

# Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

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## Briefing Paper: Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain

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### **1 Introduction**

The Religious Society of Friends in Britain is part of the liberal tradition of Quakerism found in these islands, in the rest of Europe, and parts of the USA, Africa, Asia, and Australasia. This tradition follows the unprogrammed worship structure that is based on silent waiting. Its method of making decisions in its business meetings is governed by a similar discipline of worship and limited personal contribution, heard as vocal ministry, with a view to discerning collectively the will of God in unity. This paper seeks to explain the Quaker experience and practice of what might be understood as a synodal model of participative discernment and decision-making. Such ecclesial forms are not easily translated into the Quaker version of dissenting non-conformism, but the paper aims to interpret the term broadly in the theological and social context of the characterisation of the Religious Society of Friends as a ‘priesthood of all believers.’ It observational of historical and present-day faith and practice, with reference to originating scripture and the current Book of Discipline of Quakers in Britain.<sup>1</sup>

### **2 A Quaker notion of ‘Synodality’**

*Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working.<sup>2</sup>*

2.1 Present-day practices in the Religious Society of Friends in Britain have their theological and liturgical roots in the dissenting Christian movement of the mid-17th century

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘Book of Discipline’ of the Religious Society of Friends is not a ‘penal code’ but a collection of writings to support our discipleship through learning from and growing in the Spirit. The Book describes both the faith lived through the experience of Quakers and the organisation, structure, and practices of the church in Britain. Given it is revised periodically to reflect new experience and changing understandings, the Yearly Meeting is currently embarked upon a deeply reflective process of reviewing the Book for a new generation.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘Briefing Paper 1: Synodality in the Catholic Church’, citing <https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-24/about.html>.

founded by, most famously, the Leicestershire preacher, George Fox. Raised in a Christian, protestant household, Fox would have absorbed and been inspired by much of the prevailing, if contested, theology under Puritan influence. He laid great emphasis on his own lived experience of Christ that led him into direct conflict with the established ecclesiastical order whose priests and professors offered an interpretation of scripture that did not meet with his experiential interpretation. As early as 1646, Fox challenged:

Did not the apostle say to believers that they needed no man to teach them but as the anointing teacheth them?' ... And I saw that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge did not qualify or fit a man to be a minister of Christ: and what then should I follow such for?<sup>3</sup>

The Fox conversion experiences of 1647 and 1648 are both moving and intellectually beguiling. Drawing upon the Puritan revelatory tradition, his *Journal* records significant 'openings':

a consideration arose in me, how it was said that all Christians are believers, and the Lord opened to me that, if all were believers, then they were all born of God, and passed from death to life ... and though others said they were believers, they were not.<sup>4</sup>

But as I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also ... for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition ... I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.<sup>5</sup>

These early quotes characterise what was a new theological understanding and faith practice which extends beyond the *Covenant of Grace*<sup>6</sup> offered by God to [his] people and interpreted in Puritan propositional ecclesiasticism and liturgy. More significantly in respect of the Quaker dissenters with their experiential knowledge and authority of the 'Inward Christ'<sup>7</sup>, we can characterise this as a Covenant of the Light of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Early Quaker, James Naylor, explained:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J L Nickalls (ed.), *Journal of George Fox* (London Yearly Meeting, 1986 [1952]), p. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Nickalls, *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Nickalls, *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> This is George Fox's term for the Covenant offered in Ezekiel 34:25 and transmitted by Moses to God's people.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'Christ within' is based on such as Colossians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 13:5 and James 1:21. Fox describes in his *Journal* (1647), "So Christ, the Word of God, that bruised the head of this Serpent the destroyer, preserved me, my inward mind being joined to his good Seed,...And this inward life did spring up in me, to answer all the opposing professors and priests, and did bring in Scriptures to my memory to refute them with." Fox referred frequently to 'that of God within everyone' and the term 'light' was a favoured term for the active presence of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Early Friends felt themselves united within a new covenantal reality, a participational 'covenant of Light', that is new relationship with God, described in Jeremiah 31:31-34. The term 'outward' comes to mean formal, conventional Christianity and 'inward' to refer to the transforming and intimate knowledge of the spirit of Christ. The covenant of Light becomes an expression of unity with God and each other.

<sup>9</sup> G Guiton, *The Early Quakers and the 'Kingdom of God'* (San Francisco, CA:Inner Light Books, 2012), p. 241.

where Christ is revealed and known, he is known to be spiritual, not carnal, not limited to one place, but fills heaven and earth, is all, and in all his, but not seen by carnal man, though he be the light of the world; for the God of this world has blinded the eyes of the world, that they cannot see him, for he is a mystery to them.

For early Quakers, drawing upon John 1:14, the Word was not the literal word of scripture but Christ himself, also referred to as the 'Light' or the 'Seed'. Applying their detailed knowledge of scripture, they were able to recognise the apophatic and locate biblical evidence of mystical truths about Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4) and about human transformation (2 Cor 3:18), that together will establish God's Kingdom in this life, thus fulfilling Pauline prophecy<sup>10</sup>.

Quaker William Dewsbury wrote in 1689:<sup>11</sup>

God alone is the teacher of his people, and hath given to everyone a measure of Grace, that checks and reproveth sin, in the secrets of the heart and conscience; ... I came to the knowledge of eternal life, not by the letter of the scriptures, nor hearing men speak of the name of God [but] by the inspiration of the spirit of Jesus Christ, the lion of the tribe of Judah.

Dandelion suggests that this effects a 'collective ordination', a universal and prophetic priesthood that receives revelation directly from God. In this way Quaker faith has been described in terms of collective mysticism. In its Liberal form, it emphasises the way the people of God journey together and there is an emphasis on seeking, linked to continuing revelation, over absolute theological truths.

## 2.2 The current Book of Discipline of the Society in Britain gives the following advice:

In worship we enter with reverence into communion with God and respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Come to meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared. Yield yourself and all your outward concerns to God's guidance so that you may find 'the evil weakening in you and the good raised up'.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.3 One modern-day Quaker has described her experience of Quaker meeting for worship thus:<sup>13</sup>

*I try to centre down and settle into the stillness, for me, the stillness is a more vital quality than silence. I try to be aware of the worshipping group collectively and 'feel' my way into that shared experience ... I find I do resonate with Advices and*

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<sup>10</sup> T Peat, *Paul's Vision Fulfilled*, in *Heaven on Earth*, B P Dandelion, D Gwyn, T Peat (eds), (Birmingham: Woodbrooke, 1998), Ch. 9 (is it possible to have full page references for this chapter rather than just identifying the chapter number?).

<sup>11</sup> B P Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 28

<sup>12</sup> Advices and Queries 9, *Quaker Faith and Practice, The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 1995 edition.

<sup>13</sup> H Rowlands (ed), *God, Words and Us*, (Quaker Books, 2017), p. 38.

*Queries 8<sup>14</sup> and the first sentence, 'Worship is our response to an awareness of God' and I may practise awareness of God as I sit in meeting and worship.*

2.4 There is a significant body of written witness and faith identity that is today almost universal amongst Quakers in Britain and elsewhere and known as 'Testimonies' to Peace, Equality and Justice, Truth and Integrity and Simplicity and Sustainability. Within these discerned testimonies there is a united promise to put faith into action. The 'collective ordination' I referred to earlier imposes an interpretation of people equality in church, social and political affairs that has taken Quakers at different times in history to radical action. As distinct faith commitments, these Testimonies, adopted progressively since 1661 by the people of the church, stand in the Quaker context as an embodied and enacted synodality.

### **3 The Quaker decision-making structure, process and style**

3.1 The ancient Quaker practice that the essence of true worship is the silent waiting upon God. There are many scriptural references to waiting and watching upon God, and it was a given for early Quakers that such waiting should be largely in silence, excepting for Spirit-led ministry.

3.2 The search after God's word through this liturgy of silent waiting leads directly to the structure and process of decision-making that rests on Christian unity.

As a people of the indivisible God, the church has been seen historically as the bride of Christ in which all things must be in unity in the Spirit. Preaching in 1767, Quaker Samuel Fothergill based his message on the Song of Solomon 4:12, to describe his community:<sup>15</sup>

A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, my church; erected and preserved by my power, my followers united to me, and all dear to one another, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people zealous of good works (1 Peter 2:9)

Again, on the requirement for unity, in 1769 he declared:

It is this heavenly love, the love of God, that is the grand and solemn cement of his family, both here and hereafter: wherein we are united to him, and in fellowship one with another. It binds all into a uniform consistency, both in heaven and earth.

3.3 The structure of the church for the purposes of decision-making was instituted from the chaos of the 17th century. In 1656, a group of Quaker Elders meeting in Yorkshire agreed upon a discipline that was issued across the movement at the time. In a long statement they advised on:

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<sup>14</sup> Advices and Queries 8 reads: 'Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us.'

<sup>15</sup> S Fothergill, *Eleven Discourses, Delivered Extempore, at Several Meetings Houses of the People Called Quakers* (New York, 1838), p. 104.

1. The need to keep to the ancient ways of Friends and not fall foul of the spirit that leads to division;
2. Only elders and members of the Society can judge matters;
3. The church business meeting has final authority;
4. If a calling leads to dissension, it needs to be tested further;
5. Nothing should be printed that is out of unity;
6. Only those with strong faith should be appointed as overseers and only seasoned Friends be allowed to attend business meeting.

This guidance set the pattern for organised decision-making in a very young, rapidly growing and ill-disciplined religious sect. The term ‘Gospel Order’ was used to describe what was felt to be an ecclesiology ordained by God. In 1673, George Fox moved to set up a meeting in London on every Monday morning to control the publication of all books and tracts that presumed to pronounce on the Quaker faith or its organisation. There was already a central committee set up to look after the Friends who suffered persecution for their faith, known as ‘Meeting for Sufferings’. This still exists as the main executive body of the Society in Britain for all central decisions outside of the parent Yearly meeting in session.<sup>16</sup>

3.4 All members of the Society from its beginnings have been entitled, indeed expected, to attend the Yearly Meeting, the Area and Local meetings for all matters of church business. There is, therefore, responsibility placed on all individual Friends to attend these meetings in addition to regular collective worship. All meetings for business are held as meetings for worship, where all those participating seek the will of God on the matters before them. As George Fox said:

Keep your meetings in the power of God ... And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and wait a while quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God almighty may be felt among you ... For the power of the Lord will work through all, if ... you follow it.<sup>17</sup>

3.5 The meetings for worship for business are held under the servant leadership of the Clerk, appointed for a fixed number of years in that role. All service appointments within the Society are offered for a limited time so that the work is distributed. The appointments processes are detailed in the Book of Discipline. In some instances, where the workload is seen to be burdensome, an Assistant Clerk or Co-Clerk may be appointed, though the function is seamless.

3.6 The Clerk is not a ‘Chair’ of the meeting but is a servant called to facilitate the worshipful discernment of the will of God. The meeting places upon the Clerk a

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<sup>16</sup> The term ‘Yearly Meeting’ applies not only to the organised community of Quakers in Britain, but also the event of an annual gathering of that community which all members are encouraged to attend.

<sup>17</sup> George Fox, 1658, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, *ibid*, section 3.30

responsibility to watch the growth of the meeting towards unity and to judge the sense of the meeting on the matter before it. To this end, the Clerk will normally expect only one contribution of personal vocal ministry to the discernment on a topic from any Friend present, though this may depend on the nature of the business in hand and the size of the meeting. Quakers, through their own discipline, will not seek to disparage the heard ministry of others.

3.7 The Clerk also has the task of drafting a contemporaneous minute of each decision reached, or not reached, that reflects the united sense of the meeting. All minutes thus recorded also have to be agreed by the whole meeting in situ. The Book of Discipline states:

In a gathering held ‘in the life’ there can come to the Clerk a clear and unmistakable certainty about the moment to submit the minute. This may be a high peak of experience in a meeting for church affairs, but for the most part we have to wrestle with far more humdrum down-to-earth business. It must always be remembered that the final decision about whether the minute represents the sense of the meeting is the responsibility of the meeting itself, not the Clerk.<sup>18</sup>

3.8 The minutes of the Society at all levels are held in public archives in perpetuity and all decision-making meetings have to be recorded under the Quaker process of contemporaneous minuting, as described earlier.

#### **4 Value of unity, decision-recording, dissent or revision**

4.1 Unity sits at the heart of Quaker decision-making, in accordance with what earlier Quakers called ‘gospel order’. Unity is held precious as a condition of God’s peaceable kingdom, described in Revelation 21. In modern Quaker meetings in Britain and Europe, the scriptural references tend no longer to be expressly relied upon but the aspiration of unity is respected and upheld within the Society as a witnessing peace church. Unity is not ‘consensus’ in the secular sense, but Friends learn through their discipline to ‘give way’ on a decision about which they feel less strongly led or whose first thoughts may be mistaken. *Advices & Queries* 14 commends:

Remember that we do not seek a majority decision nor even consensus. As we wait patiently for divine guidance our experience is that the right way will open and we shall be led into unity.

4.2 For all that care and patience, Quaker meetings are not without their discord on occasion. A failure to reach a united decision through prayerful discernment means that no right decision can be reached. This places additional pressure on those present to be as humble, truthful, and authentic as possible in their attentiveness to the leadings of the Spirit so as to allow the meeting to reach conclusions. We are asked to ‘set self aside’. *Advices & Queries* 15 asks:

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<sup>18</sup> *Quaker Faith & Practice*, *ibid*, section 3.07

Do you take part as often as you can in meetings for church affairs? Are you familiar enough with our church government to contribute to its disciplined processes? Do you consider difficult questions with an informed mind as well as a generous and loving spirit? Are you prepared to let your insights and personal wishes take their place alongside those of others or be set aside as the meeting seeks the right way forward? If you cannot attend, uphold the meeting prayerfully.

4.3 On this last point, it is worth noting that if we are not present at a meeting, we are asked to accept that the decision taken was Spirit-led and in unity. Decisions taken cannot ordinarily be reopened by the same or any other body of Friends. Over time, of course, as circumstances change, the Yearly, Area or Local meeting may wish to revisit the topic, if there appears to be good cause to do so when circumstances change. Any such revision will be subject to the same discernment in the Spirit at work amongst those present and any new decision will again be reached in unity. New discernment supersedes older insights as part of our sense of a people of God journeying together and our emphasis on continuing revelation. A doctrine of progressivism has also been identified in some Quaker writing, in which it is understood that more can necessarily be known about God's purposes over time, that our ability to comprehend God and God's plan enlarges chronologically.

## **5 What is found to be limited, difficult, and frustrating in the Quaker model?**

5.1 Quakers are not only not immune from human conflict and inconsistency, but nor are they necessarily well-equipped to address it. The Quaker business method, as underpinned by its faith discipline, is relied upon by all Quakers to an extent that it imposes its own constraints on individuals in the worship setting by its insistence on silent listening to God and the spoken ministry of others, the waiting to be called by the clerk to share one's led ministry and the practice of deep discernment of right decisions on which unity can be found. For the most part, this method of the worshipful holding of meetings for business is sufficiently effective as an expression of the lived faith in the execution of church affairs.

5.2 In the 19th century, the principle of openness to new revelation led to a fundamental change away from Quaker separatism and towards cooperation and dialogue with other Christians. In the 20th century this led to greater dialogue with other faiths, even small numbers of their members taking up Quaker worship for themselves. Today the composition of the worshipping body of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain includes members of other faiths and none, as well as former members of other Christian denominations. Likewise, many Quakers sometimes attend worship outside their own faith community. The Catholic briefing paper proposes that 'synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working' and the Quakers are more likely, from their history and direct experience, to describe their faith life as 'journeying together' and gathering in worshipful assembly for all manner of decision-making as their 'ordinary way'.

5.3 The fluidity and indeed decline in membership, as distinct from worshipper numbers, have made new demands on how experienced Quakers pass on their faith and practice. They cannot rely on some ‘spiritual osmosis’, on the assumption that the unfamiliar meeting practices will make sense to every newcomer in time, and although there are some optional study courses and meetings for learning, faith induction is not systematic in Britain. Quakerism is less family based than it used to be and the Quaker faith is now rarely learnt over the dining room table. Over ninety per cent of Quakers join the movement as adults.

5.4 The internalised control of the meeting to be adopted by the participants themselves can itself give rise to a latent frustration for any Friends who may come and leave the meeting with the same degree of anxiety over a particular matter. There is research that suggests that people join and leave Quakers for a range of reasons and the method and style of decision-making can be one such reason.<sup>19</sup>

5.5 There are in the Book of Discipline Quaker advisory procedures for dealing with differences that get in the way of community harmony, or that disturb the culture within the group. Such processes include additional ‘Meetings for Clearness’ and ‘Threshing Meetings’, at which a concern or complex decision may be explored further by Friends in order to bring greater light to their search for a way forward. By listening closely to others, Friends often find the space to let go of their own opinions and find comfort in an unexpected unity.

18<sup>th</sup> century preacher, Samuel Fothergill recognised the danger to holy unity of strongly held opinion of which he warned in a delivery at Gracechurch Street meeting in London a few years before his death:

Opinion has filled the world, enlarged the field of speculation, and been the cause of producing fruits directly opposite to the nature of faith. Opinion has terminated in schism; faith is productive of unity.<sup>20</sup>

5.6 There are the challenges of clerking, in calling individual Friends to speak as led by the Spirit and in discerning the right sense of the meeting in the absence of the usual secular indicators of voiced opinion or expressive body language. The Clerk is charged to be ever alert to guide the meeting through the prayerful contributions offered, without overlooking an important piece of ministry or disregarding any member of the community present. The Clerk is expected to allow for silent waiting between each contribution and Friends present are also asked to uphold the Clerk to allow for this prayerful space and not press anxiously to speak out. Nonetheless, it is a gift of gracious clerking to allow space for strong feelings to emerge before calm and eventual unity can be achieved.

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<sup>19</sup> B P Dandelion, ‘Schism As Collective Disaffiliation: A Quaker Typology’, *Quaker Studies*, 8/1 (2003), 89-97.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Fothergill and Catherine Phillips, *Some Discourses, Epistles and Letters by the Late Samuel Fothergill. To Which are Added, Some Discourses by the Late Catherine Phillips, Both of the Society of Friends* (London: Wentworth Press, 2015 [1803]), p. 78.



5.7 There is advice to Clerks in the Book of Discipline that reads:

When strong division of opinion seems to be threatening the worshipful basis which should prevail in meetings for church affairs, a period of silent and prayerful waiting on the will of God may well have a calming and unifying effect.<sup>21</sup>

That advice being available, it may be that the Clerk on occasion uses the call for silence as a way of controlling, albeit passively, the emotions expressed in a meeting for business. I might speculate that the Friends present submit themselves to the Clerk's direction under the terms of an unspoken agreement that the search for peaceful discernment is more important for the community than individual self-expression.

5.8 There are some notable examples of careful and generous clerking over difficult topics in the history of the Yearly Meeting in session. One such was the decision to allow same-sex marriage in 2009 at the Yearly Meeting held in York. In this instance, there were many wide-ranging views and experiences at the start of the week-long gathering, but through successive sessions, attended by over 1,000 Friends and held in deeply gathered worship, the Clerk was able to help the meeting reach the unity that could be found. Much of the discernment was to interpret the scriptural advice on the nature of marriage in the light of the lived experience of Friends, as God's continuing revelation, recalling George Fox's challenge in 1652:

You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?<sup>22</sup>

5.9 New challenges have arisen since the emergence of the online platform way of gathering as a faith community. During the periods of social restrictions during 2020 and 2021, Quakers have instituted a range of worship and business meetings online that still have currency. It has become usual to enable Friends to join meetings via the online platform if they have other access problems and have the computer equipment at home to do so. The blended or hybrid format for both worship and business seems set to continue to varying degrees across the church.

Now in 2023, it is emerging anecdotally that our liturgy and method of decision-making through silent waiting and Spirit-led discernment can be hindered for some Friends by online participation. This is a matter of discernment in its own right and the Yearly Meeting in session will need to discern a united response to it. For some, there is a disjunction between the inclusivity offered by remote access and the spiritual quality of the gathered meeting of

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<sup>21</sup> *Quaker Faith & Practice*, *ibid*, section 3.16

<sup>22</sup> *Quaker Faith & Practice*, §19.07

seekers. The insertion of the virtual form of attendance is troubling for some for whom worship no longer feels authentic.

5.10 A further challenge presented by the online format is to the capacity of the Clerk to hold the meeting, especially the large meeting, in the expected right ordering. Calling Friends to speak as led by the Spirit, gauging the sense of the meeting in its conclusions and judging when it is right to write a minute are all skills of sensitivity and empathy in any Quaker gathering, but to achieve the same quality of servant leadership on Zoom asks a great deal of those Friends who serve in this role.

## **6 Points of ecumenical exchange with reference to the Catholic briefing paper**

6.1 ‘Being Quaker’ places an emphasis on practice and form rather than any systematic belief or creed. The Quaker discipline or orthopraxy remains marked, resting on the experience of the early Quakers that the relationship with God is personal without external mediation. Quaker witness and testimony enacts the Spirit-led life and expresses Quaker synodality in everyday life. All places and times are deemed equally sacramental. Quakers do not follow the Christian calendar and no place is more sacred than any other. The sacramental nature of baptism and communion is experienced inwardly and the Quaker view of communion is best expressed with reference to Revelation 3:20.

6.2 Biblical errancy was anticipated from the early days of the dissenting movement after the Reformation and the Quaker reliance upon interpretation of scripture through experience allowed for lived continuing revelation of the hidden mysteries. This lent greater agency to the early Quakers whose personal transformation was elemental in their concept of God’s Kingdom as explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. As Paul urged:

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2, KJV)

The faith community is held together even today by a collective and personal discipline that flows from the search for transformation in response to progressive and continuing revelation. Equal access to God’s leadings speaks into the synodic process of discernment.

6.3 Two characteristics of the modern Quaker faith and practice that hold with the reflections on synodality within the Catholic Church could be:

- that ‘the process of understanding Christ’s message never ends, but constantly challenges us’ and Quakers can find unity with the assertion that it is a revelatory error to try ‘to crystallize the message of Jesus in a single, perennially valid form’;
- that personal transformation is a calling to be facilitated by the institution of the church.

6.4 That the communion of all worshippers [in synod] is ‘the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church’ is also wholly consistent with continuing Quaker practice. The Quaker liturgy of silence offers equal access to prayer and ministry, reflecting the Quaker identity, held even today, of a priesthood of all believers.<sup>23</sup> It is the apophatic nature of personal worship grounded in silence that allows for listening to the ministry offered by others. Quaker Advices and Queries 12 states:

When you are preoccupied and distracted in meeting let wayward and disturbing thoughts give way quietly to your awareness of God’s presence among us and in the world. Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God’s word for you, it may be so for others. Remember that we all share responsibility for the meeting for worship whether our ministry is in silence or through the spoken word.

6.5 The Quaker business meeting, held in worship, aligns with the proposition that the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll, but an ecclesial event whose protagonist is the Holy Spirit. The ‘church’ for Quakers is the community of believers. The scriptural writings of John (Epistle and Revelation) lie close to the historical heart of Quakerism as a mystical faith and still underpin its sense of right ordering in its practices.

6.6 In conclusion, this paper reflects on the three levels on which synodality can be said to manifest as a ‘constitutive dimension of the church’ in the experience of Friends:

- The **style** of the faith community as a People of God that journeys together and gathers in the power of the Holy Spirit in the Society of Friends characterises its community and witness. It also frames Quaker governance and decision-making and in this regard, diverges from the practices of other denominations.
- The **structures and processes** of the Society at all levels of activity, locally, regionally, and across Britain, are derived from the foundational abandonment of a separated clergy as a theological or traditional concept, from the apophatic liturgy of silent worship and from the method of the gathered meeting waiting for the Spirit to lead on decisions affecting the Society or its members. The appointment of Friends to carry out the range of roles and responsibilities, most notably the role of meeting Clerk, is founded on the requirement to support the established structures and processes, so as to render them both effective and affective in the spirit of true witness. The advent of remote online access to the worshipful gatherings raises new questions around the authenticity of the Spirit-led witness.

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<sup>23</sup> The Quaker submission to the World Council of Churches publication, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, p. 23 refers to the ‘royal and prophetic priesthood of all baptized’.

- **Synodal processes and events** convoked by the competent authority, according to ecclesiastical discipline might, in the Society of Friends, comprise any other event for social interconnection or learning. In the style of Friends, this can result from the decision of the Yearly, Area or Local business meeting, but it may also emerge as an initiative by a smaller group of Friends. In all instances, these events would be held as acts of shared worship, whether online or in-person, and to that extent, all Quaker activity and witness is held by all the participants in the synodal style.

6.7 This paper recognises the reality of the clerical and/or presbyteral structures of other ecclesial traditions, whose experience of synodality will differ from that of Quakers. To regard synodality merely as a form of democracy in church government falls very far short of the Quaker experience. Nonetheless, the challenge of instituting it as a way of being a Christian community within an existing tradition and authority structure – ‘to follow Jesus, returning to his style and way of exercising power and authority as a means of offering healing, reconciliation and liberation’ – requires more prayerful attention to the leadings of the Spirit than may lie comfortably within the particular normative church discipline.

6.8 A specific concern about how this transformation might play out in the local parish community is identified in the Catholic paper and might need to be lovingly and patiently addressed, perhaps in conjunction with other similarly seeking congregations. For example, parishioners may need time for preparation in learning how to listen and pray together with the mind open to seek God’s illumination. To pursue this path without a new discipline of collective discernment may give undue authority to the traditional voices and gatekeepers.

## **7 Possible Questions for the Symposium**

7.1 Do you have a vision of what subject matters could be covered in synodal parish congregation meetings? What would be the level of hunger for such events within local congregations? What preparations would you need to make the synodal model effective at this level?

7.2 Does anything about the Quaker way of meeting for collective discernment raise problems within your own church structures? How is the presence of the Spirit experienced in your worship and in your life of prayer? How can listening be encouraged in all parts of the church?

7.3 Does anything about the Quaker way of meeting throw light on new opportunities for discernment within your own church structures? How far can Catholic ecclesiology flex to allow greater inclusion and listening?

7.4 Is there a way of making use of the knowledge and information held by members of the clergy in the synodal process that doesn’t silence the faithful voices of others? How could the whole people of God be involved? How can the roles of particular forms of vocation be relaxed to enable full participation?

7.5 What practical expressions of faith allows the enactment of synodality in the wider community?

7.6 What are the signs that synodality is working well in parts of the Catholic Church? What are the hallmarks of a flourishing synodality?