 2012, Woodbrooke, Birmingham.

⁵⁶⁴ As it happens, the introduction to *Documents in Advance* refers to the Yearly Meeting as a ‘gathering’, rather than as the prime meeting for church affairs, or the final constituent authority of Quakers in Britain.

structures were consciously designed to support and encourage an unusually high level of participation by the body of the community in decision-making.

5.3.4 Yearly Meeting 2014 and the Book of Discipline Revision

The main item for discernment at the Yearly Meeting Gathering in 2014 was the proposed revision of the Book of Discipline – of which Quaker Faith & Practice is the current version. I argue below that the considerable backroom planning associated with this item, and its management in the Yearly Meeting sessions, provides an illustration of how far removed the Yearly Meeting was in 2014 from being able to exert any real influence over the actions initiated by the Recording Clerk and trustees.

Over the past century, the Book of Discipline has been revised roughly once in every thirty years. This time, the proposal for review was made after an interval of only twenty years. It could be argued that the whole agenda item at the Yearly Meeting was enacted with *mala fides* on the part of the clerks and the planning committee. They wanted to obtain the endorsement of the Yearly Meeting for a project that had already been initiated.

The matter had first come to Meeting for Sufferings in 2013, in the form of a ‘concern’ from an Area Meeting. Some participants expressed enthusiasm, but others thought that the 1994 version was still ‘good enough’, others felt that the price in terms of time and attention deflected to this issue was unnecessary at this time.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁵ *The Friend*, 18 April 2013 p.9.

Another key reason for reluctance to embark at this moment on a new revision process may have been the recognition that this time around it would not be easy to ignore the division, creatively glossed over in the 1994 revision, between those Friends who, together with the majority of Quakers around the world, would express their membership of the Religious Society of Friends in terms of ‘God language’ and Christianity; and those who would describe themselves as ‘non-theists’. Members of Sufferings were aware that unless the process was managed well it would lead almost inevitably to some of the most long-standing Friends feeling that there was no longer a place for them in the Society. There are many Quakers, on both sides of that theological divide, who do not want to risk the prospect of a schism within the Society.

For all of these reasons, Meeting for Sufferings did not simply embrace the proposal to begin the revision process. They did however agree to the clerk’s suggestion that a national consultation should be undertaken, with comments sought from monthly meetings and from central committees, including a specially-convened meeting of children and teenagers. The responses indicated a general assumption that if this consultation was happening, it was a step towards the revision happening too. Some 67% of the respondents expressed hesitations, mainly for the reasons already put forward at Meeting for Sufferings: yes, a revision would be needed eventually, but for the time being the current version was ‘good enough’. Some thought that the opportunity cost of deflecting time and money for this purpose was too high ‘for the moment. Others were anxious that the process of revision would expose well-known fault-lines within the Society, roughly between the ‘traditional Christians’ and ‘non-theists’. One group wholeheartedly in favour of a revision was the Young Friends General Meeting,⁵⁶⁶ which also advocated that

⁵⁶⁶ A national community of young adults from age 18 to about age 30.

‘God language’ and reference to Christianity should be removed from the book, perhaps reflecting the secular mindset of their generation as a whole, but also indicating how inadequately modern Quakers have transmitted the content of their faith tradition to the younger generation.

However, irrespective of the 67% of survey respondents expressing hesitations; in anticipation of the survey outcome, and of the Yearly Meeting decision, preparations had already been made to appoint a revision committee to start work in September.

The Yearly Meeting Gathering at which this item was to be decided was held in August of 2014 , but the Central Nominations Committee (CNC) had been approached long before that, early in the summer, to identify suitable individuals willing to serve on the Revision Committee. For reasons associated with its own workload, CNC did not complete this task before the Yearly Meeting.⁵⁶⁷ However, a committee secretary was appointed in anticipation of the Yearly Meeting’s decision.⁵⁶⁸

The issue was introduced at the Sunday evening session of a week-long residential Yearly Meeting. This is an unusual slot for the Agenda Committee to use for a formal business session. The evening sessions at residential Yearly Meetings are rarely used for business, and Friends generally pick from several optional activities; there may be a lecture, but there are also likely to be recreational workshops and several movies to choose from. Friends who are tired, or who have small children, may not get to any of these events.

⁵⁶⁷I was a member of the Central Nominations Committee at that time.

⁵⁶⁸ Helen Rowlands, the head of education at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, a past clerk of the Yearly Meeting and a member of the previous revision committee, was close to retirement. She had been approached to serve as secretary to the Revision Committee, and her employers had agreed to second her to the task from September 2014.

Yet the Sunday evening was chosen as the appropriate opportunity for introducing the only real item of business in the week's agenda; the only item which was not a clearly ceremonial decision. It came at the end of a long day in a hot tent, which had culminated before the supper-break with a popular but controversial Swarthmore lecture. Attendance at the session was low, as a substantial minority of Friends decided to spend the evening at other activities, or with their families and with day-visitors who had come especially for the lecture.

Even though this session was poorly attended, it 'felt' to this author that it was a gathered meeting for worship for business – an increasingly unusual experience at Yearly Meetings in the twenty first-century; the speakers from the floor appeared to be genuinely questing for the 'right' way forward. The thoughtful, but generally unenthusiastic, comments from the floor soon made it apparent that this was not an item which might be nodded through, and it became clear that further deliberations would be necessary. However, although in 2014 the Yearly Meeting agenda was short of substantive business, the agenda was not revised after the Sunday evening session to provide an opportunity for a further airing of the topic and for the meeting to come to a carefully considered decision. Resumption of the matter was left to its original slot, late in the last non-ceremonial business session, just before lunch on Friday, the last day of the business sessions.

As in the 2012 Yearly Meeting, the clerks on the Friday limited the number of comments from the floor by extending the silences between contributions. In this particular instance, the lack of assent was such that it was not possible for the clerks to suggest that their previously-prepared draft minute should be accepted. Instead of a revision committee being appointed, a minute was drafted by the clerk, not encapsulating the 'feeling of the meeting', but putting forward a proposal

which had not been tested during the course of the deliberations. The minute proposed the appointment not of a revision committee but of a revision preparation committee.

The meeting was bustling towards accepting the minute, as, the clerk pointed out, there was yet one more agenda item to deal with before notices and the timetabled lunch-break. The afternoon was not available for further discernment, as it was timetabled to deal with standard ceremonial items associated with the end of a yearly meeting, such as reports from the children's groups.

The clerks and the arrangements committee had simply not had sufficient faith in the Quaker decision-making process to allocate the time necessary for discernment on this issue, leaving the outcome to the decision of the gathered meeting, with the freedom to choose to accept or reject the proposal. Even if one chooses to assume that the proffered minute arose from a discerned decision within the course of the Meeting, this bustling towards its acceptance contrasts unhappily, unflatteringly, with the hours of painstaking, pedantic, tweaking of minutes and of draft epistles in the years before 1994, and with the fifty-six speakers on the topic of same-sex marriage in 2009.

5.3.5 Yearly Meeting Gathering, Warwick 2017: The Story the Group Tells to Itself Helps to Shape the Nature of the Group

The penultimate Meeting discussed in this chapter forms a vivid contrast to the Yearly Meeting of 1912. But 2017 was not a Yearly Meeting; it was a Yearly Meeting Gathering (see Chapter 4). In the documents in advance there were no admonitions that the event was primarily a Yearly Meeting, nor that attending the main sessions should be prioritised over other activities. When

not using the full title, the brochure for the event described it as a gathering rather than as a Yearly Meeting.⁵⁶⁹

As in 2012, this was a Yearly Meeting without a single item of business requiring discernment by ‘the final constitutional authority’ of the Religious Society of Friends. The only items of business in that week were the ceremonial decisions associated with organisational functioning, such as the appointment of clerks, and of members of committees. There were no other decisions to be made. The term ‘discernment’ was used, quite freely, but referring only to the spoken offerings during plenary sessions, rather than to deliberations with a purposeful outcome.

It was difficult to perceive this event as a religious gathering, certainly not as ‘the prime meeting for church affairs’⁵⁷⁰ of the Society of Friends. For much of the time, particularly in the plenary sessions, references to worship or to the Divine were absent.

On the first evening, the theme for the week was introduced with a jingle, sung (with gestures) by the assembled gathering: ‘head heart hands feet’. Because the children were present, a children’s story was offered: the creation of a forest ‘not by a wizard, not by an emperor’ but by the incremental processes over millennia first of soil formation then of plant growth. The following morning at another all-age session, the gathering heard a Russian fairy tale about generosity and a giant turnip.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁹ Quakers in Britain, *Yearly Meeting Gathering 2017 Brochure*. <https://quaker-prod.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/b7bce6b1a7390ecafcc99bed397eb39656ef957ec8010c0da216c883e93f> [accessed 10 January 2020].

⁵⁷⁰ *QF&P* 6:12.

⁵⁷¹ Quakers in Britain, *Yearly Meeting Gathering 2017*, Video turnip soup, <https://www.quaker.org.uk/ym/all-meetings-1/yearly-meeting-gathering-2017-archive>.

In an early plenary session, an experienced inspirational speaker, George Lakey, an American Quaker, spoke movingly about his experiences as a peace worker in Vietnam, linking his experiences there with an account of the death of his son. This led into worship-sharing, which focussed, unsurprisingly, on individual experience and individual heartbreak, loss and comfort. The session was moving, indulgent, and validating of the individual in their quest for happiness, equated in the American prosperity gospel⁵⁷² and in New Age culture with spiritual growth.

It took until the third day of the event before a meaningful reference to God was made in a plenary session; by a staff-member responsible for training in non-violent approaches to conflict. He referred to Christ's imagery in both Mark and Matthew's gospels, of 'binding the strong man'.⁵⁷³ Soft-hearted Quakers speaking from the floor objected to this unfamiliar Biblical imagery when it was referred to in the draft Minute: they deemed it too rough and too unkind for gentle Quaker purposes.

Eventually, on the fourth evening, the George Gorman lecturer,⁵⁷⁴ Tim Gee, inadvertently exposed the lost opportunities for Quaker cultural transmission associated with the gathering as a whole, and in particular with the vapidness of the children's stories told in the plenary sessions, when he discussed his own religious formation; and the way in which his values had been informed by the bed-time stories which his mother had read to him. He expressed that the

⁵⁷² Catherine Bowler, *Blessed: a History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Duke University, 2010). https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/2297/D_Bowler_Catherine_a_201005.pdf [accessed 11 February 2020].

⁵⁷³ Bible, Mark 3:27–38; Matthew 12:29.

⁵⁷⁴ A lecture to be delivered by a Quaker under the age of 40, at residential Yearly Meetings. The series is named after George Gorman (1916–1982), a long-serving General Secretary to Quaker Home Service (precursor to the current Quaker Life); in the 1940s clerk of the Young Friends Home Service Committee.

accounts of early Friends, of their moral certainty and their courage in the face of persecution, had been impressive, especially when the protagonists were mere children themselves. He was clear that this feature of his childhood formation had helped shape his career choices, mainly in NGOs (his paid job at that time was to facilitate the work of local Quaker groups with refugees).

In any social group, the stories the group tells about itself – to its members, to outsiders, to newcomers, to children – help to create the present, telling the new generation of hearers about the community of which they have become a part. And the choice of stories told helps define as well as to express the group's present values and its aspirations for the future. So in 2017 it is not immaterial that the group formulating the timetable of the Gathering event chose to tell stories about 'not a wizard, not an emperor' and about a magical giant turnip rather than to refer either to the Bible, which was so cherished by previous generations of Quakers, or to aspects of Quaker history over the past 370 years.

The George Gorman lecture was beyond the remit of the Agenda Committee, but the surprise input in the plenary time was that the 'Turning the Tide' speaker, tasked to speak on opportunities for social engagement, drew on Biblical imagery. Two other public versions of the 2017 Yearly Meeting Gathering story were being told in parallel to that of the Agenda Committee.

The Epistle-drafting committee was clerked by a retired theologian; a specialist in Biblical, specifically Gospel, commentary. The Epistle perhaps reflects more what she, and her committee, would have liked to have heard than the words which were actually said. For instance, the consideration of inequality in Britain was re-framed in the Epistle with reference to Isaiah 3:15:

‘grinding the faces of the poor’. This was entirely legitimate, as the Epistle is understood not to be a report of the Yearly Meeting – the Minutes do that – but a drawing-out of its key messages for other Friends in Britain and elsewhere. But for those who are uncomfortable with, unfamiliar with, or averse to the Christocentric, Bible-fond Quakerism of the British past – still current in the majority of Quaker meetings around the world – this was perceivable as fairly hostile reframing by traditional Quakers stuck in the past. A notable feature of the 2017 Yearly Meeting Gathering was that, contrary to previous custom and practice, the concluding minute of the 2017 Yearly Meeting Gathering provided a resume of what had occurred in the business sessions to a large extent pre-empting the Epistle, which as usual had been prepared by the Epistle-drafting committee and finalised in response to comments from the floor.⁵⁷⁵ This may sound like a small change, but it is a vivid example of ‘the centre’ rationalising power into its control, and marginalising the activities of other committees. As it happened, the content of the Yearly Meeting, and of the Epistle that year, were illustrations why the ‘centre’ might want to manage the message to other Yearly Meetings, and why it might not be suitable for them to do so. The Epistle was elliptically critical of the Yearly Meeting Gathering, and touched on the matter of social awareness, which had been absent from the Yearly Meeting, for instance in its failure to engage with government policies which were ‘grinding the faces of the poor’.⁵⁷⁶

The third version was that put forth by the weekly Quaker journal, *The Friend*. Coverage extended over five issues,⁵⁷⁷ mostly direct reportage of the plenary sessions, children’s and young

⁵⁷⁵ Quakers in Britain: ‘Minute 38’ *Minutes of Yearly Meeting Gathering 2017* <https://www.quaker.org.uk/ym/all-meetings-1/yearly-meeting-gathering-2017-archive#heading-1> [accessed 10 January 2020].

⁵⁷⁶ Isaiah 3:15. Issues current in the period, not confronted though in the Yearly Meeting, included Housing, Windrush deportations, government attitudes to refugees, etc. All of these had in the past been the kind of issues which the Yearly Meeting and its committees, had engaged with.

⁵⁷⁷ *The Friend*, 4 August 2017– 1 September 2017.

people's activities; and a sample of the associated lectures, optional workshops, and other events.

It included remarkably little commentary, except the editorial in the copy published on 4th August, in the midst of the Gathering, which enthused about the dedication of the many Friends who had contributed to the preparation or to the smooth-running of the event.

There was a letter though, in the 18th August issue, which asked bleakly 'where is the vision?'⁵⁷⁸

5.3.6 Yearly Meeting 2018: A Single Decision to Ratify

The entire agenda of the 2018 Yearly Meeting was structured around the decision to embark on the revision of the book of discipline – the matter which first came to the Yearly Meeting in 2014.

During the intervening years, the Revision Preparation Committee, appointed in 2014, had considered what they found to be the strengths and weaknesses of the current book, and had initiated a national study programme, so that Quakers in local meetings were more familiar with it. The secretary of the group edited a short book, '*God, words and us*'⁵⁷⁹ compiled mainly from contributions to a weekend workshop for Quaker theologians considering the wide range of perceptions and allegiances among Quakers in relation to God and non-theism. This was used as a study guide among local meetings in preparation for the Yearly Meeting, in general

⁵⁷⁸ Gillian Bilbrough, 'Letter' in *The Friend*, 28 July, p.9.

⁵⁷⁹ Helen Rowlands, ed., *God, Words and Us: Quakers in Conversation About Religious Difference* (London: Quakerbooks, 2017).

acknowledgement that this would be a thorny topic for the next revision, and the main issue distinguishing the new document from all the previous versions.

In marked contrast to the cursory treatment of the matter in 2014, in two rushed sessions, awkwardly scheduled at the end of a full day and at the end of the full week; in 2018 eight of the ten Yearly Meeting sessions were assigned to the topic, leaving only the Friday \evening and Monday afternoon_for the routine, mainly ceremonial, business. It was difficult, looking at the programme and the *Documents in Advance*, to envision that the Yearly Meeting might actually, after all this build-up, not agree to go forward with the revision.

As in the 2009 preparation for the consideration of same-sex marriage, the agenda had been carefully prepared to give Friends time to consider the decision, in small bites. In almost every session, there was plenty of opportunity for members of the Meeting to comment, far more than has become usual.

However, the sense of inevitability, and of déjà vu, was oppressive. Once again, as in the same-sex marriage decision of 2009, thanks to the BYM press office, Friends woke up – this time on the day the Yearly Meeting began – to the announcement of a decision which, officially, Friends had not yet made. Except this time it wasn't just the decision which was actually on the agenda – to go ahead with the revision; it was the associated expectation that the new book of discipline would reflect the increasingly amorphous faith of the group as a whole.⁵⁸⁰ An article in the Guardian was headlined 'The Quakers are right, we don't need God'. It followed a piece in the

⁵⁸⁰ See the discussion in Chapter 2 of Jennifer Hampton's analysis of belief among members of the group. Jennifer May Hampton, 'British Quaker Survey: Examining Religious Beliefs and Practices in the Twenty-First Century', *Quaker Studies*, 19:1 (2014), pp.7–136.

Times earlier in the week, announcing that there was probably going to be a revision, and that Friends were probably going to do away with the word ‘God’ in the new publication.⁵⁸¹

Both the press coverage and the ‘doing away with God’ were elephants in the room, the first not spoken of at all, the second barely touched upon. Officially, as one of the Saturday morning speakers explained, the Revision Preparation Committee had only come to an agreement that an imminent revision was necessary when they considered the state of the ‘Church Government’ sections of the book. Ironically, these are the only sections which have been updated in the five editions of the current book which have been published since 1994; in some instances because of changes in the legislation within which the Quaker processes operate, or because there were changes for internal reasons to Quaker processes. Large chunks of text were altered, for example, as a consequence of the 2006 decision to institute trustees and thus to reduce the role of Meeting for Sufferings; and Chapter 16 was rewritten to take account of same-sex marriage.

But this was only ‘patching rather than resurfacing the road’⁵⁸² and the Revision Preparation Committee recognised that different sections of the regulations were presented in different levels of detail. In some instances, such as marriages, everything was included to the last comma; but for other topics the detail was published separately, for instance in the Treasurer’s Handbook. The Handbook didn’t need to be submitted to Yearly Meeting when it was revised, so was

⁵⁸¹ Simon Jenkins, ‘The Quakers are right, we don’t need God’, *Guardian*, 4 May, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/04/quakers-dropping-god> [accessed 30 July 2018]; Kaya Burgess, ‘Quakers May Cut Out God in Faith Update’, *The Times* <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/quakers-may-cut-out-god-in-faith-update-551b7pcgz> [accessed 30 July, 2018].

⁵⁸² Introduction to the Church Government proposals, Lesley Richards video at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/ym/all-meetings-1/yearly-meeting-2018#heading-1> [accessed 10 January 2020].

simpler to update.⁵⁸³ The committee suggested that items should be divided into the principle of the issue, and the detail which would be consigned to supplementary handbooks. At first sight, this idea might be appealing, but there are actually very few issues, outside of financial management, where the detail is so copious and arcane that it actually requires separating out into a separate handbook, particularly now that the definitive version of the book of discipline is constantly updated on the internet.

Over the course of the two and a half days focussed on the revision decision, the discourse from the presenters changed. On Saturday morning the decision to recommend an imminent revision had been reported as one which had been taken with some diffidence, with the committee members only uniting when they read closely the Church Government section and saw its uneven levels of detail. They also observed that some concepts were not clearly explained, as ‘in the past, most people had grown up in the Religious Society of Friends, so there was no need to state the obvious, as in ‘what is a Business Meeting?’.⁵⁸⁴

But by Monday morning the clerk was talking about the current book not being ‘fit for purpose’ any more.⁵⁸⁵ This is a marked progression over two days.

In contrast to the slowness with which Quakers on the benches had been given recognition to speak in other recent years, with the consequent limitation in the number who were heard, the

⁵⁸³ Later that year, as it happened, the Treasurer’s Handbook was replaced by guidance sheets for Quaker treasurers, to be read in conjunction with the Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers’ handbook (Quakers in Britain, *Treasurers’ Guidance Sheets to supplement the ACAT Handbook* (Britain Yearly Meeting: London, 2018)).

⁵⁸⁴ Introduction to the Church Government proposals, Lesley Richards video at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/ym/all-meetings-1/yearly-meeting-2018#heading-1> [accessed 10 January 2020].

⁵⁸⁵ Quakers in Britain, ‘Minute 28’, *Yearly Meeting Minutes*, 2017.

clerk was relatively brisk in identifying potential speakers. The Agenda Committee was keen to ensure that Quakers did not feel this decision had been railroaded through.

However, what else had it been? Participants had been gently shepherded from one mini-decision/stage to the next. Too much preparation had been done in the previous three years for even the most reluctant Quaker to believe that the decision was one which could be tackled as if from scratch, or deferred a second time. It appeared to me at that meeting that the decision was effectively inevitable, though the planning team was keen to ensure that it was seen to be agreed by the members present. In the first Saturday session some regret was expressed at the shortness of the interval since the previous revision, but no voices were raised to suggest it might not happen.

On the Sunday morning someone questioned whether it was affordable. They were reassured by the Yearly Meeting Treasurer that it was. But of course there is an opportunity-cost to any decision associated with the expenditure of money or of time, and the alternative ways in which the money and staff and members' time might instead be spent were not identified.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has been primarily concerned with the shifts in content and meaning of Yearly Meetings in the life and structure of Britain Yearly Meeting in recent years, especially since the introduction of trustees in January 2007. The chapter opens with a discussion of several Yearly Meetings in the twentieth-century, beginning with the 1912 Yearly Meeting, which had a long agenda of items which required consideration and resolution by the Yearly Meeting, which at that stage had the authority to examine the work of committees and to comment meaningfully on their

proposed work. The outcome of discernment was not necessarily predictable from the outset. The Quakers also perceived that they had a responsibility to engage with government over a range of contentious policies, and to engage practically as well as spiritually with the needs of the vulnerable in Britain and abroad.

The 1989 Yearly Meeting was one when both the general members and the clerk were criticised by elders for disorderly conduct. It is identified as a pivotal moment, after which agendas became lighter, with increasingly-few opportunities for active discernment.

The 1912 Yearly Meeting, and to a lesser extent the 1989 Yearly Meeting, contrasts markedly with the most recent Yearly Meetings, some of which, for instance in 2012 and 2017 have had no real items for discerned decision-making to engage with, and in which only ‘ceremonial’ or routine items of business were actually resolved. This shows that while the general format of the occasion is still recognisable, there are some material differences in the content and management of the events in recent years compared to earlier in the series. In particular, there has been a notable diminution in the engagement of the Friends attending Yearly Meeting in the management of the affairs of the Society.

There has been a diminution – indeed, in 2012 and in 2017 an expunging – of the role of the Yearly Meeting as a decision-making body. This has the consequence that Quakers attending the Yearly Meeting have little opportunity to experience the shared act of discernment; prayerfully seeking unity while identifying a way forward. This shared experience of Meetings for Worship for church affairs has in the past been a key feature of Quaker spiritual life, a complement to the agenda-free Meeting for Worship.

In 1989 Quakers present at the Yearly Meeting protested vigorously when the clerk exerted a too-heavy hand, but since then the power of the clerk has imperceptibly grown; deliberations about an item finish when the time allocated is over, rather than when deep unity has been achieved. The expected outcome of a session is already implicit in the presentation introducing the topic; only in items not actually requiring resolution is the meeting allowed to digress or to reframe the topic. The majority of agenda items are appointments and other routine items for ceremonial decision, where the real deliberations have happened earlier. The Quakers present at a Yearly Meeting function increasingly as (a sometimes engaged) audience rather than as active members of the church community, together exercising their spiritual muscles and seeking unity on the way forward.

These case studies indicate that there is a marked dissonance between the idealised description of Quaker decision-making in the various versions of the British Quaker handbook (1735 to the present), and the actual practices among British Friends in recent years.

Over the period under review, there has been a diminution in the number and range of topics for discernment. Instead, there has been a notable trend of erosion of the agency and authority of the general membership, and a corresponding increase in the range and importance of issues reserved for decision outside of the Yearly Meeting forum and of Meeting for Sufferings – either by a small group of Trustees or by paid staff.

The episode in 2008, of censorship of the epistles received, demonstrated a lack of transparency on the part of the agenda committee; it was a decision patronising both to the British Quakers

shielded from unwelcome opinions, and to the members of the other Yearly Meetings which had sent the communications.

The Quakers' decision in 2009 to endorse proposals to legalise same-sex marriage was, perhaps, an anomaly during what might be seen as a period of increasing disempowerment or disengagement of the membership. While some Friends have perceived it as a 'God-given' decision, it can also be interpreted as a highly-orchestrated piece of political theatre.

The current strategies for participation-management help shift the deliberations at Yearly Meeting sessions to a category of decision-making which the social anthropologist Adam Kuper (1971) describes as 'ceremonial', as happens commonly in town councils, where:

The effective decision is taken before the assembly meets by the caucus of the governing party. The formal debate and vote is a ceremonial affair. It has various functions – but they do not include decision-taking...

This is one of the types of decision-making forms which Kuper classifies as engendering 'illegitimate' decisions. It is profoundly ironic that such techniques are applied in a Quaker business meeting, given that the whole concept of a Quaker Meeting for Worship for business is that it is 'open to new light, from wherever it might come', and that its decisions should emerge from the silent waiting and gathered discernment– not from the previously prepared minutes of a caucusing power-group.

This chapter also discusses the change in language used by the planning team about the Yearly Meeting, culminating in the 2017 brochure referring to the Yearly Meeting Gathering in the first instance as a 'gathering' rather than as a 'yearly meeting'. It was at that gathering (sic), that the

introductory sessions referred neither to the Bible nor to Quaker history, but to a magic turnip, and to the gradual evolution of a forest. The Yearly Meeting Gathering is an opportunity for participants to learn more about the Society of Friends, and to hear some of the stories the group tells about itself. However, that year, the stories were entirely secular.

In the wake of the 2016 Yearly Meeting a past member of agenda committees, with more than forty years' experience of Yearly Meetings, wrote ruefully about the state of the Society of Friends, as reflected in the management of, and the ministry in, the Yearly Meeting. He remembered back to times when there would be so many people standing to be heard that the clerk would call for a period of stillness and worship in which Friends might reflect on the value of their contribution, after which very few would stand. But now, although Friends still gave lip-service to the process of waiting and listening for guidance from the 'inner teacher', it was not actually happening in practice – perhaps because Friends now feared openly to express their faith to one another, or was it due to inexperience due to not seeing this happening in local Meetings, especially in meetings for worship for business? ⁵⁸⁶

This year, for me, the sessions felt more like 'bland blogging'. I missed the experience of real spiritual substance as it used to be in Yearly Meetings long gone. Today, Friends were managed as if for lessons in a classroom, with set questions to discuss with your neighbour....I thought we could do that in the coffee queue.....I now feel these spontaneous conversations are the best thing about coming to Yearly Meeting. ⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁶ Derek Whitehouse, *The Friend*, 6 June 2016, p.12.

⁵⁸⁷ Derek Whitehouse, *The Friend*, 6 June 2016, p.12.

He concluded sadly that it seemed no longer true that Friends were a people of prayer, and ‘we do not nurture each other in the things that are eternal, even if we talk about it a great deal’.⁵⁸⁸ It used to be that Friends’ ministry in Meeting was conspicuously situated in their understanding of God or the Light, but nowadays it seemed to emanate from the intellect or the self; and even the reports of social witness came across as if from a secular form of altruism. He asked:

Have I lost the plot, or is it we who have lost it? Do you see it differently? With our testimony of speaking truth to power, should Quakers in Britain, in honesty, now refer to themselves as the ‘beloved quasi-secular/vaguely religious’ Society of Friends? Can we put flight to this description with love in our hearts, graciousness towards one another with understanding, where we will outwardly proclaim and adventurously live our spiritual testimonies?⁵⁸⁹

In a subsequent copy of *The Friend*, another disaffected Quaker who had attended the Yearly Meeting commented that perhaps Friends shouldn’t expect to get anywhere in the successive Yearly Meetings, perhaps it was enough to gather, and see one another’s faces? But it was an expensive way of proceeding – ‘and meantime the world continues to burn’.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁸ Derek Whitehouse, *The Friend*, 6 June 2016, p.12.

⁵⁸⁹ Derek Whitehouse, *The Friend*, 6 June 2016, p.13

⁵⁹⁰ *The Friend*, 1 July 2016, p.12.

CHAPTER 6: GOVERNANCE, TRUSTEES, AND THE LOCUS OF AUTHORITY

6.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter examines the effects within the Religious Society of Friends of the second of the features of secularisation listed by Bruce⁵⁹¹ and Wilson,⁵⁹² as discussed in Chapter 2: the shaping of religious organisations to accord with technical criteria required by the State. Bruce and Wilson posit that one of the ways in which a trend to secularisation may be manifest in a faith community is through the adoption of structures and policies derived from the wider society and from government requirements, displacing and replacing systems, and sometimes even values, developed over time within that faith group. In this instance, at issue are the changes in organisation and governance made by Friends in response to the requirements of the Charities Acts of 1993 and of 2006.

The chapter opens with a discussion of the rise of governance and non-executive boards, and of the Charity Commission's governance requirements which led to the resolution by the Society of Friends to alter their decision-making structures through the introduction of trustees. It continues with an examination of six case studies of instances where the trustees have taken or been party to decisions which might previously have been made by the wider membership of the Religious Society of Friends. These are:

- Decisions regarding the sale of Courtauld House;
- The refurbishment of the Large Meeting House;

⁵⁹¹ Steve Bruce, (2011).

⁵⁹² Bryan Wilson, (1982, 1966).

- The re-naming of the Large Meeting House;
- ‘Whoosh!’ – the Recording Clerk’s initiative to revitalise local Meetings; and
- The decision to register with the Electoral Commission under the Transparency of Lobbying Act of 2014;
- The conceptual separation of ‘the church’ and ‘the charity’.

6.2 Charitable Registration and Trusteeship

6.2.1 The Rise of Governance and of Non-Executive Boards

One of the characteristics of the capitalist state in the late 20th century and beyond has been the widespread international implementation of corporate governance mechanisms for audit and accountability in both the private and the public sectors.⁵⁹³ The organisational changes within the Religious Society of Friends in Britain over the past 15 years have been at least partly informed by the requirements of the 1993 and the 2006 Charities Acts, both of which can be identified as a response by the British legislature to the increasingly specific international accounting requirements grounded in the accounting and governance recommendations formulated in the Cadbury Report of 1992.⁵⁹⁴

The UK Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance (the ‘Cadbury’ Committee) was set up by the British government in 1991, as a response to headline-bagging instances of fraud in public companies such as the Mirror Group, the Bank of Credit &

⁵⁹³The International Accounting Standards Board (previously IAS Committee): *International Financial Reporting Standards*, <https://www.ifrs> [accessed 16 July 2017].

⁵⁹⁴ Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, *The Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance* (the Cadbury Report) (London: Gee, 1992).

Commerce International (BCCI) and Polly Peck.⁵⁹⁵ The committee was led by Sir Adrian Cadbury, a past chairman of the eponymous multinational chocolate corporation, and, as it happens, a Quaker. The key recommendations of the Cadbury report, which were eventually incorporated into the UK Corporate Governance Code⁵⁹⁶ and the International Financial Reporting Standards,⁵⁹⁷ include:

- The separation of functions of the chair and chief executive (which responsibilities had previously been not-uncommonly held by a single individual);
- The appointment of a non-executive board to provide governance and oversight of the work of the executive team; and
- The appointment of an audit committee reporting to the board, which should include at least three non-executive directors.

However, while these measures may and probably do contribute to greater probity and transparency on the part of organisations, none in themselves are any guarantee that an organisation will be effectively run. As the discussion in Chapter 2 indicates, there is evidence in the literature of management and of governance that the existence of a non-executive or trustee board is not, as such, necessarily a passport to organisational effectiveness or to good governance. Nor is it a mechanism which necessarily increases or maintains the accountability of decision-making, or the powers or engagement of shareholders or other stakeholders, such as the

⁵⁹⁵ The Cadbury Archive, Judge Business School, University of Cambridge <http://cadbury.cjbs.archios.info/report> [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁵⁹⁶ The Financial Reporting Council, *UK Corporate Governance Code* (version July 2018). (London: Financial Reporting Council, 2018). <https://www.frc.org.uk/directors/corporate-governance-and-stewardship/uk-corporate-governance-code> [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁵⁹⁷ The International Accounting Standards Board (previously IAS Committee): *International Financial Reporting Standards*, <https://www.ifrs> [accessed 16 July 2017].

members of non-government organisations. Indeed, some commentators would suggest that the very structure thus created, and the structural relationships it entails with an organisation's staff, its members, (or in a commercial context, shareholders) and other stakeholders is flawed, in some instances fatally.

6.2.2 The Charity Commission

The Cadbury Commission recommendations, and the accounting regulations to which they gave rise, apply not just to commercial organisations, but also to public sector and charitable bodies. The Charities Acts of 1993 and of 2006 can be identified as a response by the British legislature to the demands of modern governance embodied in the Cadbury Code and in the International Accounting Standards, applying these standards to the charitable sector.

The Charity Commission was established under the 1993 Charities Act, as a non-ministerial government department to take over the work of the Charity Commissioners. That earlier body, which had been set up in 1853, was itself a successor to the charity commissioners empowered under the 1601 Statute of Elizabeth (The Statute of Charitable Uses) to investigate the abuse of charitable trusts. Peter Luxton reminds us that the definition of charitable bodies under the 2006 Act is still closely informed by that in the preamble to the 1601 statute, which identified charitable purposes as including the relief of poverty, the advancement of education, and what might be broadly described as public benefit.⁵⁹⁸ In the Elizabethan statute, the advancement of religion was not mentioned as a charitable purpose; perhaps, suggests Luxton, because in those days religion was so pervasive in charitable endeavour. Only in 1891, almost 300 years later,

⁵⁹⁸ Peter Luxton, *Making Law? Parliament v The Charity Commission*. (Discussion Paper). Policy Series, vol. 64 (London: Politeia 2009) p.2 <http://politeia.co.uk/p109.pdf> [accessed 9 November 2014].

were the four principal divisions of charity that more-or-less pertain today identified in English case law: trusts for the relief of poverty, the advancement of education, the advancement of religion, and for other purposes beneficial to the community.⁵⁹⁹

Since the 1960 Charities Act, most charities had been required to register with the Charity Commissioners, partly with a view to making basic information about that charity publicly available. Charities with an income or expenditure of more than £10,000 a year were subject to monitoring by the commissioners, thus ensuring a modicum of transparency and rigour in the stewardship of donated assets. However, under the 1960 Act, many charities were exempt from registration, including those associated with the armed services; scouts and guides; and a limited list of named denominations, including Quakers.

The 1993 Charities Act made it clear that excepted status was no longer seen to be justified, and it was expected that in terms of Statutory Instrument 160 of 1996 all of the relevant previously exempt charities would be registered within a five-year window. This window was extended in 2002, and then again in 2012.⁶⁰⁰

The 2006 Charities Act confirmed that:

- Exemption from charity registration for the charities excepted under the 1960 Act was to be abolished;

⁵⁹⁹ Commissioners for Special Purposes of the Income Tax v Pemsel (Pemsel's case) (1891); cited by Luxton, *Making Law*.

⁶⁰⁰ Some categories of charitable bodies, such as some named national museums, remain exempt. But all Quaker charitable bodies are encompassed by the provisions of the 2006, 2011 and 2016 Charities Acts.

- Charities with an annual income in excess of £100,000 would be required to register to submit accounts annually for scrutiny by the Charity Commission; and
- Every charity should have a board of named trustees, with personal responsibility for any breaches of fiduciary governance.

The 2016 Act incorporates all these provisions, and extends the Charity Commission's power to intervene in the functioning and financial management of charitable organisations.⁶⁰¹

The Charity Commission suggested in 2012 that while in the past there may have been a general assumption that advancing religion is for the public good; as society has changed, there had been a broad recognition that excepted status needed to change too, and that all charities should be subject to the same rules. The Commission has begun to contest whether all religious charities benefit a sufficiently large portion of the public to qualify for charitable status.⁶⁰²

In his analysis of the workings of the Charity Commission, Luxton suggests that the legal meaning of charity has been changed both by the Charities Act of 2006 and by the Charity Commission's recent interpretations:

Over the last twelve years, the Charity Commission has radically changed its approach to determining both the criteria for charitable status and a charity's permissible activities.

⁶⁰¹ Charity Commission <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission> [accessed 12 July 2016].

⁶⁰² Frank Cranmer, 'Public Benefit and the Charity Commission's Consultation' in *Law & Religion UK*, 13 August 2012, <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2012/08/13/public-benefit-and-the-charity-commissions-consultation/>, [accessed 17 December 2018]; Frank Cranmer, 'Churches as Charities: Some Basics' in *Law & Religion UK*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2015/09/04/churches-as-charities-some-basics/> [accessed 17 December 2018].

Two key areas of controversy have emerged – the way in which the Commission applies the so-called ‘public benefit’ requirement and how far it allows charities to engage in political activities.⁶⁰³

An ecclesiastical lawyer, Frank Cranmer, comments:

The importance of all this for faith-groups cannot be underestimated. Whether their trusts are registered with the Commission or not, charity trustees are obliged to demonstrate that their charities provide public benefit.... if trustees do not know precisely what the Charity Commission’s public benefit criteria are, how can they begin to demonstrate that they have satisfied them? And the previous presumption, that something done for the advancement of religion was *ipso facto* for the public benefit, would appear to have evaporated.⁶⁰⁴

All of these developments have potential implications for the status and activities of religious bodies such as the Religious Society of Friends.

6.3 Charitable registration and Trusteeship in the Religious Society of Friends

6.3.1 Quaker registration with the Charity Commission

Once the terms of the 1993 Charities Act had been clarified, British Quakers, like the other affected denominations, began to determine how the legal bodies necessary for Charity

⁶⁰³ Luxton, *Making Law*, p.1.

⁶⁰⁴ Cranmer, ‘Public Benefit’.

Commission registration should be structured. The Religious Society of Friends had three general options before it:

- It could, like the Methodists, choose to register as a single unit, responsible internally for oversight of the stewardship and functioning of the different local, intermediate and national bodies within the Religious Society of Friends, and for its activities at national level. This was the option most favoured in the first formal consultation among Quakers, in 2001/2002.
- At the other extreme, each local meeting (congregation) might register as a separate charitable body.
- Or (the route eventually chosen), each Monthly Meeting could register; thus perpetuating the long-established Quaker organising principle that the Monthly Meeting is the core unit within the worshipping community for administrative purposes.

This did not account for all of the layers of organisation within the Religious Society of Friends, nor for properties and assets held by, for instance, General (now 'Regional') Meetings, each of which is also required to be registered with the Charity Commission as a separate charitable body if it has an income in excess of £100,000.

Probably even more important in the life of the Religious Society of Friends than the separation of the already-distinct Area Meetings into discrete legal entities has been the creation in 2006 of a discrete legal body, known as 'Britain Yearly Meeting', responsible for the central work of the

Religious Society of Friends.⁶⁰⁵ The BYM governing document explains that while the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain is the term which ‘refers to the church in Britain in its entirety’, the term ‘Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain’ refers to ‘the centrally held and managed policy, property, employment and work’.⁶⁰⁶

6.3.2 Trusteeship in the Religious Society of Friends

The concept of trustees and trusteeship was not new to Quakers. Since the 17th century, Meetings at every level of the religious body had owned property held in the stewardship of small and large charitable trusts.⁶⁰⁷ Since 1923 the normal Quaker practice had been that property and investments were held in the name of a single charitable trust, Friends Trusts Ltd, which has functioned as custodian trustee; with local property and finance committees responsible for the routine finance and maintenance decisions associated with managing meeting houses and other properties.⁶⁰⁸

Quaker schools, care homes and other Quaker foundations were also managed by boards of trustees. But the role of a managing trustee in an organisation such as a school or a care home is not discernibly different in a Quaker body to that in one run by any other religious or voluntary

⁶⁰⁵ See Chapter 4.

⁶⁰⁶ Britain Yearly Meeting, ‘Report from Quaker Stewardship Committee’ *Constitutional Issues Supplement to Documents in Advance Yearly Meeting 2006*, p.8–13 (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2006).

⁶⁰⁷ See London Yearly Meeting, *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution* 2nd edn. (London: W. Phillips, 1802) Records, 1691, p.152; 1794, p.157–158.

⁶⁰⁸ Including, in London, Six Weeks Meeting, established in 1671, responsible not just for a single meeting house but for all the properties held by all London Meetings.

group; and in these instances standard guidance about tasks of trusteeship can be simply and clearly applied.

However, the role of trustees is much more complex in the governance of a religious denomination; and Andrew Chandler details the complexity of the situation in the Church of England, where, as with Friends, the many parishes and cathedrals may be responsible for several charitable trusts.⁶⁰⁹ The Anglican Church Commissioners are responsible for property and financial decisions, yet they do not have authority over the bishops and synod, both of which may make strategic and practical decisions with implications for the financial and business decisions for which the Charity Commissioners have responsibility and authority. Chandler identifies instances where the Church Commissioners (the trustees) have found it necessary, sometimes with utmost reluctance, to reconfigure their own priorities and stewardship decisions due to new leadings from the bishops and synod. These include, for example, investment choices, and disinvestment to release funds for the ongoing work of the church.

The Religious Society of Friends has neither the scale nor the complexity of the Anglican church, and so should not really not need to experience the same vicissitudes in its governance.

However, I suggest that the advent of trustees has so markedly changed power relations within the Religious Society of Friends that the very ecclesiology of the group has changed.

⁶⁰⁹ Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform 1948 – 1998* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

Chapter 3 shows that the Quaker decision-making processes had previously been in place, with minor alterations, since at least the 1670s. The structure ensured that no individual or sub-group took strategic or policy decisions with implications for the wider body unless these decisions had been ratified by a larger group of the membership. Concerns that arose at local level or in the course of the work of one of the national committees were tested within that forum through a process of reflective discernment, ‘seeking the leadings of the Spirit’, before being sent forward to the next level – perhaps Monthly Meeting.⁶¹⁰ Then, if there were possible national implications, the concern might go to the relevant functional committee⁶¹¹ or to Meeting for Sufferings and then perhaps Yearly Meeting. Any one of these might endorse, tweak, or turn down the proposals put forward. There was an understanding that if at any point in the progress of the concern, the Meeting for Worship for Business at which it was considered could not find unity in a decision, the matter would not usually be taken forward until or unless that unity was later achieved.

Obviously, this was a time-consuming, cumbersome and risk-averse strategy but it meant that any decisions were well understood by the wider membership as a whole; and even if one disagreed with a decision made ‘in right ordering’, it would be in the recognition that that was the ‘feeling of the Meeting’ at the time.

⁶¹⁰ *QF&P*, 13:07.

⁶¹¹ Such as Quaker Peace & Social Witness, Quaker Life, or Children & Young People Central Committee.

6.3.3 The new Trustee body and the locus of decision-making

Although the appointment of trustees is a statutory requirement for charitable bodies, including religious groups, there is no necessary reason why the Religious Society of Friends should cede decision-making responsibility to the trustees, and confine itself merely to the passive shareholders' role of receiving trustees' reports, perhaps augmented by reports from an audit committee responsible for scrutinising trustees' actions. Nor is it necessary that the trustees should demand it.

There was considerable anxiety within the Religious Society of Friends associated with the appointment of trustees for the central work. When the RECAST proposals⁶¹² were put to Meeting for Sufferings in advance of the 2005 Yearly Meeting, they were received with reservations. 'As one Friend noted, "the underlying fear of many was that too much power would be concentrated in too few hands"'.⁶¹³ But at that stage the RECAST committee was eloquent that they were '*not* proposing a small executive committee which would assume effective leadership of the Society and be able to determine policy'.⁶¹⁴ Jim Putz, Clerk of the RECAST committee introducing the proposals to Sufferings, explained:

⁶¹² See Chapter 4.

⁶¹³ *The Friend*, 11 February 2005. p.3.

⁶¹⁴ Jim Putz, introducing the report to Sufferings. Quoted in *The Friend*, 11 February 2005, p.3.

What we *are* suggesting is a small group of trustees with a role of ensuring that our resources are used properly to carry out the objectives and policy discerned in a worshipful manner by a fully representative body responsive to the whole Society.⁶¹⁵

Putz added that ‘trustees of a charity do *not* need to decide the policy which they are implementing’. However, Friends attending the Yearly Meeting in 2005 and 2006 continued to seek reassurances and safeguards to ensure that authority could be exercised over the trustees. In a piece in *The Friend* in January 2006, a ‘weighty’ Quaker, Gerald Drewett, raised key questions about the proposals and how they might affect and fundamentally change the theologically-determined form of the Religious Society of Friends. He argued that previously the Society’s only use of trustees was as managing trustees, who remained servants of the meeting; but the model constitutions that were now circulating showed that the new trustees would be controlling trustees, exercising power and responsibility in their own right. He asked whether Quakers realised how seriously they were modifying ‘three hundred years of organic development of the responsibility of all members for the Society (known in Biblical terms as the priesthood of all believers)?’ Had Friends lost sight of their testimony to equality?⁶¹⁶ Drewett concludes:

⁶¹⁵ Jim Putz, introducing the report to Sufferings. Quoted in *The Friend*, 11 February 2005, p.3.

⁶¹⁶ Gerald Drewett, *The Friend*, 13 January 2006, p.7.

The Society of Friends is the last vestige of institutional religious nonconformity in this country, but it is going faster and faster down the slippery slope of creeping conformity to the world, and it doesn't recognise it.⁶¹⁷

Drewett's argument was discounted in a response the following week by Christine Davis, the clerk of Quaker Stewardship Committee, who said that the distinction between 'controlling' and 'managing' trustees was not recognised in law.⁶¹⁸ However, this failed to address Drewett's point: normally in a charity the trustees are equivalent to a board of directors, charged with making strategic and operational decisions beyond the remit of the chief executive who is responsible to them. Davis avoided commenting on the *de facto* powers of trustees to act without necessarily consulting stakeholders, and, germane to the issue, the way in which the institution of a small trustee body might change the power and agency of both Meeting for Sufferings and the body of the Yearly Meeting.

In the Yearly Meeting minutes of 2005, and again in 2006, there is a record that checks and balances were sought to ensure that the power of trustees was limited, and the engagement of the wider group in decision-making was retained.⁶¹⁹ A 2005 Minute about the proposed role of trustees, referring to the concept of Gospel Order, was subsequently reproduced in Chapter 15 of *QF&P*, a chapter detailing the role and responsibilities of trustees, and as it is uncorrected or

⁶¹⁷ Gerald Drewett, *The Friend*, 13 January 2006, p.7.

⁶¹⁸ *The Friend*, 20 January 2006

⁶¹⁹ 'We receive a report from Quaker Stewardship Committee as printed on pages 8–13 in the *Constitutional Issues* Supplement to *Documents in Advance* which outlines the roles and responsibilities of a small body of trustees and a representative body (Meeting for Sufferings) as requested.' (Britain Yearly Meeting, *Proceedings*, Minute 18 of Yearly Meeting 2006: Constitutional issues: Trustees for Britain Yearly Meeting (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2006).

modified, it is natural for a reader to assume that it describes the actual relationship between the ‘gathered meeting’ at Monthly Meeting or national level and the related group of trustees:

The law may assume that authority for determining action passes to the trustees and the meeting may choose to do this. However, under Gospel Order, the ultimate authority will still lie with the gathered meeting.⁶²⁰

This appears to be a clear statement, and in some Monthly Meetings it may be a helpful reminder to the Meeting that they do have the right and duty to hold the trustees to account; and that the trustees should not be initiating decisions which the body of the Meeting does not support. And, as in 2005, Minute 20 of Yearly Meeting 2006 specifically describes the work of the trustees as that of scrutiny, of ‘all aspects of centrally managed work: ensuring the health and safety of our staff and volunteers; agreeing terms and conditions of employment; checking the financial health of the organisation’.⁶²¹ This does sound as if it aligns with the 2005 statement, as scrutiny is not at all the same as decision-making. If this had continued to pertain, then the reservation of decision-making by trustees would simply not be an issue today, as they would simply have been

⁶²⁰ *QF&P*, 15:03.

⁶²¹ Minute 20 of Yearly Meeting 2006: Constitutional Issues: Trustees for BYM. The Minute continues: ‘Further to Minute 18 we have returned to the question of safeguards and reassurances for the accountability of a small trustee body. We were reminded in our session yesterday afternoon that all the members of Britain Yearly Meeting are responsible for the work done in our name: for supporting and holding to account those who carry it out on our behalf. We are all called to be better Friends, giving more attention to the issues that arise and are set before our decision-making meetings. But we cannot all scrutinise all aspects of centrally managed work: ensuring the health and safety of our staff and volunteers; agreeing terms and conditions of employment; checking the financial health of the organisation. For this detailed scrutiny the membership needs to trust a smaller body. Meeting for Sufferings currently exercises that function’.

functioning in a manner similar to internal auditors, ensuring the prudence and probity of decisions made by Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting.

With hindsight, one phrase provided a warning signals: ‘the membership needs to trust a smaller body...’. In any group, be it a formal or an informal organisation, there is a delicate balance between trusting individuals or subcommittees to carry out the functions which have been delegated to them, and the larger group relinquishing its power and authority. At what point, on what matters, should the larger group require not merely reports for information, but that it is consulted before decisions are made – or that it should be the group retaining decision-making authority over particular issues?

Also, *QF&P* fails to mention that the 2005 statement quoted above was effectively overturned by a statement to the 2006 Yearly Meeting by the Quaker Stewardship Committee, insisting that in the final resort trustees must be acknowledged to have ultimate power and authority, as they indeed had in law.⁶²²

One of the reasons for reluctance when the Yearly Meeting agreed to the appointment of a small group of trustees was anxiety that they might assume too powerful a decision-making function, taking inappropriate power from the larger group, be it Sufferings or the Yearly Meeting. Minute

⁶²² Penelope Cummins, ‘After the Charities Act: Governance and Decision-making in Britain Yearly Meeting’. Paper presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association Conference, Birmingham, 2018.

20 of 2006, detailing the roles of Meeting for Sufferings and the new trustee body, takes cognisance of these fears when it concludes:

Ultimately, our trust is in God, who can work through small groups as well as large. We are confident that, whatever their number, our Trustees are, and will continue to be, a worshipping group of Friends who find it a natural and normal activity to seek the leadings of God's Spirit.

However, that statement can give rise to the embracing of a fallacy – the assumption that, just because the trustees or a subcommittee or advisory committee have done their Quakerly best with a decision, perhaps even through considering it in a really gathered 'Meeting for Worship for Business', their decision should be passed unchallenged by the larger body. This is a particularly important point, which should be emphasised, as this is the primary issue which has given rise to the marked divergence from the traditional Quaker understanding of Gospel Order, in which the meeting community sits in worship together to wrestle with issues for discernment. Of course 'God can work through small groups as well as large'; but hitherto in the Religious Society of Friends there has been a system whereby the discernment of smaller or subordinate groups has been tested by the larger ones. The present situation, where the small group of trustees is senior in the decision-making hierarchy to Sufferings and the Yearly Meeting, is a reversion to the standard pyramid of decision-making authority which pertains in the wider society.

In the event, the Yearly Meeting of 2006 approved in principle the governing document required by the Charity Commission, and the associated RECAST proposals, which included the adoption

of a small body of trustees. The detailed document was accepted by Sufferings in December, and on 1st January 2007 the new Britain Yearly Meeting trustees 'became responsible for central funds and properties, replacing Meeting for Sufferings'.⁶²³ The report in the 2008 Yearly Meeting proceedings continued: 'Trustees and central committees define policies and decide the work to be done. Staff decide how to implement the decisions and to manage the work.'⁶²⁴ In retrospect, it is telling that in that paragraph there is no mention of the role of the Yearly Meeting in identifying, defining or clarifying policies and strategic decisions. With reference to this, it should be noted that in its report the following year, about the 2009 Yearly Meeting, *The Friend* records: 'Responding to some feeling that last year the trustees' report, and BYM's opportunity to engage with it, had got rather short shrift, this year it was allotted almost a whole session.'⁶²⁵

The report continues with verbatim quotes from the session:

'How bold do you want trustees to be, Friends?' Jonathan Fox, clerk to BYM trustees, asked the meeting on Saturday morning. ...

...one Friend gave a robust answer 'I thought the challenge was for us to be bold, not the trustees. Without vision, the trustees perish, and it's our vision the trustees need in order to carry out the work for us'.

If trustees had been looking for endorsement, as one Friend commented in the later special interest group, they must have been disappointed. Fears of an over-powerful trustee body had, it appeared, not been entirely laid to rest – some Friends worried about

⁶²³ Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Proceedings: Yearly Meeting 2008* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2008) p.49.

⁶²⁴ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Proceedings, 2008*, p.49.

⁶²⁵ *The Friend*, 14 August, 2009, p.13.

the phrase in the report (p.30): ‘Trustees.... decide the work’ and warned once again ‘things could become hierarchical if we’re not careful’.⁶²⁶

However, in 2012,⁶²⁷ in their Annual Report to the Yearly Meeting, the trustees moderately described their role as follows:

Trustees are accountable to all Quakers in Britain for the work done in their name and for ensuring BYM complies with the law.

Oversight of the Centrally Managed Work

It is the duty of Trustees to:

- Ensure that the priorities for the work set out by the Yearly Meeting and by Meeting for Sufferings are taken forward with the right use of our resources;
- Ensure that the governance and management of the work carried out are in accordance with the objectives set out in the governing document as well as compliant with charity law.

This description by the trustees of their responsibilities accords well with the brief as understood by the 2006 Yearly Meeting. While, legally, the trustees are answerable to the Charity Commission for the stewardship of the assets of Britain Yearly Meeting, they are not necessarily required to make decisions – only to endorse or reject them – with reference, presumably, to probity and the management of risk. If this understanding were put into practice, the

⁶²⁶ *The Friend*, 14 August, 2009, p.13.

⁶²⁷ *Trustees Annual Report for the Year Ended December 2011* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), 2012) p.29.

responsibility for identifying the priorities for central work would remain with the Yearly Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings, not just in terms of agreeing to the conceptual outline, but in actively discerning between competing projects and priorities.

However, the case studies below indicate that this has not been the case. The trustees have chosen to understand their role in the normal terms that a member of a charitable board might do; not merely checking that good governance has been practised, but actively making decisions formerly made by the wider body of members, either in the representative committee, Meeting for Sufferings, or at the Yearly Meeting.

It would appear that the meaning of the phrase ‘responsibility for identifying priorities’ has become fluid. Historically, as discussed above, Friends would have understood these ‘priorities’ as the concerns emanating from individuals, local meetings and working committees, tested through discernment in the Yearly Meeting, and ultimately taken forward - or not, as the outcome of the discerned decision of the group as a whole. Now Meeting for Sufferings has a ‘visionary and prophetic role’, and the priorities which it is empowered to identify, and the Yearly Meeting to endorse, are general areas or values rather than specific pieces of work. The calling letter for a Sufferings meeting in 2018 contained an item on ‘Priority setting’ (arising from a monthly meeting’s concern that Sufferings’ role was now negligible. It explained

currently, we see that Meeting for Sufferings sets the long-term vision (currently *Our Faith in the Future*) which the BYM Trustees use to inform their strategic planning for the centrally-managed work; and Management Meeting (senior staff) then prepare the operational plan which is agreed and owned by Trustees. Central Committees are tasked

with oversight of specific areas of work and are accountable to Trustees, as well as linking with MfS through their representative. MfS is not involved in the degree of detail expected of BYM Trustees or central committees; so it may be that the particular wording used in QF&P 7.02a (i.e. MfS is to set priorities for the CMW in its long-term plan) no longer reflects our practice.⁶²⁸

6.3.4 Opportunities for scrutiny

The 2018 Trustees' Annual Report also includes, as one might expect, the annual financial statements.⁶²⁹ However, for three years from 2012 the financial statement was not included in the Trustees' report,⁶³⁰ which functioned at that time more as a public-relations pamphlet on current Quaker work, than as a statement of performance measured against expectations and budget. Only the trustees report was included among the documents in advance for members

⁶²⁸ Meeting for Sufferings: Priority-setting for Centrally Managed Work – the relationship between Meeting for Sufferings and BYM Trustees in respect of the work of BYM, *Calling letter*, 21 September 2018 for Meeting for Sufferings 2018 10 06: <https://quaker-prod.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/c95f3e91aec32be86fb65cd0a6e0109bb5419dcae7a4eec072cdd5bf4d8b> [accessed 12 February 2020].

⁶²⁹ Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Annual Report, including Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31st December 2018* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2019), the most recent available at the time of writing (April 2020).

⁶³⁰ Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Trustees Annual Report for the Year Ended December 2011* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2012); Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Financial Statements* (London: Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2012); Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Financial Statements for the Year Ended December 2014 to Accompany the Trustees' Annual Report* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2015); Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Trustees' Annual Report* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2015).

proposing to attend the Yearly Meeting. The financial statement was of course statutorily available, from the Recording Clerk's office, on application by interested parties, but there was no encouragement to read it in preparation for the Yearly Meeting. So any interrogation of Britain Yearly Meeting finances was left to the forensic few. This appears to have been a conscious policy, as at the same time, for two years in a row, even though the clerk of trustees was present and could have given the trustees' report in person, it was delivered by means of a video presentation. This mode of delivery served, I suggest, to distance the Friends present even further than usual from the content of the report, and from exercising their right, and arguably their duty, to interrogate it. But while the content of the documentation has recovered since 2012, and the clerk of trustees again speaks to the report, any expectation that the Yearly Meeting might have a responsibility to interrogate the trustees report has not been emphasised.

Also in 2012, a total of one single hour was allocated in the plenary sessions, over the four days of the Yearly Meeting, for the presentation and discussion of three reports on financial and stewardship matters, including the treasurer's report and that of the trustees. After the presentations, the opportunity for deliberation was perfunctory, and was curtailed to ensure that the next activity, a guided meditation, began promptly. (This, as Chapter 5 shows, was the first Yearly Meeting with only ceremonial matters for decision; it was not a Yearly Meeting with a crowded agenda of other urgent issues).

Since 2012 it has become customary that the Quakers attending the Yearly Meeting have been divided into interest groups for half a session, at which staff and committee members have provided clarifications on aspects of the Trustees, Sufferings or Stewardship Committee reports,

thus discouraging comment or discussion of matters of substance in the main session. But that clarification session is not the proper forum for asking questions of substance about policy or execution, as that forum has no authority, as the Yearly Meeting in session should have, to insist on the executive team justifying their actions, or to alter their proposed decisions.

The Agenda Committee for the 2013 Yearly Meeting created what could have been an opportunity for considering the quality of communication by trustees, and for actively seeking to create an environment of shared engagement, perhaps by defining more closely what kind of items which committee should have delegated authority over, and which needed plenary decisions. Instead, the Yearly Meeting session was called ‘Trust in Quaker Trusteeship’, and the purpose of the session was to enjoin members of the Society of Friends to do just that, rather than to ensure that they were alert to their shared responsibilities of ensuring that trustees throughout the denomination engaged in transparency and accountability.

This session took place during a period when trustees were engaged in two of the largest BYM financial transactions in living memory: the sale of a 200-year lease of Courtauld House – effectively transferring it out of the ownership of the Society for the entire foreseeable future and beyond; and the application of the sum thus released to the refurbishment of the Large Meeting House – the largest capital project since the construction of Friends House in the 1920s.

Of course in a religious group, especially one in which members are committed to trying to think the best of other people,⁶³¹ one hopes to trust that trustees are doing their best – but that is not the same as a body, in this instance the Yearly Meeting, abrogating its responsibility. Yet it is difficult to interpret the intention of that 2013 agenda item as anything except a reproof to the unruly and the untrusting membership.

It is manifest that trustees have not provided the light-touch oversight that would have left the previous decision-making structures intact. Instead they have claimed the authority to make decisions on topics which in earlier times were discerned by the Yearly Meeting in session. Yet, to be fair to trustees, it should be noted that the behaviours of secrecy and autocracy in the making of major financial decisions, explicitly valuing commercial profitability over other, church-building, factors, were already present among the inner circle of leaders and decision-makers within the Religious Society of Friends by the time that trustees were appointed. An account of some of the major property decisions of the past 20 years, below, shows some of the shortcomings, in terms of Quaker values, transparency and accountability, that have been observed, for instance in both the decision in 2003 to vacate and sell the 25-year lease of Courtauld House, and the 2008 decision to sell it on a 200-year lease.

⁶³¹ ‘Do you respect that of God in everyone, though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern?’ (*QF&P*, ‘Advices and Queries’ 1.02:17).

6.4 Property-related case studies associated with the work of Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees

6.4.1 Case study: Courtauld House 1995–2008

When the Britain Yearly Meeting trustees were first appointed, they inherited a long-running situation which until then had been managed primarily within the Finance & Property Committee, the clerk of which was Britain Yearly Meeting's treasurer, and who became an ex-officio trustee. Since the mid-1990s, both the Finance and Property Committee and the Meeting for Sufferings Committee had been querying whether continuing to own and occupy Courtauld House, a building a few blocks from Friends House in Bloomsbury, was the most effective way for the Religious Society of Friends to manage its assets.

Courtauld House, the second-largest property asset of the Religious Society of Friends in London, had been bought in 1964, initially to replace a hostel set up at the end of World War 2. In the mid-1990s it housed the Quaker International Centre (QIC), which provided bed & breakfast accommodation to Quakers and to other visitors to London, as well as meeting rooms for hire, and where one of the central committees, Quaker Service, hosted low-key gatherings of diplomats. Office spaces in other parts of the building were let to Quaker organisations such as the Friends World Committee for Consultation, and the Quaker weekly, *The Friend*. A restrictive covenant from the Bedford Estate, that the building's use should be confined to the provision of long-term student accommodation, was honoured in the breach for most if not all of the time it was in Quaker hands. In 1995, during a period of financial crisis, within the Society of Friends,

the viability of the QIC was called into question by the central Finance & Property Committee, due to the cost of refurbishment which would be necessary to meet new fire-safety standards.

The last almost-unalloyed report from the Quaker International Centre (QIC) committee to Meeting for Sufferings, and thence, in the Documents in Advance, to the Yearly Meeting, was in 1997.⁶³² The report opens cheerfully, announcing that QIC had had ‘another very successful year’. Bedroom occupancy had risen to 70%, and more than 160 non-Quaker groups had used the meeting rooms; so the QIC committee felt that they were engaging very successfully in outreach. The committee had paid £30,000 to the central work of the Society of Friends in recognition of services received from the Friends House accounting and personnel staff; and had also contributed a further £50,000 to central work. The committee noted that they were hoping ‘that next year a notional rent will be agreed so that we can then be financially fully accountable to the Society’. The report added: ‘In 1998 we will produce a business plan to cover our development for the next three years which will throw light on exactly what we cost and contribute to the Society in financial terms’. Looking to the future, it announced: ‘We are hoping to refurbish the dining room next year and in so doing increase our catering trade and kitchen turnover’.⁶³³ But in 1998, although the QIC reported another successful year, the Meeting for Sufferings Financial Report also noted:

⁶³² Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 1997* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1997) p.247.

⁶³³ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance, 1997*, p.247.

Consideration is being given to the policy for Drayton House⁶³⁴ and also the future of Courtauld House.... The committee considers that there is a theoretical potential market for its properties in Central London, and to comply with the spirit of SORP⁶³⁵ have obtained estimates of their market values which have been incorporated into these accounts.⁶³⁶

Drayton House was emptied of its small tenants, and was refurbished and let to University College London on a 25-year repairing lease in 1999.⁶³⁷ Courtauld House though, was a different proposition. Drayton House had been constructed and managed since 1926 as an office building; but the much smaller, Georgian, Courtauld House had a considerably more complex history and range of existing uses. While the advocates of rationalisation urged that it was not germane to the central work of the Society and therefore did not warrant the investment required to bring the building up to standards which met new fire regulations, there were many Friends who had happy memories of staying there, and it was still perceived as a productive venue for Quaker community building and for outreach. During the deliberations about its future, two Quaker groups, the International Centre Steering Group and the Memorandum Group, mustered to bid for the property so as to continue running it for Quaker purposes.⁶³⁸

⁶³⁴ A segment of Friends House, designed from the outset for lettings, with a view to that revenue funding the maintenance costs of the building as a whole.

⁶³⁵ SORP – Statement of Recommended Practice, in this case from the Charity Commission, concerning financial reporting, auditing practices and actuarial practices.

⁶³⁶ Documents in Advance 1998, p.274.

⁶³⁷ 'Meeting for Sufferings Report', *The Friend*, 12 November 1999, p.13. The report said that the rent agreed was £446,000 p.a.

⁶³⁸ Meeting for Sufferings Committee report to Sufferings, *The Friend* 12 March 2004, p.6.

The building was advertised for sale on a 25-year lease in December 2003. Technically, as the Finance & Property Committee and Meeting for Sufferings Committee were all aware, there was no statutory requirement on Meeting for Sufferings – at that stage the trustee body – to maximise revenue if there was a valid reason for accepting a lower bid. However, the two Quaker bids, of £2 million and £3 million, were far lower than the commercial bid which was accepted, from an American University, Huron, for £8 million.

The formal decision was taken to Meeting for Sufferings in March 2004, in the light of advice from Meeting for Sufferings Committee: ‘Nicholas Simms, the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings Committee, reminded Friends that the future of Courtauld House had been unresolved since 1995 and this “weighed heavily on this Meeting and those whom we employ”’.⁶³⁹ The way the briefing material was presented – and the enormity of the gap between the potential revenue from the Quaker bids and the Huron bid – together led to Sufferings’ acceptance of the commercial option rather than, as they had previously been assured would be possible, allocating a lease to either of the two Quaker groups attempting to maintain the existing function of the building.

A member of one of the Quaker bidding groups said afterwards that while he was disappointed, the financial value of the Huron bid made it inevitably attractive. Two other, intermediate, commercial bids were only ‘briefly considered’ as they would have tied the Society to a 125-year lease.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁹ Meeting for Sufferings Committee report to Sufferings, *The Friend* 12 March 2004, p.6.

⁶⁴⁰ *The Friend*, 12 March 2004, p.6.

Contracts were eventually exchanged on 18th April, 2005, with Huron University for a 25-year lease. The value of the contract was not enormous in the early years: £150,000 p.a.; with the first three months rent-free during refurbishments. It was due to rise later to £300,000 p.a., index-linked.⁶⁴¹ Meeting for Sufferings Committee urged that that the rental income should be simply added to the overall budget for each year, and not be used for special projects, 'which would have required an elaborate allocation mechanism and risked distorting the unity of our work'.⁶⁴² This was not necessarily seen as fair, as Quaker Service (predecessor to the current Quaker Peace & Service Committee) had put up about half of the initial capital for purchase of the building, so might have justifiably received a ring-fenced boost to its budget.

The decision, and the way it had been navigated through Sufferings, were not universally perceived being in 'right ordering'. The Quaker International Centre Steering Group, which had submitted one of the Quaker bids to keep the centre open, and the 'Memorandum Group', which had also lobbied on behalf of retaining the existing Quaker enterprise, aired their disquiet in letters to *The Friend*, to the clerk of Sufferings, and at the 2004 Yearly Meeting.

It was not possible to sweep this discomfort with the process under any carpet. Minute 23 of the Yearly Meeting in 2004 appointed a working group to appraise the Courtauld House decision-making process. The Minute concluded with the remark: 'We need continually to review our processes, both locally and centrally, to ensure that we are not acting on the world's terms, but are rightly led by the Spirit.' The review was to consider both the way in which the process had

⁶⁴¹ i.e. the actual rent to be paid in any one year would be recalculated to take account of inflation.

⁶⁴² BYM Documents in Advance, *Quaker Work in 2005*, p.13.

been managed, and the management of the meetings for worship for business at which the matter had been presented.

At the April 2005 Sufferings meeting the working group was elided into a wider Meeting for Sufferings Committee working group, the Courtauld House decision to be reviewed as a case study of Meeting for Sufferings' decision-making processes. This in itself was not entirely transparently objective, as some of the members of the Sufferings review group had been party to shepherding the Courtauld House decision through Sufferings. In their eventual report, the authors emphasised their neutrality as post-project appraisers, 'though we were well-informed because of our participation in the events under review'.⁶⁴³

By the time the working group reported to Sufferings in 2006, a new triennium had begun, and a substantial minority of participants were new to the committee and therefore unfamiliar with the details of the decisions made between 1995 and 2005. The Sufferings report to Yearly Meeting in 2007 explained that in February 2006 Sufferings had received a 'moving and helpful' interim report from the working group, which 'highlighted things that, with hindsight, we could have done differently, alongside things that worked well. We hoped that reflection on our individual roles before and after that decision would enable us all to move on together'.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴³ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2007* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2007).

⁶⁴⁴ BYM Documents in Advance, Quaker work in 2006, Meeting for Sufferings report, p.13, 4.9. The interim report was not made publicly available as an attachment to the Sufferings Minutes posted on the internet.

This paragraph was highly elliptical. What, precisely, were the ‘things’ that could have been done differently? Or were helpful? In the absence of explicitness, the main effect of those words was that of fogging, both to contemporaries attending the Yearly Meeting, and to subsequent historians.

The review showed that, on the grounds of ‘commercial confidentiality’, some relevant information had not been circulated to Sufferings by Finance & Property Central Committee, the clerk of which handled the negotiations.⁶⁴⁵ At that time, Sufferings was the designated trustee body of the Society, and it is difficult to understand how trustees, or any other decision-makers, can take an informed decision in the absence of key information.

In the 2007 review of the process of the disposal of Courtauld House, the review group exonerated the Finance & Property Committee and Meeting for Sufferings Committee, who had actually made the decision, from any fault. But their report did criticise the wider gatherings, the 200 members of Meeting for Sufferings and the 600-700 people present at the Yearly Meeting session in 2004 when the decision was accepted, for failing to stand up and insist on the clarification of some loose terminology. In other words, the wider group, whose compliance is usually assumed or potentially engineered, were blamed for their meekness and the abrogation of authority which had been asked of them.

⁶⁴⁵ Britain Yearly Meeting, ‘Meeting for Sufferings Report of the Year 2006, *Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2007* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2007).

From 1995 to the moment the new tenants took occupation, the contention over the future of Courtauld House had extended over ten years, with the ‘centre’ determined to divest itself of what was described as ‘non-core work’, and to obtain the best possible financial return. The decision-making process, while nominally undertaken within the frame of Meetings for Worship for Business (i.e. with silence as a preamble to the meetings, and with contemporaneous minuting), was effectively indistinguishable from a commercial decision and its associated processes. This indicates the existence of elements of secular managerialism within the Religious Society of Friends in the period leading up to the appointment of trustees.

However, very shortly afterwards, in the wake of the financial crash of 2008, Huron withdrew from the contract. By that time the first cohort of trustees were in post, and they determined that the decision about the reallocation of the lease lay entirely within their remit. In this instance, there was no alternative, pre-existing, Quaker intent for the building. On the advice of property agents, they sold the lease not for a quarter century, but for 200 years, for £6.6 million.⁶⁴⁶ The value of this lease was considerably below the sum negotiated previously, but for eight times the duration – way beyond the lifetime of any current members of the Society or their children. In other words, they disposed of the capital asset, and the Society could expect no further income from it. The earlier letting decisions relating both to Courtauld House and to Drayton House, both for a period 25 years, had been queried by Quakers at the time, and Meeting for Sufferings Committee had been called upon to justify the protracted duration of the leases.⁶⁴⁷ However, the

⁶⁴⁶ Quaker Communications, *Friends House Refurbishment*; Press Release 11 May 2012 (2012). The agents were Strutt & Parker.

⁶⁴⁷ Documents in Advance YM 2001, Annual Report year ending 31 December 2000. See *The Friend*, 21 April 2001 p.13. For the signing of a 25-year lease for Drayton House ‘the consent of the Charity Commission is not required

trustees chose not to take cognisance of the disapprobation associated with the length of the earlier lease, and went ahead with a far longer duration of sale. The later transaction may have been, commercially, what the market could bear at the time; but the decision to relinquish a continuing source of income for a one-off capital sum is a potentially controversial one, even if it is appraised entirely in commercial terms.

This was an enormous financial decision, and it is surprising that trustees believed themselves empowered to undertake it without consultation at least about the principle of the transaction, with either Meeting for Sufferings or the Yearly Meeting, both of which had been party to financial decisions in the past.

6.4.2 Case Study: The values and capital decisions associated with the refurbishment of the Large Meeting House

The single largest item of capital expenditure that the Religious Society of Friends in Britain undertook in the 20th century was the purchase of land for and the construction of a new headquarters building, Friends House, on the Euston Rd. So far in the twenty-first century, the largest capital item has been the £4.25 million restructuring of the Large Meeting House, the main gathering space within Friends House.

because the statutory requirements have been followed'. Also, 'while we are not disposing of Drayton House, a long lease [in this instance 25 years] precludes some flexibility in our use of the building'.

The decision-making processes associated with these two projects were very different, and each illustrates the role of the Yearly Meeting in capital decisions at the time, as well as aspects of the dominant values of the Society in that period.

This case study of decisions relating to the Quakers' largest gathering space, the Large Meeting House, is also a case-study of the way in which the Religious Society of Friends' construction and stewardship of its built assets embodies theological and organisational attributes of the Society; and some of the ways in which those have changed in the period since the building was first proposed, just over a hundred years ago.

In the early 20th century, the decision-making process to build new headquarters was iterative, and came before the Yearly Meeting for discernment over a period of 11 years. In 1911 the concern was raised by members of the Home Mission and Extension Committee (one of the responsibilities of which was to lobby for improved working conditions in Britain) that the existing central premises, at Devonshire House, were an insanitary rabbit-warren of too-small spaces, with inadequate light or fresh air for the well-being of staff.⁶⁴⁸ So a subcommittee was appointed to bring proposals to the Quakers' national representative council, Meeting for Sufferings, and thence to the Yearly Meeting, for consideration, discussion and review. The input of Sufferings and of the Yearly Meeting was not a mere formality. Decisions were made, and revisited. The matter was discussed almost every year between 1914 and 1924 at the Yearly Meeting; and the Meeting's guidance to the subcommittee sometimes varied considerably

⁶⁴⁸ Which at that time consisted of nine persons.

from the recommendations which had been put forward to it. Contentious topics included whether to refurbish the existing building or to move (1915); whether to have a Large Meeting House or to hire a large space when it might be needed (1914 and again in 1921); the process for appointing the architect (1923); the brief to the architect (1923); and whether to acquire a controversial site (1924). Finally, when the plans were ready, there was real exercised deliberation by the Yearly Meeting as a whole about whether the scheme should go ahead; and if so, whether it should go ahead at the site already purchased.⁶⁴⁹

The final project report (London Yearly Meeting 1924) specifically remarked on an unusual decision in 1921, in that a specific financial transaction was made even though the subcommittee with delegated responsibility for the transaction was not in unity. In that era, such a decision was exceptional, worthy of remark three years after the event.

Friends House won for its designer, Hubert Lidbetter, the 1927 RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) bronze medal for the best new building in London that year. The Large Meeting House is the heart and centrepiece of the Friends House building. Among the encomiums at the time, the design of Friends House was described in the *Architectural Review* as ‘eminently “Quakerly”’, or, in other words, [it] unites quiet common sense with just so much relief from

⁶⁴⁹ London Yearly Meeting, ‘Report of the Special Premises Committee: A Resumé of the Principal Matters Considered by the Special Premises Committee Since its Inception in February 1911’, *Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends Held at Llandrindod Wells 1924: Reports and Documents Presented to the Yearly Meeting, Together with Minutes and Index* (Bishopsgate, London: Society of Friends, 1924) pp. 234-243.

absolute plainness as gives pleasure to the eye without disturbing the conscience in the matter of unnecessary expenditure'.^{650,651}

In 1996, partly in response to yet another application for new works and alterations at Friends House, the national heritage listing body, English Heritage, decided that it might be prudent to identify Friends House as a building of sufficient architectural merit and importance to the national built environment to be worthy of protection. It is 'only' Grade 2 listed, but as architectural historian Anthony Walker notes, 20th-century listed buildings are relatively rare. He reminds us:

Most of the buildings from earlier periods which are considered to be of note have been identified, but the importance of many from the twentieth century is only just being established.

A listed building of any period requires careful assessment, but buildings of the twentieth century present a challenging new range of risks. Earlier buildings which warrant listing

⁶⁵⁰ *Architectural Review*, October 1927, p.140, quoted by Joanna Clark: *Eminently Quakerly; the Building of Friends House, London* (London: Quakerbooks, 2006) p.20. Clark herself (p.20) observes: 'By the standards of the time it was quite an austere building, yet intended to blend into its environment. The sash windows owe much to the late eighteenth century buildings found in Bloomsbury, while the Doric columns at the entrances reflected the Victorian neo-classicism of Euston station opposite, including the famous Euston arch (demolished in 1963). The interior architecture shows more the later influence of the Arts & Crafts movement.'

⁶⁵¹ The Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee comments: 'Lidbetter's Friends' House of 1925 is remarkable in its subtlety of detailing and extraordinary mastery in the use of the classical idiom. It is a very beautifully thought through and considered building and this gives it an aura of calm and harmonious unity. It is one of those buildings where the inter-relatedness of the elements, the details of the facade, the cornicing, door cases, skirtings etc. are each carefully considered as contributing toward the architectural whole. Although the individual elements do not immediately draw attention, if a little time is spent considering them one is rewarded by the realisation that there is masterful fluency and consistency in their design.'

'The culmination of the composition is, of course, the great meeting hall where tiered seating 'in the round' (quite revolutionary in ecclesiastical architecture of the time) gives the feeling almost of a debating hall or parliament rather than the more usual axial focus on a sanctuary at the end of a nave. The timber detailing of the panelling and seating is consistent with the fine detailing throughout the rest of the building and the whole space was gloriously and evenly lit with clerestory lights around a coffered ceiling. The building was well deserving of its 1926 RIBA medal.' (BCAAC March 2013).

have generally been identified and understood by both conservation specialists and the general public, but those of the twentieth century are unique in their areas of special interest.⁶⁵²

Friends House is a building of robust character, with great consistency and clear definition. It is far more difficult to change than one which is more tentative and which has been designed in expectation of extension and revision.⁶⁵³ It is what Christopher Alexander, the prophet of incrementalism in architecture, describes as a 'strong' building: difficult, and even possibly inappropriate, to alter: 'The difference between a good building and a bad building... is an objective matter, and [mere] words fail to capture it because it is much more precise than any word. The quality itself is sharp, exact, with no looseness in it whatsoever. The quality embodies a freedom from inner contradictions.'⁶⁵⁴

It is this unnameable quality which led English Heritage to identify Friends House in 1996 as a building of sufficient importance to the national built environment to be listed.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵² Anthony J. Walker, 'Ubiquity in search of an identity: A dissection of listed buildings from the twentieth century', *Journal of Building Appraisal*, 5:1, Summer 2009, pp.45-54; p.45.

⁶⁵³ The architect himself, Herbert Lidbetter, wrote presciently: 'It is to be hoped that the Quaker architects of the latter part of the 20th Century will continue to respect the architectural integrity of their forebears and not allow themselves be unduly influenced by the restless eccentricities which so frequently mar the modern places of worship and detract from their true function' (Herbert Lidbetter, *The Friends Meeting House: an historical survey of the places of worship of the Society of Friends (Quakers) from the days of their founder George Fox, in the Seventeenth Century, to the present day*. (York: William Sessions, Ebury Press, 1961) p.44.

⁶⁵⁴ Christopher Alexander, *A Timeless Way of Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p.27.

⁶⁵⁵ Elsewhere, I refer to comments by Hugh Cullum, a Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee spokesman: 'The current proposal to destroy the coffered ceiling (presented in the planning application as being 'beyond repair' which the photographs show it patently NOT to be) and replace it with one designed for a coloured artificial light show is, frankly, appalling beyond comprehension. Similarly the proposal to completely reconfigure the galleried seating to be a single steep rake, thereby hiding the fine timber panelling, is completely wrong-headed.' Penelope Cummins, 'The Large Meeting House: moving on', *The Friend*, 7 June 2013, pp.6-7.

And just as do any other owners of heritage buildings, Quakers do have some responsibility to society at large, and to posterity, for the way in which they care for and alter the listed buildings in their possession. To what extent do they have the moral right to alter a building for their own present purposes, if it has been identified as a national resource, worthy of preservation for posterity? It is especially interesting, perhaps, to look at this question in relation to Quaker property ownership, as, on the one hand, Quakers have a longstanding Testimony to sustainability and to the stewardship of creation,⁶⁵⁶ and on the other hand an equally ardent certainty that buildings are just lumber.

This project followed a £1.9-million modernisation of office spaces and other parts of the building. At the Yearly Meeting of 2008 the trustees' report announced a review of options for the refurbishment or redevelopment of the building. Minute 34 of that Yearly Meeting recorded that it was pleased 'to hear of trustees' plan to consult widely before any of the major options are implemented'.⁶⁵⁷

An international architectural practice, John McAslan & Partners, was retained by the trustees. Its recent projects included the redesign of nearby Kings Cross station on the Euston Road, and it is experienced at obtaining local authority acquiescence to the reformulation of listed buildings.⁶⁵⁸ In the Statement of Need submitted to Camden Council together with the proposed plans, the trustees explained that the refurbishment was necessary 'so as to ensure that Quakers continued

⁶⁵⁶ See BYM, *Proceedings* 2011, Minute 36. and Geoff Morries thesis for historical claim?

⁶⁵⁷ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2008).

⁶⁵⁸ McAslan Architects (John McAslan & Partners) website: <https://www.mcaslan.co.uk/work>. [accessed 28 September 2016].

to use the building’ and ‘to ensure that they continued to provide a quality environment for the organisations hiring the space’. The question about continuing to occupy Friends House is one which had been discussed at length in the 1980s. It has not been an item for consideration by Sufferings or Yearly Meeting in the past decade.

At a meeting of Sufferings in February 2011, the clerk of trustees announced that the trustees would consider the architects’ proposals for configuring the conference space, the Large Meeting House, at their July meeting; and that they would then decide whether to take the scheme forward.⁶⁵⁹ Actually the decision was agreed in June 2011 before it was announced to Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting in August that year.⁶⁶⁰

Formal approval for the ‘refurbishment’ was sought as an item in the Trustees’ Annual Report to the Yearly Meeting in 2011, by which time full, costed plans had already been prepared by the architects. There was no opportunity to challenge a misleading response from the clerk of trustees, who stated that the refurbishment was necessary to maintain income from lettings, but who failed to mention that the Friends House Hospitality Company had repeatedly explained to trustees that the cost of the proposed scale of refurbishment and alterations could never be recovered from the lettings revenue.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Meeting for Sufferings Minutes (S/11/02/3).

⁶⁶⁰ BYM Documents in Advance (2012) Trustees Report for the Year Ending December 2011, p.4; *The Friend*, 17 June 2011, p.5.

⁶⁶¹ Penelope Cummins, ‘The Large Meeting House: Moving On’. *The Friend*, 7 June 2013, pp.14 – 15; p.15.

Two days after the matter had been dealt with in the Yearly Meeting session, that Friends attending the Yearly Meeting first saw, at an ‘Interest Groups Fair’, the architects’ model for the scheme, and found that it could be more accurately described as a major redevelopment rather than a refurbishment.

The design unveiled in 2011 for the redeveloped space in the Large Meeting House included an inner shell to the space, and the replacement of the raked seating and galleries with a single steep rake on three sides of the room; altogether reducing the accommodation by about a hundred places. It also included provision for a retractable roof, to accommodate a £1.2 million ‘Skyspace’ by American Quaker artist, James Turrell.⁶⁶²

Press releases issued by the Britain Yearly Meeting communications officer, and the Statement of Need submitted to Camden Council, acknowledge that Friends House is a Grade 2 listed building.⁶⁶³ But neither in 2011 nor in 2012, in the reports to Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting, was it made clear to the Society at large that there were any contentious issues associated with the proposal to alter a key feature of a listed building.

Quakers were told at the Yearly Meeting in 2011 that agreement to the alterations had already been obtained from the Twentieth Century Society, which exists to protect the architectural heritage of Britain from 1914 onwards; though actually it was in October 2011 that the heritage

⁶⁶² Ian Kirk Smith, ‘Skyspace plan dropped’ *The Friend*, 17 May 2012, p.4.

⁶⁶³ McAslan Architects (John McAslan & Partners): *Friends House Refurbishment. Statement of Need Submitted to Camden Council* (London: McAslan Architects, 2011).

group acquiesced in principal to the scheme, subject to detailed review of subsequent design decisions.⁶⁶⁴ Because the building is ‘only’ Grade 2 listed, there is no legal requirement to consult English Heritage about alterations to the interior. English Heritage was indeed not consulted, and has no record of the proposals.⁶⁶⁵

And at no point was Sufferings or the Yearly Meeting alerted to the reservations of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee (BCAAC). Their report to the planning authority, Camden Council, was short and blunt, but comprehensive:

The drawing shows extensive and damaging work to the main hall of this fine building (RIBA medal winner 1926 [*sic*]) which is quite rightly EH listed. We object strongly to the destruction of this uniquely consistent and fine interior.⁶⁶⁶

The Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee spokesman commented lamentingly:

One of the wonderful things about the current building is the way in which it represents the admirably calm, quiet, deliberate and unshowy nature of the Quakers and the attempt to turn the hall into a conference venue with 'wow' appeal is deeply disappointing. It seems contrary to the nature of the Quakers and it shows complete contempt for the love and effort made by the original team, including Lidbetter, who created the building.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁴ Twentieth Century Society: *Comments on Friends House Application* (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2011).

⁶⁶⁵ Confirmed by English Heritage by telephone, January 2013, when I was seeking a copy of their (ie non-existent) comments. See Cummins, ‘The Large Meeting House’.

⁶⁶⁶ Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee (BCAAC): Report to Camden Council Planning Committee on the matter of Friends House, February, 2011.

⁶⁶⁷ BCAAC (2011).

In 2012, and again in 2013, at both Meeting for Sufferings and at the Yearly Meeting trustees reported on, but did not encourage deliberation or comment about, their plans for the redevelopment. However, concerns expressed at the March 2012 Sufferings meeting about the cost and opportunity-cost of the light sculpture apparently led trustees to recognise that this was a decision about which their authority might be tested at the forthcoming Yearly Meeting. A fortnight before the Yearly Meeting began, the trustees released a statement that the plan to incorporate the ‘visionary “Skyspace”’ had been dropped.⁶⁶⁸ Even though the artist had offered to donate the installation to Britain Yearly Meeting, the trustees had been called upon to recognise that Britain Yearly Meeting would still be required to pay for the electrical and other running costs and repairs associated with the retractable roof. The trustees explained that ‘they had heard concerns that to install the major artwork may be in conflict with the Quaker commitment to become a low-carbon sustainable community and may not be a right use of money’.⁶⁶⁹

The trustees were clear both in their original decision and when they were changing their minds that the authority to do so was within their own hands. Arguably, as a leadership group within the Society of Friends, it would have been prudent for them to recognise that the body of stakeholders included at least a vocal few who would not back their decision. But, according to the trustees’ own understanding, there was actually no mechanism by which the membership could have insisted that the trustees change their collective mind on a decision. This was a very different situation to that which had pertained in the past, when committees brought decisions to Meeting for Sufferings or to the Yearly Meeting not for information nor even for ratification, but

⁶⁶⁸ Kirk Smith, ‘Skyspace plan’ p.4.

⁶⁶⁹ Kirk Smith, ‘Skyspace plan’ p.4.

for ‘discernment’, with a real expectation that the outcome might be entirely different to that which the individual introducing the matter, or the committee tabling it, might have proposed.⁶⁷⁰

At a Meeting of Sufferings in March 2012, the clerk of trustees stated: ‘Trustees are clear that they have acted, in the case of the Large Meeting House development, within their “terms of reference”’.⁶⁷¹ However, in a paper for that Sufferings meeting, responding to a concern expressed by Hampshire and the Islands Area Meeting about the respective roles of trustees and Meeting for Sufferings, the trustees acknowledged ‘the need to make clear when they are seeking guidance from MfS and when consultation is indirect or informal’.⁶⁷²

Technically, it may be said that in reporting their actions and their proposals to Meeting for Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting, the Board has engaged in transparency. But the relegation of the Friends attending Yearly Meeting to the status of audience, or passive recipients of trustees’ decisions, is very different, for instance, from the membership’s active participation in the discernment about whether and how to construct Friends House in the early 20th century.

The minutes of the trustees meeting of 11th July 2011⁶⁷³ and those of 10th May 2012⁶⁷⁴ do not indicate any concerns that the proposed interventions might adversely affect the nature of the

⁶⁷⁰ Penelope Cummins, ‘*To See One Another’s Faces*’: *The Role and Purposes of Yearly Meeting in Britain in 2012 and 1912*. Paper Presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association ‘Differences’ Conference. Woodbrooke, Birmingham, July 2012. See also the discussion in Chapter 5 about the 1912 Yearly Meeting, or the discussion above of the planning and design decisions at Yearly Meeting about the construction of Friends House between 1911 and 1924.

⁶⁷¹ *The Friend*, 6 April 2012, p.6.

⁶⁷² *The Friend*. 6 April 2012, p.6.

⁶⁷³ BYM Trustees, 2011

⁶⁷⁴ BYM Trustees, 2012.

listed building. Instead, the reasons they gave for turning down the Turrell installation are illuminating about the quality of the decision process and the considerations about Quaker tradition and values that have, or haven't, been taken into account.

They commented:

- 'It's about the light, but actually Quakers do the Light Within;
- Simplicity: some trustees expressed concern that the focus on a major work of art may be a distraction from what we are called to do;
- Sustainability/carbon footprint: also, the maintenance cost may become a burden to Friends in the future;
- Economic justice: 'we perceive a risk to our reputation'.⁶⁷⁵

It is noteworthy that none of these reasons for setting aside the Skyspace feature of the refurbishment addresses the issue of the proposed damage to the interior of a 1920s listed building. This is perhaps not surprising, as there had been no reconsideration of the decision to block off the galleries through the installation of new tiered seating. This is not to suggest that the trustees were ignorant of the conservationists' appreciation of the galleries; the McAslan Statement of Need in 2011 explains, in response to concerns raised by heritage bodies, that the benches might be removed, but they would be stored 'carefully', or would be offered to local Meetings that might want them.⁶⁷⁶

It is difficult to assert that the trustees' approach to the stewardship of a unique, listed, 20th-century building and its interior has been exemplary in terms of their responsibility to the heritage

⁶⁷⁵ BYM Trustees, 2012.

⁶⁷⁶ McAslan submission to Camden Borough Council, 2011.

of the community at large. Similarly, the trustees themselves have explained that the changes to the Large Meeting House have been designed with commercial clients rather than Quaker groups in mind as the primary users of the space. Financially, this has been a problematic project; not only because it has used capital which previously provided income for operational purposes, including the faith group's witness in the world; the trustees themselves have acknowledged that the ratio of expenditure relative to probable return on this scheme is poor. But, most problematic of all, this set of major financial decisions was made under the assumption by trustees, not effectively or successfully challenged by the wider membership, that they had the right to make them, without either meaningful consultation or transparency.

In conclusion, we find that a comparison of the decisions, organisational structures and processes associated with the construction of Friends House and those associated with the refurbishment of the Large Meeting House provides an indication of the substantial changes in the organisation and values of the Religious Society of Friends over the past century.

6.4.3 Case study: What's in a name? 'The Light'

In December 2013, *The Friend* reported that at the recent Sufferings meeting, the clerk of trustees, Jennifer Barraclough, 'as an aside to her report on the Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees' minutes':

told Friends that the board of directors of the hospitality company that manage Friends House have decided to give an additional name to the Large Meeting House. It will be called 'the Light'.

She explained that the hospitality company felt that having a ‘house’ within Friends House was confusing to non-Quakers who would make use of the hall in the future. The room will remain ‘The Large Meeting House’ for Friends.⁶⁷⁷

This caused consternation at Sufferings, for several reasons. Representatives questioned the process and the authority of the decision-makers, and they also objected, for solidly theological reasons, to the name chosen.⁶⁷⁸ A separate article in the same issue of *The Friend* reported: ‘The announcement was not in the agenda, notes, or information given to representatives, but was mentioned by Jennifer Barraclough when she gave the report of the Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees’. The article reported comments from the floor that it was ‘Disneyfication’,⁶⁷⁹ and they reminded the trustees that when Quakers refer to ‘The Light’ they are generally talking about the Inner Light – an important theological concept to Quakers, rather than a suitable term for a hired venue. In a third article in the same issue, Peter Coltman, the clerk to the Board of Directors of the Friends House Hospitality Company, explained that the company had ‘consulted professionals’ about the name ‘Large Meeting House’, which sometimes confused new hirers; he also explained that the company ‘donated’ its profits to the Society.⁶⁸⁰ Both of these points sound reasonable, but both, on closer examination, can be seen as reflecting the secularisation of understanding about governance and financial management on the part of the trustees.

⁶⁷⁷ ‘Report on Meeting for Sufferings on 7 December, 2013’, *The Friend*, 13 December 2013, p.4.

⁶⁷⁸ ‘The Light’, *The Friend*, 13 December, 2013, p.5.

⁶⁷⁹ Possibly a reference to Alan E. Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2004).

⁶⁸⁰ ‘The Light’, *The Friend*, 13 December 2013, p.6.

The Friends House Hospitality Company is a legally distinct body from Britain Yearly Meeting, but it is not one which has or should have goals and values which are at variance from the larger organisation. It was created in 2008, from the revenue-earning catering facility at Friends House, as part of the Quaker response to Charity Commission requirements for charitable bodies to separate revenue-earning from charitable activities.⁶⁸¹ It is wholly owned by the Religious Society of Friends, the board members are all Quakers, some of them are Britain Yearly Meeting trustees, and the hospitality board reports to the Britain Yearly Meeting trustees. The Chief Executive of the company is also Head of Operations and a member of the Management Meeting team of Britain Yearly Meeting staff, so is closely engaged in the work of the Yearly Meeting. As well as ‘donating’ its profits to Britain Yearly Meeting, the revenue accrued from lettings by the hospitality company helps to pay the operating costs of running Friends House. In terms of this intimate, entwined, relationship there is no more appropriate destination for the hospitality company’s profits than to swell Britain Yearly Meeting funds.

Rebranding exercises are generally undertaken by organisations that want to draw a line between the past and their future; and while it is certainly understandable that the hospitality company wanted to distinguish in some way the new era of a refurbished meeting space with smart equipment and greater flexibility than before, it was a substantive strategic decision, surely wider than the remit of the hospitality company, to rename and rebrand the space rather than, say, to

⁶⁸¹ In the first full year of trading, the hospitality company generated a profit of £399,000 for Britain Yearly Meeting (Friends House Hospitality Annual Report 2009); an especially remarkable achievement given that the hospitality services had functioned at a loss for the previous four years. More detailed work would be necessary to establish whether the hospitality company and the Friends’ House department have been dealt with on a like-for-like accounting basis.

rebrand the hospitality company itself as space and service provider. (The rebranding of the company itself happened in 2018 and it is now known as ‘The Quiet Company’).⁶⁸²

If, after 80 years of the Quaker nomenclature, potential new hirers were indeed confused by the name of the Large Meeting House, it was presumably possible to insert onto the website or pamphlets a short explanatory paragraph which would thereby have achieved the ‘outreach’ ends ascribed to the new name. ‘The Light’, unexplained, is potentially at least as obscure as ‘The Large Meeting House’.

Heated correspondence about the new name, and the privatisation of the decision by hospitality company board members, continued in *The Friend* into 2014,⁶⁸³ with some Quakers deeply affronted at the purloining of a theologically significant metaphysical term for a room. Chapter 3 explained that the Inward Light has been historically a very important concept to Friends,⁶⁸⁴ too important, and too central, some would argue, to treat lightly or to utilise for commercial profit. But, theologically, it can be argued that this episode also breached a core Quaker testimony: the commitment to truth. On the one hand, the Large Meeting House has a new name – on the other hand, it hasn’t.⁶⁸⁵

It seems reasonable to speculate that the appellation ‘The Light’ had been chosen, though not yet announced, at a time when it still seemed likely that the refurbishment would include James

⁶⁸² <https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/news/welcome-company-annual-review-2018> [accessed 8 January 2020].

⁶⁸³ Quakers in Britain, *The Company Annual Review 2018*.

<https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/sites/default/files/Friends-House-Annual-Review-2018.pdf> [accessed 20 May 2020].

⁶⁸⁴ John 1:9 ‘That was the true *light*, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world’.

⁶⁸⁵ Ironically, as recently as September 2018, the hiring website did not explain the name, but on the page advertising ‘The Light’ it did, in parentheses, use the old name too: ‘(also known as the Large Meeting House)’. <https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/thelight> [accessed 23 September 2018].

Turrell's light sculpture; in which case the character of the space would have been dominated by the installation, and at least the outer meaning of the name would have been obvious to users of the venue.

It is not just the content of the decision that exercised the authors writing to *The Friend*. They were also exercised both by the locus of the decision and the fact that none of the leadership group appeared to recognise that there was any problem that the decision had been reserved not merely by trustees, but by the members of the hospitality company board; people at a remove from the Quaker hierarchy of decision-making meetings.

This was certainly not a decision which needed to be made in any kind of hurry, and, to be fair, neither the hospitality company nor the Yearly Meeting trustees asserted that it had been. But it was a decision, and a decision-making process, that made it clear to the members of the Religious Society of Friends that their right and authority to question the actions of the decision-making few were very limited. It illustrated that the Quakers' inverted decision-making pyramid had been flipped; and that the Religious Society of Friends had reverted to the familiar pyramid of power dominant in Western culture – with a tiny group of decision-makers at the top, and with the majority of Quakers disempowered, the audience, at the bottom.

6.4.4. Discussion: The three property case studies

The reservation by the trustees of all three of these property decisions: the sale or lease of a capital asset; a major redevelopment; and the naming of the new venue, may seem perfectly unexceptionable to an outsider experienced in decision-making by the boards of businesses or most voluntary or statutory organisations. However, the dissociation of the general membership

from the process of making these decisions forms a vivid contrast to previous decisions by the Religious Society of Friends about these specific properties.

As an example of a faith group's aesthetic sense, or, much more importantly, of its stewardship of a feature of the built environment which had been identified as part of the public good, this has not been a study of best practice. It has also shown a transition, from a situation where the primary purpose of the space is for the holding of an annual national decision-making gathering at the heart of the Quaker organisational culture, to one where the owner's use of the space is deemed to be peripheral to its primary purpose, that of revenue-generation.

This has also been a study of a faith group in transition. It identifies a moment in the history of the Religious Society of Friends when the shared cultural understanding of maximum participation in decision-making, described by Sheeran, Davie, Collins, Dandelion and others,⁶⁸⁶ has been replaced by an understanding, initially on the part of a few, but in practice accepted by the majority, that key decisions are reserved for a small group, in this instance the trustees. I suggest that the Religious Society of Friends has not yet recognised the extent of the theological as well as organisational shift which has occurred.

⁶⁸⁶ Michael, J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983); Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology Since 1895* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Peter J. Collins, *The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994); Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

6.5 Case studies relating to the locus of power and to charitable status

6.5.1 Case study: The centralisation of decision-making: The role of the Recording Clerk – and Whoosh!

‘Whoosh!’ is an inreach-outreach project initiated by the current Recording Clerk in 2012, soon after his appointment in 2011. It is still very evidently one of his personal priorities, as it is referenced in his thumbnail biography on the Britain Yearly Meeting website in 2018.⁶⁸⁷

The ‘Whoosh!’ project was managed within the Recording Clerk’s office, and cut across or duplicated the programme for nurturing and developing local meetings which had hitherto been the responsibility of the Quaker Life Central Committee and the Quaker Life staff. The research phase of ‘Whoosh!’, or the ‘Vibrancy in Meetings’ project, coincided with, and eventually took precedence over, a similar initiative within Quaker Life, ‘Hearing our Meeting’s Stories’, which had been intended to identify and disseminate information about innovations and good practice in building community within local Meetings.⁶⁸⁸

Up to that point, one would have expected any project to promote the vitality of local Meetings to have originated in Quaker Life, one of the main functional committees of the Religious Society of Friends, responsible for nurturing the well-being of local meetings and the spiritual life of its members. In the past, any decisions about programmes to support outreach, or to enhance the life of local meetings, would have been entirely within the remit of Quaker Life, or its predecessor

⁶⁸⁷ Quakers in Britain website: <https://www.quaker.org.uk> [accessed 9 September 2018]: ‘Paul serves as Recording Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting and is responsible for the centrally managed work of Quakers in Britain. He believes that Quakerism is poised to go ‘Whoosh!’ in the 21st century’. This is repeated as the tag-line at ‘Paul Parker @ RC’ on the Quakers in Britain Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/rcquaker?> [accessed 20 September 2019].

⁶⁸⁸ Quaker Life: Being Friends Together; Sharing our Meetings’ Stories (London: The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), 2014).

body, Quaker Home Service. The committee would have been responsible for the budget agreed for its full range of work (and, before 1987, would have been responsible for raising that money too).

The research phase led to the appointment of a pilot team of four regional outreach workers in 2016. In 2019 the Vibrancy pilot was positively appraised by outside consultants,⁶⁸⁹ and in June trustees agreed to appoint more workers, based in different locations around Britain.

This is not the forum to query whether ‘Whoosh!’ was warranted, or whether Vibrancy is better or worse value for money than the Quaker Life programme. It is cited as an example of the changes in the decision-making processes and the authority relations in the Religious Society of Friends; with the Recording Clerk acting more closely within the standard, secular role of chief executive, as an initiator and decision-maker, than within the historic Quaker role in this post as servant of the Society, providing administrative and operational support to the national Quaker committees and to their decisions. This active leadership by the Recording Clerk, bypassing the Quaker Life Central Committee, was undertaken with the approval and support of the trustees, to whom the Recording Clerk reports. It is only since the roll-out phase of the project was agreed by trustees in 2019 that management of Vibrancy has been moved from the office of the Recording Clerk to that of Quaker Life, the committee responsible for providing ‘support, advice and training’ for Quaker communities, both in the spiritual and practical aspects.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁹ Sally Cupitt & Harriet Pierce Wills, *Vibrancy in Meetings: Programme Evaluation, Main Report* (London, NCVO Charities Evaluation Service, March 2019).

⁶⁹⁰ *QF&P*: 8:08–8:10.

Another example of the way in which the role of Recording Clerk has developed, diminishing the role of the membership, has been in the positioning of the Recording Clerk among ‘church leaders’ and ‘faith leaders’ making public statements, or signing inter-church or inter-faith petitions to government, on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends.⁶⁹¹ This is probably an unforeseen consequence of a Yearly Meeting decision in 2016 to give the Recording Clerk greater authority to issue press statements and press releases without waiting for committee decisions to do so. This was proposed as a way of increasing the speed and timeliness of Quaker responses to public issues. Yet, if he is the Quaker representative signing their joint letter to the Prime Minister expressing concerns about a no-deal Brexit, it is very difficult for someone outside of the Society of Friends, or for someone inside it, to perceive the current Recording Clerk, Paul Parker, as anything but a ‘church leader’ equivalent to the President of the Methodist Conference, Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reform Church, or to the Bishop Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.⁶⁹² It is even more difficult to avoid that impression in situations where the Recording Clerk, rather than the Yearly Meeting Clerk or relevant committee clerk, attends meetings or events on behalf of the Society of Friends where other faith groups are represented by their bishop or moderator. At present, there is no conscious effort made either by the Recording Clerk or by other decision-makers in the Society of Friends to mitigate that impression.

Parker has been assiduous in his visits to Local and Area Meetings around the country, making personal contact with Quakers at the grassroots, and helping to link local Quakers with the work

⁶⁹¹ Quakers in Britain, 26 June 2019, ‘Mass Lobby urges urgent action on climate’.

⁶⁹² *The Friend*, 2 August 2019; *Independent Catholic News*, 24 July 2019.

of Friends House. (This, presumably, is a task which is also undertaken by other staff-members, though much less conspicuously). However the net effect of his high profile internally within the Society of Friends, and externally, is that he occupies a situation on the cusp between a secular chief executive and an archbishop; neither of which is historically part of the Quaker culture.⁶⁹³

6.5.2 Case study: The decision to register under the Charities Lobbying Act 2014

While Quakers have a longstanding respect for the rule of law, they emphasise even more the importance of following one's conscience. One of their Advices reads: 'Respect the laws of the state but let your first loyalty be to God's purpose'.⁶⁹⁴ There have been occasions throughout their history when, after careful discernment, individuals or the Society as a whole have deemed that they have a conscientious objection to some piece of legislation; and instead of complying, have chosen instead to flout or to ignore it, often at enormous personal cost to the individual. For instance thousands of individual Quakers lost their livelihood, or were imprisoned or fined for subscribing to the testimony against payment of church tithes, from the 17th century until the tax was abolished in the 19th century.⁶⁹⁵ Similarly, Quakers in both World Wars were imprisoned due to their conscientious objection to conscription.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹³ Parker, in his Twitter account, describes himself as 'the closest Quakers get to a chief executive' (Paul Parker @RC Quaker) [accessed 20 September 2019].

⁶⁹⁴ *QF&P*, 1:35.

⁶⁹⁵ Early examples of such persecution are contained in Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers: for the Testimony of a Good Conscience, From the Time of Their Being First Distinguished by That Name in the Year 1650, to the Time of the Act, Commonly Called the Act of Toleration, Granted to Protestant Dissenters in the First Year of the Reign of King William the Third and Queen Mary, in the Year 1689* (London: Luke Hinde, 1753).

⁶⁹⁶ David Boulton, *Objection Overruled: Conscription and Conscience in the First World War* (Dent: Dales Historical Monographs, 2014).

There have been occasions when the Religious Society of Friends deemed it more important to stand by their principles and to speak out than to obey legislation and stay quiet about an issue of public policy which they deemed important to challenge. For instance, when state censorship was introduced at the start of the First World War, the Yearly Meeting concluded that if Quakers agreed that it was important that a truth or an observation should be stated, then it should be stated whether or not they had permission from the censor. In terms of a 1917 amendment to the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, every individual or organisation intending to publish any material which might ‘cause disaffection or alarm’ among the civilian or military population was required to submit their proposed publication to the censor. But, with the assent of the Yearly Meeting, the Friends Service Committee made no submission to the censor when they published a pamphlet about the convictions and demographics of conscientious objectors to military service.⁶⁹⁷ Three members of the committee were arrested and convicted for this unlawful publication. Their trial happened to coincide with the 1918 Yearly Meeting, which paused in prayer while the clerk of the meeting attended the court. On his return, the Yearly Meeting affirmed its earlier decision.⁶⁹⁸

A not-dissimilar situation arose in 2014, when the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act was promulgated. This Act requires charitable bodies to register with the Electoral Commission as non-party campaigners if, in the 12 months before an election, they are likely to spend more than £20,000 in England, or more than £10,000

⁶⁹⁷ Friends Service Council, *A challenge to militarism* (London: Friends Service Council, 1917).

⁶⁹⁸ London Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1918* (London: London Yearly Meeting 1918).

in other parts of the UK, directly or indirectly (eg on salaries), on campaigning which ‘might reasonably be regarded’ as intended to influence the way that people choose to vote.⁶⁹⁹

Before the Act was passed, an ecclesiastical lawyer, David Pocklington, commented:

With the growing involvement of religious groups in ‘the public square’, engagement in activities that potentially fall within the scope of the Bill seems inevitable. Currently, this would involve groups with concerns over fracking, the HS2 rail route and the badger cull, to name but three. And what about concerns that have less-specific policy targets, such as the alleviation of poverty or concerns about the treatment of illegal immigrants, in both of which the Churches are heavily involved?⁷⁰⁰

Most faith groups took legal advice before the Act came into force; and determined either that the new law did not affect them as any speaking out they might do would arise from their faith activity; or that they were unwilling to tailor their ministry to the terms of the legislation. Only two denominations, the Quakers and the Salvation Army chose to register.⁷⁰¹

For Quakers, with their long commitment to truth-telling, and their long history of willingness to confront or flout intimidatory legislation, this is a surprising decision. Rather than choosing to interpret central Quaker work as part of Quakers’ ministry, living out their faith without reference to political limitations, as almost all of the other churches and faith groups chose to do, the trustees determined, effectively, to identify the Religious Society of Friends as functioning like a

⁶⁹⁹ UK Public General Acts: *The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014* <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/4/contents/enacted> [accessed 20 May 2020].

⁷⁰⁰ David Pocklington, ‘Churches, Charities and Lobbying’, *Law & Religion*, (29 August 2013). <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2013/08/29/churches-charities-and-lobbying/> accessed 16 April 2017].

⁷⁰¹ Sam Burne James, ‘Salvation Army and the Quakers registered under the Lobbying Act’, *Third Sector* (29 January 2015). <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/salvation-army-quakers-register-lobbying-act/communications/article/1331607> [accessed 9 September 2018].

secular charity, such as, for instance, Arthritis Research UK, or the British Institute of Human Rights.⁷⁰²

Jennifer Barraclough, the Clerk of Trustees, said: ‘Not registering would support our belief that it is not for government to place limits on a political campaign that springs from our understanding of God’s will: but registering is a proper expression of belief in the rightness of transparency in our dealings’.⁷⁰³ Both the Recording Clerk and the Quaker Parliamentary Liaison Officer⁷⁰⁴ have insisted that Quakers have had no intention of altering their activities in the context of the Lobbying Act; and Jessica Metherringham, then Parliamentary Liaison Officer, has said that ‘Quakers believe the legislation is unworkable and unenforceable’.⁷⁰⁵ However, Metherringham has also said that Britain Yearly Meeting ‘has had to divert resources to monitoring and logging their own activities’.⁷⁰⁶

The Act was formulated in the period leading up to the 2015 election, at a time when it was expected that Britain was committed to fixed-term parliaments. However, the government confirmed in advance of the 2017 election that the 12-month period applies *retrospectively* from the date of a snap election announcement. In other words, as one can predict neither the date of such an announcement nor the date it might set for the election announced, the limitation on lobbying and non-party campaigning applies consistently rather than, say, for 12 months out of

⁷⁰² Burne James, Sam, ‘Salvation Army and the Quakers registered under the Lobbying Act’, *Third Sector* 929, January 20150. <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/salvation-army-quakers-register-lobbying-act/communications/article/1331607> [accessed 9 September 2018].

⁷⁰³ *The Friend*, 12 December, 2014, p. 6.

⁷⁰⁴ Burne James, ‘Salvation Army and the Quakers’.

⁷⁰⁵ Burne James, ‘Salvation Army and the Quakers’.

⁷⁰⁶ R. Hawkins, (January 2015).

every 60. Whether it applies for limited or extended periods, however, the legislation has anyway been widely criticised as inhibiting free speech and legitimate criticism of government policies.⁷⁰⁷ A report by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation in June 2018 found that more than half of the charities registered under the Act believed that it had considerably inhibited their public-information campaigning on equality, environmental and other issues; and a fifth of the charities had reduced their campaigning.⁷⁰⁸ And in the House of Lords, a former bishop, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, the Chair of the Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement, described the act as ‘ill-thought-out and chilling legislation’ which should be amended in advance of any future election.⁷⁰⁹

6.5.3 ‘The Church and The Charity’

In trying to understand why, unlike other faith groups, the Religious Society of Friends chose to register under the Lobbying Act, I suggest that the trustees’ decision to register is associated with the contemporary Quaker leadership’s reluctance to identify the Religious Society of Friends as a church – notwithstanding the Society’s membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and the existence of publications such as *A Spirit-led Church* by the Quaker Committee for

⁷⁰⁷ Adam Becket, ‘Lobbying Act Has ‘Chilling’ Effect on Charities’ Spending’, *Church Times*, 21 September 2018 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/21-september/news/uk/lobbying-act-has-chilling-effect-on-charities-spending-lord-harries-warns> [accessed 21 January 2019].

⁷⁰⁸ Sheila McKechnie Foundation, *The Chilling Reality: How the Lobbying Act is Affecting Charity & Voluntary Sector Campaigning in the UK*, www.smk.org.uk June 2018 [accessed 30 August 2018].

⁷⁰⁹ Alice Sharman, Alice, ‘Lobbying Act did stop charities campaigning, concludes report’ *Civil Society* 9 September 2015 <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/lobbying-act-did-stop-charities-campaigning--concludes-report.html>. [accessed 6 May 2016].

Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR), which was endorsed by Meeting for Sufferings in 2016.⁷¹⁰

Rather than explicitly understanding the charitable status of Britain Yearly Meeting as being a consequence of its status as a worshipping community, it is increasingly described in the first instance as a charitable body. The Britain Yearly Meeting website, for instance, explains: Quakers in Britain have a complex structure made up of different meetings, groups and committees. Britain Yearly Meeting ... is the charitable organisation which supports and works on behalf of all Quakers in Britain. Most of our work is run by volunteer members with support from Britain Yearly Meeting's paid staff.⁷¹¹

Within the past two years, a discourse has arisen within the Society of Friends, whereby trustees and others talk about 'the church and the charity' as if they were two separate bodies. This apparently originated in a paper received at Meeting for Sufferings in October 2018. The Sufferings minute reads:

We receive paper BYMT-2018-09-13, prepared by Management Meeting and appointed trustees, which incorporates Trustees' thinking so far on the strategic priorities. Under the banner "Simple Church, Simple Charity" it identifies three strategic priorities.⁷¹²

⁷¹⁰ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *A Spirit-led Church; A Response from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain to World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No 214, The Church, Towards a Common Vision, Geneva 2013* (London: Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations, 2016).

⁷¹¹ Quakers in Britain website, 'Our Structure' [accessed 18 September 2018].

⁷¹² Meeting for Sufferings: MfS/18/10/07 'BYM Trustees', *Minutes of Meeting for Sufferings, 7 October 2018* <https://quaker-prod.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/27e3fe3f3e306e23f6bc82cb5413266b4e2ab384e9556c8642e68c4230a1> [accessed 12 February 2020].

The Friend reports that at their following meeting, in November 2018, Sufferings heard that ‘Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) trustees have reaffirmed they want ‘a simple church supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism’ as the basis for its new set of priorities’.⁷¹³ By 2020 the distinction had become common parlance in Britain Yearly Meeting communications. The clerk of trustees, in her report at the February 2020 Meeting for Sufferings, explained that ‘One of the most important matters considered in 2019 was the setting of strategic priorities for the work of BYM the charity’.⁷¹⁴ And, in the calling letter for the June 2020 Sufferings meeting, the clerk of trustees explained that the financial consequences of the Covid 19 lockdown meant that ‘It is now more important than ever that BYM adapts quickly to become a ‘simple church supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism’ – working towards thriving Quaker communities, with simple structures and practices, and towards a sustainable and peaceful world.’⁷¹⁵

This distinction is curious. The Religious Society of Friends, due to its status as a faith organisation, is classified as a charity (rather than, for instance, a company or a non-profit organisation). The BYM trustees appear to be distinguishing the central work of the Society from that of the local and Area Meetings, which, presumably, are ‘churches’ (but in the

⁷¹³ Rebecca Hardy, ‘Simple church affirmed as new priority’, *The Friend*, 29 November 2018, <https://thefriend.org/article/meeting-for-sufferings-simple-church-affirmed-as-new-priority> [accessed 10 May 2020]. The article continues ‘The trustees’ proposals for the future included ‘a range of far-reaching suggestions, which included possible ‘regionalisation’ – decentralising some BYM roles – and creating a ‘two-way conversation’ between central management and ‘on the ground’ Quakers’.

⁷¹⁴ Meeting for Sufferings Minutes 1 February 2020: MfS/20/02/07 BYM Trustees.

⁷¹⁵ Meeting for Sufferings Calling Letter: MfS 2020 06 07 Update from the Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees.

congregationalist management of the Area Meetings, using the national trustees' own logic, is it appropriate to refer to them in the aggregate as the 'church'?). But the central work consists of most if not all of the work undertaken at national level by the Religious Society of Friends. The Quaker Life central committee for instance is responsible for the support, on spiritual as well as property or operational matters, of the local and Area Meetings. The Quaker Social Responsibility and Education committee is responsible for the programmes of work within Britain and elsewhere which have arisen out of Quaker 'concerns' – which have arisen from the religious imperative to 'love thy neighbour'⁷¹⁶ and to care for the weaker and most disadvantaged members of society, such as 'prisoners, widows, orphans and the poor.'⁷¹⁷ All these activities have been integral to the life of the Religious Society of Friends since its earliest days – and of course, to most other faith groups too. The finance, personnel and property management functions of the central work are all enabling activities that help the core work to run smoothly.

In the Society of Friends, for more than three hundred years, the national work has, mostly, not been managed by experts but by committees of members drawn from local meetings around the country. But the engagement of members has become seen by trustees and management meeting as something inefficient and costly, rather than as a feature of the church at work; to be limited on grounds of cost, efficiency and carbon-footprint. The Recording Clerk's first blog of 2020 says:

In today's highly-regulated environment our reliance on volunteers to ensure we are well-administered, charity-law compliant, and safe may not be sustainable. At a national level, around five hundred Friends are engaged with the governance of the centrally-managed

⁷¹⁶ Matthew 22: 37-39.

⁷¹⁷ Isaiah 61:1.

work of Britain Yearly Meeting – is sitting in committee meetings the best use of their gifts, or are there new and creative ways for their willingness to serve to be expressed?⁷¹⁸

This sounds like a valid query, is this the best way of spending the church-members' time? But it is helpful at this point to recall the insights of Margaret Harris, referred to in Chapter 2 of this thesis, identifying the difference between the participation of a volunteer in a membership organisation and that of a church member living out their faith.⁷¹⁹ The meetings of Sufferings and the other central committees – if they have a useful and relevant agenda, and if the committees have the power, within the organisation of the Society of Friends to make meaningful decisions – are not simply meetings of volunteers or interest groups, they are meetings of the church at work; at work both with reference to the deliberations and their content, and also as representatives of the church community, from different parts of the country, weaving the Society together both geographically and in their shared task of prayerfully seeking unity in their understanding of 'the will of God' about their decisions, and thus the shared activity of living the Kingdom of God into existence.

Item 9 in the Calling Letter for Meeting for Sufferings in June 2020 proposes that only four Sufferings meetings are held in 2021, on the grounds of cost and the impact on the carbon footprint of the Society.⁷²⁰

⁷¹⁸ Paul Parker, *Our Faith, Our Community, A Reality Check for 2020* blog, 1 January 2020.

<https://quaker.org.uk/blog/our-faith-our-community-a-reality-check-for-2020> [accessed 7 May 2020].

⁷¹⁹ Margaret Harris, 'A Special Case of Voluntary Associations? Towards a Theory of Congregational Organisation', *British Journal of Sociology*, 49:4, December 1998, pp. 602–618; Margaret Harris, *Organizing God's Work: Challenges for Churches and Synagogues* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

⁷²⁰ Meeting for Sufferings, Calling Letter for June 2020, MfS 2020 06 09 Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain Dates of Meeting for Sufferings in next triennium.

It is illuminating, when reflecting on the Society of Friends' conceptual separation of 'the church and the charity', to consider the extent to which these changes are, as Quakers appear to understand, driven by the Charity Commission or by the trustees and management meeting. If one looks at the trustees' annual report to the Charity Commission,⁷²¹ it is constructed within the language and framework of a mainstream charity. While it does say that its Aims & Activities include 'Sustaining our church and faith; Supporting Quaker meetings; Promoting Quakerism; Witness through Action', its statements about 'what the charity does'; who the charity helps' and 'what the charity does' are populated with a broad variety of charitable tasks and beneficiaries. 'What the charity does, for instance, is described in a list of five activities, from 'General Charitable Purposes' to 'Other Charitable Purposes'. It mentions education and the relief or prevention of poverty before it comes to 'Religious Activities'. 'Who the charity helps' includes children, old people, and 'people with disabilities', as well as, at sixth place 'mankind'. Ten instances of 'How the Charity Works' starts with three grant-making functions.⁷²²

Is this really driven by Charity Commission requirements, or by how the trustees and management meeting conceive of 'the charity'? The Baptist Union's 'Charity Overview' is both more succinct and more overtly religious. Its 'Aims and Activities' are 'To provide encouragement, advice and support to member churches so that they too may maximise their ability to achieve their own charitable objective of making Jesus Christ known to individuals and

⁷²¹ Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales; Britain Yearly Meeting (Quakers); Data for Financial Year Ending 31 December 2018* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/>? [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁷²² Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales; Britain Yearly Meeting (Quakers); Data for Financial Year Ending 31 December 2018; Overview* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/>? [accessed 10 May 2020].

society in general'. 'What the charity does' is simple – 'Religious Activities'; it helps 'Other charities or voluntary bodies' and it works by acting 'as an umbrella or resource body'.⁷²³

Similarly, the Methodist Church in Great Britain engages in 'Religious Activities'; it helps 'the whole of mankind' and it 'Acts as an umbrella or resource body'.⁷²⁴

Unlike the Baptist and Methodist central bodies, both of which are arguably analogous to the central body of the Religious Society of Friends, The Church Commissioners for England just have a financial and property management role within the Anglican Church. Even they describe their work, simply, as 'Religious Activities'.⁷²⁵ I suggest that while the Charity Commission demands have indeed required changes to church organisations, including for instance the Baptist and Methodists, it is symptomatic of the mood and inclinations of trustees and the management committee within the Religious Society of Friends that the Quaker completion of Charity Commission paperwork is formulated so differently to those of other churches, and much more as if Britain Yearly Meeting is a multi-purpose charity with donor and other functions.

⁷²³ Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales; The Baptist Union of Great Britain: Data for Financial Year Ending 31 December 2018; Overview* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details>. [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁷²⁴ Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales The Methodist Church in Great Britain; Data for Financial Year Ending 31 August 2018; Overview* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?>. [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁷²⁵ Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales Church Commissioners for England; Data for Financial Year Ending 31 December 2018* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details?> [accessed 10 May 2020].

6.6 Chapter Summary

The consideration in this chapter takes up the challenge posed by Chandler⁷²⁶ in his study of the workings of the (Anglican) Church Commissioners, and also by the sociologists Steve Bruce and Bryan Wilson, to broaden the discussion of secularisation from examining changing beliefs to tracing the changes in religious organisations in response to the demands of the secular state. It shows that the Quaker response to Charity Commission requirements has not consisted merely of administrative alterations; but that it has, to some extent inadvertently, reshaped the governance structures of the Religious Society of Friends. It does not suggest that these changes have been exclusively caused by the response to the Charity Commission requirements, and indeed this chapter and Chapters 4 and 5 each illustrate that the forces of managerialism and centralisation of authority had been already present in the Society when the legal changes entrenched and exacerbated these trends.

The reservation for themselves by the trustees of two large financial decisions (within the economy of the Religious Society of Friends) – the sale of Courtauld House, and the redevelopment of the Large Meeting House – illustrates the trustees' perception that they have the power, and the authority, to engage in large-scale strategic and capital decisions without the engagement of what was hitherto the key decision-making body, the Yearly Meeting, or, in its abeyance, Meeting for Sufferings. Technically, it may be said that in reporting their actions and their proposals to Meeting for Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting, the Board has engaged in

⁷²⁶ Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform 1948 – 1998* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

transparency. However, their unwillingness to engage with criticism by Quakers ‘on the benches’ in Yearly Meeting sessions indicates that they are exhibiting the autocratic and disempowering behaviours described by Chait *et al*⁷²⁷ and by Monks⁷²⁸ and Keay⁷²⁹ in their discussion of trustee board behaviour in public companies and in the voluntary sector (see Chapter 2).

There is nothing in the Charity Commission’s specifications that requires the trustees of the Religious Society of Friends, or of any other denomination or charitable body, to reserve large strategic decisions to themselves. Indeed, the Charity Commission lists ‘failure to engage stakeholders in strategic decisions’ as one of the shortcomings for which trustee boards may be deemed culpable.⁷³⁰

This centralisation of decision-making, and of power, is antithetical to the traditional ethos of the Religious Society of Friends, with its radical understanding that it is a denomination without a laity and without a paid clergy, emphasising instead ‘the priesthood of all believers’,⁷³¹ with its corollary that the care of the church, including its community and its works, is in the hands of its members.

⁷²⁷ Richard P. Chait; William P. Ryan & Barbara E. Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Non-Profit Boards* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2004).

⁷²⁸ Robert A. G. Monks, ‘Governance at a Crossroads, A Personal Perspective’, *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*, 8:1, 2011, pp.62-76 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/jdg.2010.23>.

⁷²⁹ Andrew Keay, ‘Accountability and the Corporate Governance Framework: from Cadbury to the UK Corporate Governance Code’, *SSRI Electronic Journal*. 2012 DOI: [10.2139/ssrn.2143171](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2143171).

⁷³⁰ Charity Commission, *RS8 Transparency and Accountability*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/284721/rs8text.pdf [Accessed 20 May 2020].

⁷³¹ 1 Peter 2:5.

For most of its history, the Religious Society of Friends in Britain has been structured to ensure maximum participation by the members of the Quaker community in the running of the church, and in reaching the decisions undertaken in the name of Quakers. This is not to ignore the work of Isichei⁷³² or of other researchers such as Dandelion⁷³³ who have observed that leadership within the Religious Society of Friends, especially at national level, has been limited throughout its history, both formally and informally, to relatively few individuals; and that the number of individuals who speak at Yearly Meeting or at Meeting for Sufferings is similarly limited, usually to the same diffuse set of individuals. However, that does not offset the fact that the structures of the Religious Society of Friends enable participation in decision-making at local, Area and Yearly Meeting level by any Quaker minded to take part, an opportunity generally not open within their denomination to members of other churches. Yet in each instance that aspects of this capital programme came before the Yearly Meeting or Meeting for Sufferings, the clerk of the relevant body acquiesced in this situation to the extent that they, in some instances forcefully, actively controlled the meeting so that the members had little or no opportunity to express reservations or disquiet, or through their comments to modify the decision – which had already been effectively made, and which was being brought to the attention of the meeting really only as a matter for information.

Chapter 3 indicates that the organisation of the Religious Society of Friends has been noteworthy for the checks and balances built into its design since the early days of Quakers in the 17th

⁷³² Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

⁷³³ Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: the silent revolution* (Lampeter. Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society No. 34) 1996).

century; with concerns being tested in committees and in lower levels of the organisation before coming to the largest group relevant for that issue, for final determination. Thus, this suggests that the reservation by a committee of large strategic and financial decisions for initial and also final resolution by itself is as near to an ecclesiological fallacy as this liberal religious group can fall into.

To some extent at least, this centralisation of authority has been a direct response to, and a consequence of, the Charity Commission's requirements for registration and for the application of generally recognisable trusteeship functions in all charitable bodies, including faith groups, which until recently were exempted from registration.

The chapter briefly illustrates some of the ways in which the role of the Recording Clerk has expanded into that of figurehead for the Society of Friends, both internally and externally, consequently marginalising the role of committee members and clerks, who, I would suggest, theoretically function not as 'volunteers' in the running and governance of the central work of Britain Yearly Meeting, but as members of the church, one which celebrates, or, rather, used to celebrate, the 'priesthood of believers'.⁷³⁴

I suggest that the trustees' discourse since 2018 of distinguishing between 'the church' and 'the charity' really does indicate that the thinking of trustees and other paid and unpaid officials of the Society of Friends has been affected, one might say afflicted, by 'the displacement, in matters of

⁷³⁴ 1 Peter, 2:5-9.

behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria'; and 'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation' described by Steve Bruce and Bryan Wilson as features of secularisation.⁷³⁵

⁷³⁵ Bruce, *Secularization*, p2.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Chapter Outline

Chapter 7 opens with a brief review of the material in the six previous chapters, leading to a discussion of the general findings of this study, and its particular contribution to the field of Quaker Studies and to the study of religious organisations. It identifies issues for further research which have emerged, and concludes with a short chapter summary.

7.2 Summary of Key Points

The evidence, and argument, in this thesis has been laid out in six chapters:

Chapter 1 identifies this study as that of a faith organisation in the process of change.. The research question, focussing on changes to the internal organisation and processes of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is framed with reference to Steve Bruce and his predecessor Bryan Wilson's definition of secularisation, which establishes that the growth of secularisation within a faith organisation has many dimensions, of which this study focusses on two. These are: 'the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria'; and 'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation'.⁷³⁶ The chapter refers to earlier research which identifies that the decline of religious

⁷³⁶ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.2.

certainty among members of the group is a third aspect of secularisation which has occurred within the Religious Society of Friends.

A review of the demographics of the Religious Society of Friends shows that it is a very small faith group, with barely 21,000 members and attenders. Only about a third of members subscribe to the ‘canonical’ version of the Society and its worship discussed in Chapter 3. More than 80% of members are converts to the group, 33% within the past decade. Only a small proportion of members and attenders attend meetings for worship for business locally; so many participants at the Yearly Meeting are unfamiliar with Quaker traditions and practices. Modifications to Yearly Meeting content or procedures are not recognised as such but are accepted as ‘normal’ Quaker practice (which, of course, they thus become).

Chapter 1 presents the methodology of the project, which has been a study using published data. This research method, using material which is equally available to other researchers, was chosen partly to overcome the inevitable opportunity for bias on the part of the researcher, a longstanding participant in the group.

Chapter 2 contains a review of academic literature in the field of Quaker Studies, establishing that the present study covers material which has not previously been dealt with by academics considering the life of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

It refers to recent work by Pink Dandelion, who argues that there is ‘a cultivation of conformity’ within the Society of Friends with the secular world, which precedes any organisational changes

inspired by the government policies.⁷³⁷ It also refers to recent work by Yarlett, who finds that the proliferation of non-theism within the group in recent decades is incompatible with the practice of mystic religion; and that Dandelion's conception of orthopraxy is so regularly referenced that this has now become one of the creeds of the Society, 'marginalising the substantive informative role of discursive theology and/or orthodoxy with regard to the Liberal Quaker identity'.⁷³⁸ I found this insight helpful for understanding how the place of the worshipping community making decisions in a 'gathered' meeting for worship for business has been marginalised in the quest for efficiency and other changes to the organisation and the decision-making practices of the Society of Friends which are described in the following chapters.

Chapter Two also reports that there is a strand of contemporary research among Quaker academics such as Nicholas Burton and Rachel Muers, who hope to apply the Quaker business method in public sector or commercial organisations.⁷³⁹ Peter Cheng has investigated attributes of the Quaker business method with a view to their application outside of a religious context.⁷⁴⁰ My own understanding is that many of the constructive attributes of Quaker business practice are already attributes of good practice in secular meetings, apart perhaps from the Quaker habit of contemporaneous minute-making and agreeing the minutes. But the key feature of a Quaker business meeting is that it is, or has hitherto been, a meeting for worship for business. That is to

⁷³⁷ Pink Dandelion, *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2019), p.161.

⁷³⁸ Yarlett, *Accommodation of Diversity*, 2020, p.310.

⁷³⁹ Nicholas Burton, 'Quaker Business Method: A Contemporary Decision-Making Process?', in *Quakers, Business & Industry*, ed. by Stephen W. Angell, & Pink Dandelion (Philadelphia: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2017); Rachel Muers & Nicholas Burton, 'Can We Take the Religion Out of Religious Decision-Making? The Case of Quaker Business Method', *Philosophy of Management*, (28 June 2018), pp.1–12.

⁷⁴⁰ Peter C-H Cheng, 'A Cognitive Science Analysis of the Quaker Business Method: How it Works, Why it Works?' *Quaker Studies Journal*, 24:2 (2019), pp. 271–297.

say, not even a meeting book-ended by worship, but one in which unity is reached on the matters before the meeting through the shared discernment of the worshipping group. Further, the clerk of a Quaker meeting has a different task to that of a meeting chairperson; they have the task of reflecting back to the meeting the decisions which appear to be emerging. This is not the chairperson's role of arbiter and final decision-maker.

This chapter also discusses other academic literature which has informed this study, including material about decision-making in face-to-face and egalitarian organisations. It draws particularly on Adam Kuper's typology of ceremonial and other 'illegitimate' forms of decision-making.⁷⁴¹ It also refers to David Graeber's reports from his own experience of the protest movement 'Occupy' that it is possible for entirely secularised process of consensus decision-making to provide the social space which is similarly claimed for the Quaker decision-making process; for a decision to be made which is genuinely 'owned' by each person present, even though there may have been initially a wide level of disagreement. However, he and others note that apparent consensus-seeking is often what Kuper would term 'illegitimate' decision-making; a process of co-optation and of disempowerment, especially where there is a power imbalance among members of the group. The study also draws on management literature, especially pertinent because one of the recent innovations under discussion is the creation of a small trustee body, as recommended by the Charity Commission. Authors such as Peter Drucker and Robert Monks point out that the institution of trustees does not as such necessarily add to the effective governance of an organisation, but their existence can distance other stakeholders from effective engagement in

⁷⁴¹ Adam Kuper, 'Council Structure and Decision-making' in Richards, Audrey & Adam Kuper, (eds.): *Councils in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 13–28

decision-making.⁷⁴² All of this material is discussed because it is seen as helpful for understanding and analysing the events discussed in Chapters 4–6.

Chapter 3 discusses the Quaker concept of ‘Gospel Order’, which refers to the organisation and community of the church, within which decisions are, or rather, were in the past, understood to be made under the headship of Christ, the ‘presence in the midst’ at any prayerfully gathered Meeting for Worship for Business. The chapter explains that, as in any Quaker meeting for church affairs, it is understood that the business of a Yearly Meeting will be conducted in a meeting for worship based on silence, during which Friends seek to discern the way forward.⁷⁴³ The phrasing of the Quaker handbook⁷⁴⁴ describes this process in terms of recognising ‘God’s will’ and ‘God’s guidance’ – terms which sit uneasily with non-theist Quakers; for whom perhaps the decision-making process can be more appropriately described as ‘seeking to know the sense of the Meeting’; in other words, at most, consensus, or at any rate the minimum that can be agreed.

Chapter 4 This chapter reviews some of the changes to the organisation of the Yearly Meeting over the years, and to its place in the authority structures of the Society of Friends, particularly since the advent of trustees in 2006. A new event, Yearly Meeting Gathering, is now held every third year, in little expectation that it will be a decision-making event.⁷⁴⁵ The chapter also considers some of the changing roles of particular groups and individuals in the management of

⁷⁴² Peter F. Drucker, ‘The Bored Board’, *Toward the Next Economics, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 107–122 (First published *The Wharton Magazine*, Fall, 1976)); Robert A. G. Monks, Governance at a Crossroads: A Personal Perspective, *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*, 8:1 (2011), pp. 62–76.

⁷⁴³ *QF&P* 3:02–3:09.

⁷⁴⁴ *QF&P* 3:02.

⁷⁴⁵ See 2014 and 2017, discussed in Chapter 5.

the Yearly Meeting and thus also of the life and work of the Religious Society of Friends; these include the participation of women since the beginning of the 20th century, the role of the clerk, and of the Recording Clerk.

It briefly discusses the changing, and diminishing role of members of the Religious Society of Friends in the national work of the Society. The Yearly Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings are both subordinated to a new tier of authority, trustees; and the decision-making powers of the first two bodies are now diminished. Until the mid-twentieth century national committees were responsible for raising their operating funds, and for employing any staff needed to augment the skills or energies of committee members. Nowadays the central work is primarily undertaken by paid staff, and the trustees are anxious to reduce the number and size of committees to ensure that 'valuable staff time' is not consumed by servicing them.⁷⁴⁶

Chapter 3 explained that community participation in shared decision-making, through worshipful discernment, was a distinguishing feature of the Society of Friends in the past. The brief discussion in Chapter 4 of the changes to the organisation and to the locus of authority in the hands of trustees indicates that the role of the members of the group has diminished; in a way that fundamentally affects the ecclesiology of the body. The changes since the introduction of trustees are explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 examines case-studies of Yearly Meetings, focussing particularly on the recent past, since the introduction of trustees. It shows that the role of the Yearly Meeting has shifted from

⁷⁴⁶ Joseph Jones, 'It's Going to Be an Evolution, But We Need to Get on With It', *The Friend*, 2 August, 2019, pp. 8 – 10

that of a substantive decision-making body, as in 1912, to one where in some years, such as 2012 and 2017, not a single non-ceremonial decision was made. It finds that the opportunities for discernment in the Yearly Meeting sessions have been curtailed. Substantive matters for decision appear infrequently on the agenda, making it impossible to achieve the levels of stakeholder engagement in the process or in the outcome so appreciatively reported in the mid-20th century by Quakers such as Roger Wilson⁷⁴⁷.

And on the occasions when items for active consideration do appear, it is in a context whereby the Agenda Committee has a strong inclination to a particular outcome, which, at most, they expect that the meeting may or may not reach. There is little expectation or opportunity for the meeting to modify the outcome proposed by the Agenda Committee, although there does still appear to be a recognition that the meeting, on that occasion, may not yet be ready to accept the outcome sought. None of this is ‘discernment’ in Quakers’ earlier understanding of the term.

Chapter 6 examines the effects within the Religious Society of Friends of the second of the features of secularisation listed by Steve Bruce and Bryan Wilson, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2: the displacement, or at any rate the shaping, of religious organisation to accord with technical criteria required by the State.⁷⁴⁸ In this instance, at issue are the changes in organisation and governance made by Friends in response to the requirements of the Charities Acts of 1993 and of 2006. The chapter opens with a discussion of the rise of governance and non-executive boards, and of the Charity Commission’s governance requirements which led to the resolution by

⁷⁴⁷ Roger C. Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern: Swarthmore Lecture* (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1949). See Chapter 3.

⁷⁴⁸ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: CA Watts, 1966).

the Society of Friends to alter their decision-making structures through the introduction of trustees. Five instances where the trustees have taken or been party to decisions which might previously have been made by the wider membership of the Religious Society of Friends are discussed. These are:

- Decisions regarding the sale of a London property, Courtauld House;
- The refurbishment of the Large Meeting House;
- The re-naming of the Large Meeting House;
- ‘Whoosh!’ – the Recording Clerk’s initiative to revitalise local Meetings; and
- The decision to register with the Electoral Commission under the Transparency of Lobbying Act of 2014.

The chapter also discusses the recent discourse emanating from trustees in which there is a conceptual separation between ‘the church’ and ‘the charity’. It would appear that the central work of Britain Yearly Meeting is increasingly being described in secular charitable terms, as, for instance, in the returns to the Charity Commission. A similar trend has not been observed in other faith bodies’ reports to the Charity Commission; but neither the Methodists, Baptists nor the Anglicans have embraced such a broad spectrum of individualised belief among their membership as have the Quakers, whose members range from traditional Christians to ‘Quagans’ and non-theists.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁹ Jennifer Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey: examining religious beliefs and practices in the twenty-first century’, *Quaker Studies*, 19:1, (2014), 7–136; Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: the silent revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society No. 34, 1996).

7.3 Discussion

This thesis opened with the statement that it was a study of a faith group in transition. The research question asked whether, and to what extent, this might be a case study of a religious group changing its nature in response to the requirements of the secular state, as predicted by proponents of secularisation theory, particularly by Steve Bruce and his predecessor, Bryan Wilson.⁷⁵⁰

Following a review of theoretical literature relevant to the topic, and a discussion of the Quaker concept of ‘gospel order’, this study has traced the changing role, content and management of the Yearly Meeting, the annual national gathering of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain in the modern period. It has explored how organisational changes such as the introduction of trustees, precipitated by new requirements on the part of the Charity Commission, have affected the structures and the authority relationships within the Society of Friends.

While some aspects of the original form persist, this study finds that the Society of Friends’ charism of collective decision-making under the Lord’s guidance has fallen away. Chapters 5 and 6 both include instances when the traditional Quaker decision-making practices have been abused or have less salience. The term ‘discernment’ is still used in the Documents in Advance for Yearly Meetings, but its meaning has been modified in current parlance to emphasise ‘reflection’ rather than judgement or decision-making.

⁷⁵⁰ Bruce, *Secularization*; Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*.

This study indicates that the Yearly Meeting is no longer a meaningful decision-making body. Chapter 5 shows that in some recent years it has had only ritual decisions to make, such as ratifying appointments. Where major matters have come to the Yearly Meeting, for instance the 2009 decision to support same-sex marriage, or the 2014 and latterly the 2018 decision to revise the book of discipline, it has been made very clear to the assembled Quakers what outcome the clerk and the agenda committee hope will be achieved.

It would appear that the Yearly Meeting clerks are anxious – and actually have been anxious since the disagreements at the 1989 Yearly Meeting – that the meeting might get out of hand.⁷⁵¹ A tight reign has been kept on the time allocated to particular items, and new rituals added to the process of calling speakers from the floor have helped to limit the number of people who can speak within that limited time. The 2009 same-sex marriage deliberations and the 2018 book of discipline revision decision were both unusual in that the clerks and the timetable provided extended opportunities for speakers from the floor; and it is argued that in both instances the planning team were particularly keen that the decisions were seen to be ones which had been made with the full agreement of the Yearly Meeting – the 2018 decision particularly requiring that status after a more cursory treatment of the matter in the 2014 agenda had not yielded the assent necessary for the project to go forward. Similarly, the same-sex marriage decision really needed endorsement and commitment to the decision by the Quaker membership, as it was not simply an internal matter, but one which placed the Quakers at conspicuous variance to government policy and to the positions held by most other faith groups, such as the Anglican Church.

⁷⁵¹ See Chapter 5 of this document.

These two occasions provide a marked contrast to the brisk termination of consideration in 2012 of the major capital project of this century, the ‘refurbishment’ of the Large Meeting House; or to the time allocated for plenary consideration of the Trustees and Meeting for Sufferings reports in various years since 2006.

While there has been less substantial decision-making at the national assemblies, these events have then tended to focus on the personal and subjective. In turn and in time, there has been a shift from religious witness to group and personal introspection, not necessarily emanating from a faith or worshipping base – as in the session at the YM in 2012 when Friends were called upon to meditate upon footprints on a beach; or the session on love and grief at the 2017 Yearly Meeting, led by the motivational speaker George Lakey.⁷⁵² Further, the emphasis on personal spirituality has fostered the tendency of the group in its increasingly diminished interest in substantive decision making; creating circumstances which encourage a further ceding authority to trustees. Although QF&P contains a statement that, whatever the law says about the authority of trustees for determining action, ‘under Gospel Order, the ultimate authority will still lie with the gathered meeting’,⁷⁵³ this study shows that this has not been the case in practice. Rather, a completely different statement, also in QF&P, prevails. Para 8.17 states that ‘Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees are responsible for the work, assets and property of the yearly meeting’. This paragraph

⁷⁵² George Lakey, ‘Living and loving on your edge’ Yearly Meeting Gathering Archive 2017 <https://quaker-prod.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/86e5d09d204fa4ac59abc183e0467cc6bb184169cc0c265d20e11308c169> [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁷⁵³ QF&P, 15.03.

is not modified by any caveats which might harmonise with the statement about trustees and gospel order.

Previous research has found that members of the group no longer have a shared understanding of the religious nature of Quaker business meetings,⁷⁵⁴ and this study finds that the concept of ‘Gospel Order’ is no longer aspired to in the conduct or the agenda of Yearly Meetings. This research suggests that the Yearly Meeting no longer has a meaningful decision-making role in the Society of Friends, nor does it have authority over the decisions of trustees and paid staff. The shared religious experience of members of the Quaker community gathering in ‘silent waiting upon the Lord’, trying to discern God’s will for the topic in hand, has been replaced by decision-making by a small appointed group of trustees. At best, staff or trustees might conduct their meetings ‘after the manner of Friends’, but even if this happens, they are making decisions on behalf of the group, rather than leaving it to the largest available assembly of Quakers at national or at local level to consider prayerfully together.

The opportunities for the members of the church community to find unity as a community as well as a decision-making group through the process of shared, worshipful, discernment are thus curtailed, changing the nature of the Yearly Meeting as an event, and also of the organisation of the Religious Society of Friends as a faith community.

The requirement by the Charity Commission⁷⁵⁵ that risk-associated trading activities are not undertaken directly by a charitable body but are dealt with by a separate company means that the

⁷⁵⁴ Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey; Alastair Heron, *Our Quaker Identity: Religious Society or Friendly Society?* (Kelso: Curlew Productions, 2000).

⁷⁵⁵ Charity Commission for England & Wales: *CC 35, Trustees, Trading and Tax; how trustees may lawfully trade* (London, Charity Commission, 2016).

hospitality function at Friends House is no longer directly part of the work of Britain Yearly Meeting. There are now real, legal, walls between the ‘Friends on the benches’ and the hospitality company, which, although it is wholly owned by the Society, is not answerable to the Quakers assembled at the Yearly Meeting, but only to its own board of directors and through them to the BYM trustees. This is of course an instance of the displacement of Quaker organisation and practices by ‘demands that accord with strictly technical criteria’, as described by Wilson and Bruce⁷⁵⁶. This particular issue is one which is certainly not unique to the Religious Society of Friends; the Charity Commission requirements in this regard have affected all faith groups and organisations which engage even incidentally in revenue-generating activities, and many secular charities. In the case of the Quakers, this separation has led to the trading company and the Britain Yearly Meeting trustees making decisions which previously would not have been within the remit of the executive and non-executive team with delegated responsibility for managing that aspect of the corporate work.

The Yearly Meeting and Sufferings’ lack of capacity to influence the decision by the directors of the Friends House Hospitality Company (now known as ‘The Quiet Company’)⁷⁵⁷ to change the name of the Large Meeting House for trading purposes to ‘The Light’ is an example of such a situation. This occurred even though most if not all of the company’s directors are Quakers; some them are trustees of BYM, of which the trading company is a wholly-owned subsidiary. Legally, as the directors pointed out,⁷⁵⁸ BYM had no authority to influence a strategic decision on the part

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869136/CC35_PD_F_v2.pdf [accessed 22 May 2020].

⁷⁵⁶ Bruce, *Secularization*, p.2.

⁷⁵⁷ Quakers in Britain, *The Company Annual Review 2018*. <https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/sites/default/files/Friends-House-Annual-Review-2018.pdf> [accessed 20 May 2020].

⁷⁵⁸ Peter Coltman, ‘The Light’, *The Friend*, 13 December 2013, p.6.

of the company. The directors termed it entirely as a marketing decision rather than, at least partially, an aspect of the Quaker group's self- presentation to the wider society – an issue about which the wider Quaker body might expect to have relevant opinions.

Inevitably too, the fiduciary separation associated with the separation of Area Meetings and of other parts of the Religious Society of Friends into different charitable bodies and, in some instances, separate trading companies, has created barriers and the potential for barriers between different parts of the Religious Society of Friends. The different charitable entities and companies are no longer necessarily linked; and are in a position to make decisions independently of each other, without necessarily even considering the consequences of those decisions for the wider Religious Society of Friends or for parts of the Religious Society of Friends which, geographically or functionally, might previously have been expected to work cooperatively together. Even more distantly separated are Quaker foundations such as the schools and old-age homes which, until new company structures were created in the light of charity legislation, used to belong directly to a geographic or national echelon of the Society, and to have boards of trustees or governors who were answerable to that stakeholder group. The changes mean that, in a group which has historically highly prized the checks and balances which it has built into its structures, there is no longer any legal requirement for the Quaker stakeholders to check the decisions made by trustees of these now-separate organisations. That is not to say that Friends have necessarily served well as scrutineers of decisions made by their trustee boards, even when they did have greater capacity to do so. For instance, the oldest of the Quaker Schools, Friends School, in Saffron Walden in Essex, was for at least the past thirty years neither particularly well-managed nor particularly committed to the transmission of Quaker values or knowledge, although

it was owned until the 1990s by London & Middlesex Monthly Meeting, after which time it had an ad-hoc General Meeting to which it reported annually – transmitting information rather than being legally accountable. But once the school governors had in 2016 initiated the laying-down of the General Meeting, there was absolutely no authorised responsible body to question the governors' decision to continue trading when in financial deficit; to the point, in May 2017, when its bank foreclosed on the assets of the institution.⁷⁵⁹

In this instance, there has been distinct reputational damage to the Society of Friends, especially locally. But such situations – either strategic decisions at odds with those of the wider body of which the now distinctly separate company is a part, or actual instances of financial mismanagement and bad practice which give rise to reputational damage for the wider body as a whole – are not unique to the Society of Friends. It is likely that similar disjunctions are occurring in many different national organisations which have legally become fragmented into many separate smaller entities. And it should be expected that in some of these fractalled groups policy differences will emerge, both between the individual small charities and between the smaller, newly independent, charities and the centre. Further study of its effects in other denominations such as the Baptist Union and the Anglican Church, as well as in the Society of Friends, would also be fruitful (see below). It is possible, ironically, that the imposition of more rigorous, generalized, governance requirements has actually diminished the denominations' oversight of some now-freestanding enterprises, lifting the denominational checks and balances over the management of those activities; and leaving governors unconstrained in their steering of

⁷⁵⁹ Dunmow Broadcast, 'Walden School Accused by Parents and Suppliers of 'moral fraud and deception' by parents and suppliers' as it goes into administration', 18 July 2017, updated 19 July 2017. <https://www.dunmowbroadcast.co.uk/news/walden-school-accused-of-moral-fraud-and-deception-by-parents-and-suppliers-as-it-goes-into-administration-1-5111668> [accessed 12 April 2019].

the enterprise – not always necessarily in close-keeping with the prior values and objectives of the denomination.

Gradually, much of the social engagement undertaken as part of the work nationally of the Society of Friends has become professionalised; it is no longer seen as an integral part of the local worshipping community's shared experience, and it is left in the hands of paid BYM staff and the increasingly-streamlined committees responsible for oversight of the work. The Religious Society of Friends has moved from its historical situation whereby committees undertook work done either internally or in the wider world in the name of the Society, possibly with the assistance of paid staff, to a situation where the committees are found to be extraneous, and the servicing of them being seen as encroaching on staff time.⁷⁶⁰

Chapter 6 identified the 'Whoosh' project, later 'Vibrancy', launched by the current Recording Clerk in 2012, with endorsement by trustees, as an example of centralised decision-making overriding the historical processes of the central committees. This kind of initiative indicates that some of the senior office-bearers in the Religious Society of Friends today, both within the general membership and among the paid Quaker staff, have a very different perception of the leadership function to that of the past, and a low level of commitment to ensuring the shared engagement in decision-making of the wider body of members.

Further, there has been a marked shift in the words used to describe the role of those Friends who serve on central committees. In the past, they were said to be 'giving service'; now they are

⁷⁶⁰ Joseph Jones, 'It's Going to Be an Evolution, But We Need to Get on With It', *The Friend*, 2 August, 2019, pp. 8–10.

described on the Quakers in Britain website and in Charity Commission returns as ‘volunteers’.⁷⁶¹ This is not merely a semantic change. As Torry observes, members of a faith community ‘will properly regard themselves as *constituting* the congregation, rather than having a relationship with a congregation that has an identity distinct from their belonging to it’.⁷⁶²

This change of language denotes a critical shift in the understanding, at least by some staff and members of the Quaker ‘leadership’ about the role and status of members of the Religious Society of Friends, demoting them from their engagement as active participants in the faith community – or as St Paul puts it, ‘the body of Christ’⁷⁶³ to members of a voluntary organisation engaging in discretionary activity. This is particularly ironic given the history of the Religious Society of Friends as a faith group which celebrated the contribution which every member made to the life of the worshipping community, as part of ‘Gospel Order’; and which had no clergy, but, rather, affirmed ‘the priesthood of all believers’.⁷⁶⁴

I suggest that this marks another stage in the internal secularisation of the Religious Society of Friends. Together, these aspects of secularisation: the acceptability and, indeed, enshrining of individuals’ ‘pick n mix’ selections from the spirituality and practices of a range of world religions; the rise of managerialism, and the associated replacement of widely-shared theocratic decision-making by a small group of trustees and a chief executive in conformity with state

⁷⁶¹ Charity Commission, *Registered Charities in England and Wales: Britain Yearly Meeting (Quakers); Data for Financial Year Ending 31 December 2018* <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?> [accessed 10 May 2020].

⁷⁶² Malcolm Torry, *Managing Religion: The Management of Christian Religious and Faith-based Organizations*. V 2: *External Relationships* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.199.

⁷⁶³ 1 Corinthians 12: 12–27 (The body of Christ has many different parts, just as any other body does; each is necessary and none is more valuable than any of the others).

⁷⁶⁴ 1 Peter 2:5.

requirements, all suggest that there have been profound changes in the nature of Quaker decision-making and in the organisation of the faith group as a whole. The ecclesiology of the church has changed markedly, though incrementally, in a process which started long before the trustees claimed the authority to make decisions on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting.

As belief has become more diffuse within the Society of Friends, the theology of Quaker decision-making has fallen away,⁷⁶⁵ and with it the real meaning of the group's traditional decision-making practices and behaviour. A respect for and even the worship of the shared silence in which meetings for worship and business meetings are grounded is not in itself religious practice. Graeber and others have shown that these values and behaviours are easily transferable to a secular setting such as 'Occupy' either when honestly practiced or when it actually functions as a system for 'ceremonial' decision-making which is strongly controlled by the leadership.⁷⁶⁶

Under these circumstances there has been little scope, nor, among the decision-making cadre, reason to resist the third variety of secular change which this study identifies within the Religious Society of Friends in Britain: the changes in practices imposed by, or consequent on the demands of, the secular state. It is possible to interpret at least some of the changes described in Chapters 4 and 5 as being ones brought about by the demands of the Charities Acts of 1991 and 1996.

The changes in governance in response to the statutory requirements of the Charity Commission have had the consequence that decision-making, for instance that associated with major items of

⁷⁶⁵ Yarlett, *The Accommodation of Diversity*, 2020.

⁷⁶⁶ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland Ca. & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009); Astra Taylor; Keith Gessen & editors from n+1, *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* (London: Verso, 2011).

expenditure, has been privatised among a small cadre of trustees and managers. The substantive decision-making role of the large group of members attending the Yearly Meeting has fallen away, and most decisions put before the larger group have been pre-empted, and those resolutions taken within the large assembly are to a greater or lesser extent staged.

The case studies of major decisions taken recently by trustees illustrate that the Quakers' inverted decision-making pyramid has been flipped and that the Religious Society of Friends has adapted itself to the familiar pyramid of power dominant in Western culture—with a tiny group of decision-makers at the top and the majority of Quakers at the bottom. The case studies also show that trustees have exhibited some reluctance to be transparent with the membership over some of the major decisions taken since the institution of the new body. For example, in the case of the refurbishment, key information such as the heritage bodies' criticisms of the scheme was withheld, so even if the Yearly Meeting had been given the opportunity to deliberate meaningfully about the proposed scheme at a point when it might realistically have been altered or abandoned, the discernment would have been skewed for lack of key information. One recalls the warning by Roger Wilson about the opportunities for human ambition to corrupt the management of Meetings for Worship for Business:

If a Committee hides from Yearly Meeting the truth of its work, its work will be bad. It is not difficult, in the short term, to confuse or hoodwink Yearly Meeting. But to just the degree that this is done, those responsible are not laying their service before the Lord in Worship, and the work will not be what it purports to be. It becomes something else—the expression of the unanchored intelligences of the members, of the ambition of individuals,

of the unreflecting traditionalism of those who have ceased to think critically of what they are doing.⁷⁶⁷

The appointment of trustees, as required by the Charity Commission, and the simultaneous shift in the role of the Yearly Meeting from a decision-making body to one that reflects on ‘themes’ chosen up to three or even six years in advance⁷⁶⁸ have together fundamentally affected the inclusive structures of decision-making and therefore the nature of the organisation. Currently, most decisions put to the Yearly Meeting are, one way or another, ritual decisions,⁷⁶⁹ predominantly routine matters of business such as committee appointments. In some years, such as 2012 and 2017, there was not a single substantive issue about which a discerned decision was sought by the agenda committee.⁷⁷⁰

But without the opportunities for substantive discernment and real decision-making on the part of the Yearly Meeting, the Quaker ideal of a prayerful, challenging process of the Meeting reaching towards unity on a decision does not occur, and a vital feature of traditional Quaker religious practice is not exercised. Instead, the assembled Quakers function more like passive auditors; what Søren Kierkegaard describes as the reduction of a worshipping community to the role of audience.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁷ Roger C. Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern: Swarthmore Lecture* (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1949).

⁷⁶⁸ In 2012–14 the overall theme was ‘Being a Quaker Today’; from 2015 to 2017 it was ‘Living Out Our Faith in the World’.

⁷⁶⁹ Adam Kuper, ‘Council Structure and Decision-making’, in *Councils in Action*, ed. by Audrey Richards and Adam Kuper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 13–28, (p.21).

⁷⁷⁰ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2012 and 2017).

⁷⁷¹ Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Attack upon ‘Christendom’*, trans. Lowrie, W., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945 [1855], http://archive.org/stream/kierkegaardsata00kier/kierkegaardsata00kier_djvu.txt [accessed 23 February 2017].

The understanding put forward by the trustees and the Recording Clerk that there are two distinct entities: ‘the church and the charity’⁷⁷² is theologically baffling. The central work of the Society, that carried out by trustees, members of Meeting for Sufferings and of other committees and by staff, is all work of the faith group as a whole. The central work of the Society of Friends is carried out by ‘Britain Yearly Meeting’, which is a charitable body distinct from the other charitable bodies constituted by the geographically separate Area Meetings. But the central work is carried out by a body which has charitable registration because that is the state’s governance classification for faith groups; not because there is any other reason for it to be registered as a charitable body. What the Britain Yearly Meeting website refers to as the ‘core’ activities at the centre – such as personnel, and the finance office, are actually the support departments to those departments and committees which provide advice and resources to support the worshipping communities at local level, or which undertake activities in the wider society, as part of the social engagement arising from Quaker ‘concerns’. The language distinguishing between the ‘church’ and the ‘charity’ is now well established among staff and trustees, but it is inaccurate and has yet to be confronted and decoded by the membership and by theological observers.

This is an examination of a faith-based group in change, observing the church as it is lived, in its organisation and its responses to the demands of the state. As such, particularly as the institution of trustees was in response to statutory requirements by the Charity Commission, an agent of the state, it is suggested that this transformation of organisation and processes within the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is an illustration of Wilson and Bruce’s thesis that secularisation of

⁷⁷² Meeting for Sufferings Calling Letter: MfS 2020 06 07 Update from the Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees.

religious organisations may occur as the organisation responds to the demands of the secular state.

This example embodies Bruce and Wilson's descriptions of secularism as including, as Bruce puts it, 'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness ... by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation' in relation to its internal organisation and strategic decisions; and 'the displacement, in matters of [organisational] behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria'.⁷⁷³

This discussion covers a moment in the history of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain when the shared cultural understanding of maximum participation in decision-making, described by authors such as Sheeran, Collins, Dandelion, and Davie⁷⁷⁴ has been replaced by an understanding that key decisions are reserved for a small group—in this instance, the trustees. I suggest that British Quakers have not yet recognised the extent of the ecclesiological shift that has occurred, nor its effect on the shared spiritual and temporal life of the group.

It is of course not impossible that the trends identified in this study are reversible. But it is extremely unlikely that the centralisation of power and authority, and the associated eagerness to

⁷⁷³ Bruce, *Secularization*, p.2.

⁷⁷⁴Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia Pa.: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983); Peter Collins, 'The Sense of the Meeting: An Anthropology of Vernacular Quakerism', [unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1994]; Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press (Studies in Religion and Society No. 34), 1996); Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology since 1895* (Lewiston and New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

comply with secular organisational requirements, will be rolled back unless an understanding is recaptured of the theological beliefs underpinning the organisation and nature of the Religious Society of Friends in the first 300 years of its existence.

7.4 Conclusions

This study has reviewed the Religious Society of Friends as a faith organisation in the process of change. It indicates that the forces of secularisation are at work within the Society, not simply, but in at least three different respects; each of which interacts with and helps drive forward the others. The three reinforcing shifts towards secularisation identified in this thesis include:

- The normalization of plurality of belief within the Society, and an increasing emphasis on diffuse personal spirituality rather than the framework of traditional Christianity and a lived, shared, responsibility for the wellbeing of one's neighbour locally and in the wider world;⁷⁷⁵
- A history over the past fifty years of increasing centralization of decision-making; and over the past quarter century a concomitant decrease in substantive shared decision-making at national level;

⁷⁷⁵ Matthew 22:36-40.

- Changes in practices imposed by, or consequent on the demands of, the secular state, particularly changes in governance and in the locus of decision-making consequent on the requirements of the Charities Act of 2006.⁷⁷⁶

In other words, this investigation illustrates and affirms Bruce and Wilson's description of secularisation as including **'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness ... by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation'** in relation to its internal organisation and strategic decisions; and **'the displacement, in matters of [organisational] behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria'**.⁷⁷⁷

This investigation suggests that the pre-existing changes associated with increasing pluralism of belief and with increasing centralisation of decision-making have made the Society of Friends especially vulnerable to reshaping its ecclesiology in response to technical requirements imposed by the state. Further, it suggests that these changes have fundamentally affected the theocratic governance and therefore the religious character of the Society of Friends, following the pattern which authors such as Peter Edge⁷⁷⁸ suggest is likely in twenty-first century Britain.

The study finds that, as indicated by Wilson and Bruce in their description of the multifactorial nature of secularisation, the ecclesiology of the Religious Society of Friends has changed gradually since the mid-twentieth century. This has been partly due to the increasing variety of belief among the membership, and also to the importation of management techniques and values

⁷⁷⁶ UK Public Legislation: Charities Act 2006 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/50/contents> [assessed?]

⁷⁷⁷ Bruce *Secularization*, p.2.

⁷⁷⁸ Peter W. Edge, Secularism and Establishment in the United Kingdom, in *Religions, Rights and Secular Society*, ed. by Peter Cumper & Tom Lewis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012) pp. 38–57.

from the wider society. The changes in the structure, organisation and management of the Society of Friends have been especially marked since the introduction of trustees in 2006 in response to government requirements.

This study shows that the Yearly Meeting (and also Meeting for Sufferings) has lost its power and authority. It continues to have an agenda of 'ritual' decisions, such as committee appointment, but it is now primarily a gathering for fellowship and for spiritual reflection. Real strategic and operational decision-making happens elsewhere, by a small group of trustees working closely with the senior staff member, the Recording Clerk.

With the attrition of its decision-making function the role and purpose of the Yearly Meeting has changed, and at national level the Religious Society of Friends has abandoned its particular charism of the widest possible group of members of the church sitting together in worship, uniting as a community in their quest to discern 'the will of God' about the decisions before them. The replacement of this forum by a small group of trustees taking decisions (whether or not they practice the Quaker business method in their meetings) has effectively flipped the hierarchy of power and authority, shifting from the Quaker understanding of Gospel Order, with engagement of the wider group, to the much more familiar pyramid of authority, common in most religious, voluntary and charitable organisations, with a small group of decision-makers at its apex, and a more-or-less marginalised 'audience' of the wider membership consulted notionally about decisions over which they may have little influence.

The concept of ‘Gospel Order’ is explicitly Christian, as is the understanding that there is a God to be worshipped, the presence of which is sufficiently imminent to infuse and to inform the decisions made in the context of a worshipping group. If this is one’s understanding of the Quaker decision-making process, it is difficult to understand how the process might be transferred into secular organisations. But if this is not any longer the Quaker understanding of their decision-making processes, it behoves the Society of Friends to ask itself what instead is happening, and whether the Society has effectively lost its religious character and meaning.

This study contends that the growth of secularisation within a faith organisation or denomination is multifactorial. Within the Society of Friends I suggest that the spread of secularisation of belief among the membership and the development of managerialism within the organisation have both contributed to the extent to which the Society embraced the organisational changes associated with conforming to Charity Commission requirements, and to the vulnerability of the Society to the shift of its locus of ultimate authority from the largest possible forum of membership to a small, appointed, oligarchy.

7.5 Looking forward

In my own preparations for the 2018 Yearly Meeting, it seemed to me inevitable that when the question of whether to embark on the next revision of the Book of Discipline came up, that it would be decided in the affirmative. The Agenda Committee, and the Recording Clerk, had been moving the Society towards this since 2013,⁷⁷⁹ and the process has merely been extended by the

⁷⁷⁹*The Friend*, 18 April 2013 p.9.

resolution at the Yearly Meeting in 2014 to defer the establishment of a revision committee, and instead to appoint a revision-preparation committee.

As has been the case with all of the Books of Discipline since 1870, the new book will be a statement of the state of the Society in Britain at the time that it is accepted. This fact, and the fear of the likely alienation of some long-established Quakers associated with putting into official words the changes which have already occurred in the nature of the Society of Friends since 1995, are probable reasons why some Friends, at Yearly Meeting in Bath and elsewhere, hesitated at the prospect of the revision.

Where different beliefs and values remain unspoken, people on both sides of a chasm of difference can pretend that nothing much divides them. But for those Quakers, mostly elderly, but also some younger and very young adults, who still perceive the Religious Society of Friends as a Christian group, followers of Christ, seeking to live the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; the prevailing, relativist, New Age-infused culture of the Society of Friends in Britain today is inimical to their understanding of the religious frame within which they seek to worship and live out their faith.⁷⁸⁰

The new book, even if it is entirely bland, is likely to state clearly that the Society of Friends in Britain is now post-Christian. And that raises the question as to how those ‘old time’ Quakers will continue to find a worshipping space for themselves in a Society which is – if such is the case – not committed to worship; one in which secularisation has officially prevailed.

⁷⁸⁰ See Stewart Yarlett, ‘The Accommodation of Diversity: Liberal Quakerism and Non-Theism’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020).

The diminution of certainty of belief among Friends, and development of distinguishing features of modern Quakerism such as the ‘absolute perhaps’ identified by Dandelion⁷⁸¹ and the cognitive style and the shared unwillingness among Friends to define their faith-position, as identified by Plüss,⁷⁸² has led to a situation where faith and worship have become less-than-necessary features of individual and group practice in the Society of Friends, thus making it entirely feasible, for instance, for authors such as Nicholas Burton to propose that it may be feasible to translate Quaker business methods into commercial or government settings.⁷⁸³ And, conversely, also to apply these methods outside of their theological context within the Society of Friends.

Douglas Davies suggests: ‘People are unlikely to engage in religious activity unless they derive some benefit from it, not least some sense of power coming to them or arising within them’.⁷⁸⁴ In a faith group such as the Religious Society of Friends, where individuals, local groups and national committees have historically all had a high level of autonomy and indeed a religious duty to take responsibility both for their own actions and for the wellbeing of the church, it is difficult to see that a high level of personal engagement is likely to be perpetuated in a situation where authority is claimed by, or ceded to, a small group of trustees and paid staff. If this is a valid assumption, these patterns of internal secularisation will lead to a further fall in numbers. In an appreciation of the garden designer Rosemary Verey, whose work influenced many British domestic gardeners in the late twentieth century, the historian Roy Strong refers to Verey’s deep understanding of the writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century landscape and garden

⁷⁸¹ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*.

⁷⁸² Caroline Plüss, *A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement*, (unpublished DPhil. Thesis, Lincoln College, Oxford, 1995).

⁷⁸³ Burton, ‘Quaker Business Method: A Contemporary Decision-Making Process?’.

⁷⁸⁴ Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg, 2002) p.188.

designers: ‘her art was a reaching backwards in order, as she saw it, to go forwards’.⁷⁸⁵ It is this ‘reaching backwards’ which the Society of Friends is failing to achieve at present.

Paul Parker, the Recording Clerk, uses the image of the Society of Friends as a camel train in the desert, always seeking and open to the New Light’.⁷⁸⁶ Yet to recognise what is new light one has to know the older light. It is only by ‘reaching backwards’ that one understands that early Friends were a community less of seekers than of Christian believers, and that they referenced the Early Church in their structures and authority relationships. It is also only by reaching backwards that one can glimpse the ways in which Friends used to discern together in their Meetings for Church Affairs.

7.6 Contribution to scholarship

This is the first academic study appraising the effects of the organisational changes made so far in the twenty-first century in the Religious Society of Friends. Its completion follows the publication in 2019 of Dandelion’s investigation of internal secularisation, which uses the experience of British Quakers as a case study. That book focuses on cultural changes within the group associated with secularisation, but its only reference to the related organisational changes is to conference papers which I have written while preparing this document.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸⁵ Roy Strong, *The Laskett: The Story of a Garden* (London: Bantam/ Transworld, 2003), p.114.

⁷⁸⁶ Paul Parker, ‘Speech to Enquirers’ Saffron Walden Meeting House’, 5 October 2018.

⁷⁸⁷ Pink Dandelion, *The Cultivation of Conformity: Towards a General Theory of Internal Secularisation* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2019); Penelope Cummins, ‘After the Charities Act: Governance and Decision-making in Britain Yearly Meeting’. Paper presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association Conference, Birmingham, 2018; Penelope Cummins, ‘Decision-making in the Silence: Theology or Theatre? Quaker Decision-making: The Insider’s and the Outsider’s Perspectives’, Paper presented at the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group Conference, Leeds, 2017.

This study has been unusual in that it is a study of a religious organisation in change. Indeed, it is unusual (though of course not unique) in that it is a study of a traditional religious organisation at a scale larger than a single parish, monastery or school. As Chapter 2 indicates, much of the work in fields such as the sociology of religion in Britain over the past twenty years has dealt either with personal religious experience or with popular trends. This study has been innovative in that it looks at the theological implications within a faith group of organisation and governance changes emanating from secular practice and from state requirements.

Bryan Wilson's⁷⁸⁸ original list of features of secularisation within a religious organisation is more than fifty years old, and Steve Bruce's⁷⁸⁹ restatement of that list was made in 2011. In all this time the effects of secular legislation on religious organisation and practice, one of the categories identified by Wilson and by Bruce, has been an under-researched area. This study has identified the changes within the Religious Society of Friends in its response to the Charities Acts of 1993 and 2006 as having been not simply practical administrative changes but as having had real ecclesiological effects, fundamental to but not explicitly recognised by the faith organisation. It also suggests that the organisational decisions made in response to Charity Commission requirements are likely to have had similarly profound effects in other denominations, such as the Baptist Union – and in any faith group where worshipping groups have been newly separated from each other or from their centre through the creation of new charitable bodies at the behest of the Charity Commission. Or similarly in situations where ancillary activities in which members

⁷⁸⁸ Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*.

⁷⁸⁹ Bruce, *Secularization*.

have hitherto engaged as part of their community engagement have been separated from the core into legally-discrete trading companies.

7.7 Opportunities for further research

This study has discussed issues of power, authority, centralisation and secularisation within the Religious Society of Friends in Britain in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Even within its own terms the study is by no means definitive, and it opens questions which could be fruitfully addressed by further research, both within and beyond the Society of Friends. For example:

1. The present study has looked at one particular aspect of the recent history of Britain Yearly Meeting. Authors such as Dandelion, Davie and Robson have dealt with other facets of this history;⁷⁹⁰ but there is no study of Quakers in Britain over the past century which is comparable to Thomas Kennedy's examination of the Society of Friends from 1860 to 1920,⁷⁹¹ and there are some periods of the 20th century, including most of the fifty years from 1920 to 1970 which have been barely addressed by academic researchers. If such an historical study were undertaken, detailed investigation of the Yearly Meeting's finances and of financial decisions over the period investigated would be a revealing feature of that work, as would an analysis of staffing and the longitudinal changes in the distribution of tasks between the Quaker membership and the paid staff.

⁷⁹⁰Pink Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology Since 1895* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Susan Robson, *Living with Conflict: a Challenge to a Peace Church* (Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2014).

⁷⁹¹ Thomas Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

2. It was suggested in Chapter 6 that at local level, where a greater proportion of the membership attends Local or Area Meeting compared to Yearly Meeting, there is a strong expectation that all matters of interest to the small community will be brought to Local and Area Meetings for deliberation, and that the warp and weft of authority structures within the Area Meeting may be sufficiently dense to minimize the opportunities for unilateral decision-making on the part of trustees. This may or may not be true, and it warrants closer investigation of trends, and of case studies relating, especially, to property decisions.
3. The suggestions above for further research arising from this thesis relate to the Religious Society of Friends in Britain or elsewhere. But possibly the most fruitful direction for future work, with the widest application, would be to explore further the effects discussed in Chapter 6 of the changes to charity law which have led to the changes of fiduciary authority within the Society of Friends, which in turn have affected power and authority both between national and local levels of the organization and within each organisational layer. Other faith communities such as the Baptist and Anglican communions and other, national, charitable bodies with local membership groups have also been affected by this legislation. The changes which have been made within the organisations have probably been too many, and too fundamental, for them to be unwound. But it would still be very helpful for government policy makers, and also for policy makers within the affected sectors and institutions, to have a systematic understanding of the unintended consequences of the legislation. Also, it is likely that some organisations, or sectors, have made structural decisions which are more, or less, constructive.

4. Closely allied, another issue which applies far more widely than just within the Society of Friends is the withdrawal since the Charities Act of 2006 of structures and procedures within the denomination for the oversight of businesses or other enterprises or projects which were previously seen as an integral part of the denomination's activities, either at national level or in a more localized level such as Monthly or Quarterly Meeting, Circuit, Parish or Bishopric. It is possible, ironically, that the imposition of more rigorous, generalized, governance requirements has actually diminished the denominations' oversight of some now-freestanding enterprises, lifting the denominational checks and balances over the trustees endowed with legal responsibility with management of the now-freestanding body; and leaving the trustees and their staff unconstrained in their steering of the enterprise – not always necessarily in close-keeping with the values and objectives of the denomination. The proposition that there has been unintended, often unacknowledged, structural change in the authority relationships within the denomination (or, indeed, other national voluntary organizations now fragmented into several different, effectively and legally autonomous, charitable bodies) should be tested through the investigation of case studies within and between denominations and other faith groups, and also within other national voluntary organisations.

7.8 Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 opened with a brief review of the earlier chapters of this thesis, and a discussion of their findings.

This has been a study of a religious organisation in change. Using Bruce and Wilson's categories, it concludes that there have been three reinforcing shifts toward secularisation in the Religious Society of Friends: a softening and increasingly broad spectrum of personal belief among its membership; a recent history of managerialism; and changes made in response to state requirements.

The study has focussed on the role and function of the Yearly Meeting, the largest, annual, gathering of members of the Society of Friends; like other Quaker Meetings for Worship for the conduct of church affairs, the forum where the largest group of members has hitherto gathered, ostensibly in worshipful silence, seeking together to discern the 'will of God' with reference to any decisions before them. This is a church-building and community-building activity, and in theological terms can be described as the charism of this particular branch of the church.

However, the Society of Friends has moved away from this canonical description of its activity, and the introduction of a small body of trustees in response to the governance requirements of the state in the form of the Charity Commission has changed the locus of decision making to the small group at the apex of the organisation; effectively disempowering and disengaging its wider membership from active participation. The author is led to speculate that the current revision of the book of discipline of the Society will necessarily reflect the effects of secularisation within the organisation and also in the beliefs of its membership. It asks whether, if this is the case, the remnant of members who still have a worshipful understanding of meetings for church affairs will still find space for themselves within this post-Christian body.

The chapter notes that this study has provided a contribution to scholarship in the area of ecclesiology within the Religious Society of Friends, and that it has been innovative in drawing together theological, organisational and financial factors in the study of a faith community.

It ends with a series of proposals for further research within the Society of Friends, both in the areas of Quaker history and also in reflection about the changes of ecclesiology and governance at local level within the group arising from the changes made in response to the requirements of the Charity Commission. More broadly it is also proposed that similar investigation is required in other faith groups, investigating the effects of the changes they too have been required to make in response to the governance requirements by the Charity Commission.

Coda

Finally, Friends, collectedly and individually, farewell! May all our meetings be held with weight, as in the immediate presence of the heavenly President. May the aged among us be examples of every Christian virtue; and evince, by the calmness of their evening, that their day has been blest. May the middle-aged not faint in their allotted stations, but, together with their elder and younger brethren, firmly support, yea exalt, the several testimonies which we are called to maintain. And O! May the beloved youth, the tender objects of our care, and of our hope, bend early and cheerfully under the forming power of truth: that thus, each standing in his allotment, the harmony of the building may be preserved, and we may truly grow up into a holy temple for the Lord.⁷⁹²

Thinking about it, just after Brown's speech, I took a new view of the conference. Yesterday I said I think it is a waste of time coming, but I now see it in a new light. I see the Labour conference now as part of our culture, like parliament and the church. We gather once a year and meet a lot of old mates. We have no decisions of any kind to reach. I quite like it, because I meet

⁷⁹² Extract from the printed Epistle, Yearly Meeting 1799, Coda to the 1834 Book of Discipline (Rules of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends, with Advices: Being extracts from the Minutes and Epistles of their Yearly Meeting, held in London from its first institution (London, Gracechurch St: London Yearly Meeting, 1834))

old friends; everyone is very friendly. But it is nothing whatsoever to do with democracy, any more than religion has anything to do with the teachings of Jesus.⁷⁹³

Reformation is a continuous process in any Spirit-led movement: ‘the reformed church must always be the church which is reforming itself’. In Biblical terms, reformation is the process that Ezekiel, perhaps the greatest ecologist amongst the prophets, mused over with his dry bones (Ezekiel 27). Is it possible, he asked, for a culture that has died to dance again?⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹³ Tony Benn, *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine; the last diaries* (London & New York, Hutchinson & Random House, 2013 p.47).

⁷⁹⁴ Alastair McIntosh, ‘Pagan Presbyterianism? : Protest and prophetic theology’ *Friends Quarterly* vol 32:7, July 2001, pp 300 – 309, p.300.

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