

Working towards the Shape of the Future of North of Scotland Area Meeting

“Advice/Query 14. 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 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”

Introduction:

We have had many meetings, consultations, discussions, papers, and thoughts about this concern, and have produced an amazing amount of paper. It seems to have gone on for a very long time! It is now time to move on to the next stage; where we begin to develop models which may suit the future and help to fulfil the aspirations of the Religious Society of Friends (and perhaps of our beloved Society in Scotland). This preparation paper is not meant to be prescriptive but tries to summarise the many things which have already been done and achieve some clarity, so that we can get to the next step. It is not meant to represent the opinions of the clerk or **any** group of Friends within the area meeting and tries to lay out suggestions which have been made, developed or imagined, for clarity of the discernment process. No one suggestion, or set of suggestions, is being recommended. This discernment must be made at NSAM itself.

History:

This paper takes into account, as well as informal discussions, the following:

-  **Britain Yearly Meeting Agreed Aims** – strengthening our spiritual roots, witnessing to our faith in action, promoting Quakerism
-  **The presentation, in 2016**, to NSAM at Pluscarden, by Michael Long of Northumbria Area Meeting
-  **Our Listening Project** – carried-out through a group of Friends specially appointed for the purpose, and involving as many NSAM Friends as possible
-  **Minute from:** NSAM in Orkney in May 2017 (Facing Future of AM),
-  **Papers from Discussion of Listening Group Report** (led by Rosie Carnall)
-  **Minute from:** SGM in November 2017,
-  **Threshing meeting on Nominations** in Edinburgh, December 2017
-  **Minutes (and discussion)** of GM Trustees in April 2018
-  **Aberdeen LM's response** to 14 Jan letter from GM for Scotland
-  **Quaker Life Webinar**, attended by NSAM clerk, 24th July 2018 on “**The Shape of our Area Meetings**”.

The sustainability of the traditional structure of LMs, AMs and GMs has been in question for some time and many Friends have wondered how long we can go on as we are.

Why do we think NSAM is unsustainable?

NSAM has serious difficulties over and above those being experienced throughout the Yearly Meeting and in General Meeting for Scotland. There are clearly identifiable layers of these:

Yearly Meeting is experiencing:

- Reduction of numbers of members

- Ageing and health issues
- Attenders not coming into membership
- Young people finding their local meetings stultifying compared to Young Friends

General Meeting is experiencing the above, plus:

- Difficulty in finding Friends for service (filling 'jobs')

North of Scotland Area Meeting is experiencing the above plus:

- **Extreme** difficulty in finding Friends for service (filling 'jobs')
- Many Young Friends move on to **far away** universities and are lost to their localities (some never come back)
- **Remoteness** of local meetings in North Scotland makes many NSAMs 'residential' (therefore expensive and awkward)
- Only about 50% of Friends/attenders on list **are 'active'**
- NSAM might not be considered a viable 'community'
- Children live far apart and are few in local meetings
- Meetings for Worship for Church Affairs are often considered 'just administration' and boring
- Friends and attenders are looking for enhanced opportunities for developing their spiritual life as well as feeling the need for more community and fun

NOTE: We do not yet know what levels of all this is being experienced in **other** Area Meetings.

What are the components of NSAM/Areas we may need to work on?

Membership:

The concept of membership of the Religious Society of Friends has existed for a long time and although that is not, in itself, a reason to cling to the practices of the past, the structures were introduced for reasons which may, or may not, be valid for today. Neither should we casually abandon practices which have served us well over the

years. An important purpose of membership is to act as a symbol of our commitment to our faith and our acceptance that, because we have no separated ministry, we are all responsible for the right conduct of our business. There are certain opportunities for service (usually called 'jobs') to which we do not usually appoint attenders e.g. it is most unusual to appoint an attender to an eldership rôle, or that of trustee. This policy has become, and is becoming, more flexible, and some meetings have established their own precedents.

Trustees:

Since 2005, we have had trustees for BYM, GM, and AMs. There are FIVE charities covering Scotland, each having trustees. It has been suggested that sustaining all this causes unnecessary work and ties up Friends who could, if released, accept other service for the Society. This does not reflect that NSAM objects to being a charity, or objects to being subject to charity law. The trustees of Scotland General Meeting have discussed this and have said that changing this would probably not save much work – having set out the interlocking (or, perhaps, not interlocking) financial and legal situation with regard to BYM, GM, and AMs. This may or may not be valid.

The SGM trustees have said that there could be a central body for Scotland with a trustee from each area, plus specific postholders, or the existing AM trustees could be regarded as sub-committees of the central trustee body. GM for Scotland currently has no **authority** to deal with AM business and GM trustees do not have any legal relationship with AMs, which are administratively autonomous. Changes to the trustee-ship arrangements would be subject to the approval of both Meeting for Sufferings and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR). Should GM be able to accept the responsibilities of trusteeship for the whole of Scotland, all four AMs would have to approve. The trustees also felt that it might be difficult to find Friends willing to take on such a general responsibility, that communications might be adversely effected, and conflict could ensue. Some trustees felt that greater professional accountancy could reduce problems, although this would be more expensive for members.

Elders and overseers

Many elders and overseers (or elder/overseers) have been in post for much more than one or two triennia. This leads to staleness and exhaustion, as well as contributing to the perception of E/Os as some kind of elite (not equality)! It must be noted that elder/overseers are appointed by area meeting, even though much of their work is within local meetings. There are elements of both individual and group working involved; support and advice of E/Os is at area level, whereas hands-on working is usually at local level. Elder/overseers have many responsibilities, including the right holding of meeting for worship and the care, spiritual and temporal, of Friends, attenders and children. They also need to attend meetings for worship for church affairs, as these too are meetings for worship and the quality of them matters as much as meetings which are purely meetings for worship.

Nominations Committees

It has been said that Noms Comm members don't know Friends in meetings well enough to bring forward names to NSAM, which appoints everyone except local meeting clerks/assistant clerks and treasurers. The question is *Why not?* It has been said that Noms Comms draw from Friends who attend Area Meetings. How can they get to know a wider range of Friends? It is extremely bad practice to have Noms and, even, AM, to rubber stamp appointments. There is a good reason for passing through Noms and AM discernment (i.e. two layers).

For all the following we need trustees, elders, overseers, clerks, safeguarding officers, librarians, collectors, treasurers, other Friends/Attenders for other groups. Can any of these be done in a different way? Can the essentials become sufficient? Can tasks be redistributed?

What is essential (of the essence of) in each LM?

Right holding of meeting for worship

Right holding of meeting for worship for business

Right holding of meetings for children and teenagers

Right holding of meetings for worship and memorial meetings on death

Safeguarding

Pastoral and Spiritual care & development

Notices – inc Quaker & Local events, reading of BYM epistle

Library

Commitments to other groups (e.g. Refugee Support, Peace Groups, Ecumenical & Interfaith Groups, Health Councils, etc.,)

Collection of donations and housekeeping (FMH, rentals, donations etc.,)

Local community

What is essential (of the essence of) AM?

Right holding of meeting for worship for business

Right holding of meetings for children and teenagers

Right holding of meetings for worship for marriage

Safeguarding

Pastoral and spiritual care (Appointment of Elder/Overseers)

Appointment of Nominations Committee

Appointment of clerks/clerkship teams

Appointment of trustees

Membership matters (applications, visiting, accepting)

Appointment of persons to attend Quaker gatherings/committees: Meeting for Sufferings, QPSW, Quaker Life, NFPB and non-Q groups

Area-wide Fellowship and Community

What is essential (of the essence) of GM?

Right holding of meeting for worship for business

Right holding of meetings for children and teenagers

Safeguarding

Appointment of persons to attend Quaker gatherings/committees: Meeting for Sufferings, Q and non-Q groups

Scotland-wide Fellowship and Community

Representation of Quakers to other bodies/churches

What is the simplest possible structure for Friends in North Scotland?

MODEL A:

North of Scotland Area Meeting would be laid down and its functions devolved to Local Meetings. So, new LMs would be responsible for:

Right holding of meeting for worship

Right holding of meeting for worship for business

Right holding of meetings for children and teenagers

Safeguarding

Pastoral & Spiritual care

Notices – inc Quaker & Local events, reading of BYM epistle

Library

Commitments to other groups (e.g. Refugee Support, Peace Groups, Ecumenical & Interfaith Groups, Health Councils, etc.,)

Housekeeping (FMH, Financial and legal matters (treasurer)

Local Friends' community

Appointment of (local) Nominations Committee

Appointment of clerks & treasurers

Appointment of persons to attend Quaker gatherings/committees: Meeting for Sufferings, QPSW, Quaker Life, NFPB and non-Q groups

GM for Scotland would have responsibility for:

Appointing trustees, signing-off accounts & some legal responsibilities

Appointing elders and overseers

Appointing Nominations Committees

Supervising Safeguarding (as now)

MODEL B:

All four Area Meetings would be laid down and their responsibilities would be divided between an enhanced General Meeting for Scotland and nationwide Local Meetings and Worship Groups.

This is the most radical of the four models mentioned here and involves the remodelling of General Meeting for Scotland as well as laying down Area Meetings! The following ideas might be suggested:

General Meeting for Scotland:

That General Meeting for Scotland would be one charity of which all

Friends in Scotland would be members. GM for Scotland would appoint trustees and area meeting trustees would be released for other service.

(additional: There may be benefits in **national membership of BYM** – this would hold the membership of travelling Friends and students who may later settle in various places away from home. See also: FWCC which holds memberships)

The Importance of Using What we Have: Friends are kind, usually, and take notice of when we are ill or tramelled by life, or have young children and full-time jobs, and the care of elderly parents and a variety of other commitments. It is suggested that being an older person, of itself, is not a barrier to all types of Quaker Service. What we tend to say is 'ageing and infirm'. It should be noted that not all people over 70 or 80 or 90 automatically become infirm (although some do, and some are infirm many years before that!). Many can

still do things, if others enable them and don't wrap them in cotton-wool. And they may have Quakerly experience and wisdom to impart to others (can we stop thinking weighty Friends are a barrier?). Helen Keller said:

*"I am only one; but still I am one
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
I will not refuse to do, The something I can do."*

And there's the question of the Book: Are we honest and truthful about our List of Members and Attenders or do we put names in there when someone has been to meeting twice – or is a beloved partner who never comes at all? If we consider this in terms of 'bums on seats', of course only 50% are available for service. Is there a case for pruning the lists ruthlessly, or having **associate membership**? Or, how true is it that only 50% are active? How do we know?

There could be a clerkship team for GM – consisting of a Principal Clerk, 2 Friends from each of the original 4 area meetings, 2 delegates from GM trustees, a delegate from elders, a delegate from overseers, GM treasurer (15 Friends in all). It is important that that the group should ensure 4 of its members at each GM.

All these team members would be appointed for (strictly) 3 years and would have an annually rolling Principal Clerkship.

Nominations Committees would be encouraged to 'advertise' what they are

looking for in Quaker AM & GM publications – or we could have a yellow form scheme like BYM – we all write down what we are interested in and our experience etc., to help Noms in their discernment.

There would be a full-time (or job-share) administrator for GM, who would also act as personal assistant(s) to the Principal GM clerk and her/his team

Claiming for expenses would be compulsory (for 'officers' and those appointed to attend) – so being unable to afford to travel would not be a barrier to membership of the Clerkship Team – and, at the discretion of the trustees, could be advanced on the **imprest system**. If the appointed person does not wish to claim, the amount could be paid back into GM accounts as a donation.

Elders would be appointed by General Meeting Nominations Committee, overseers would be appointed by Local Meeting Nominations Comms.

Elders, especially with a teaching remit, could travel in the ministry around Scotland. There should be a **duty elder** at local meetings for worship and meetings for worship for business (and, indeed, to shake hands for meeting to rise!).

A Scotland-wide Hospitality Scheme could be developed, so that Friends may stay with others at minimal or no cost.

General Meeting for Scotland would meet 6 times each year, possibly on a Sunday, e.g. January, March, May, July, September, November

General Meeting for Scotland would meet at various locations e.g. Inverness, Aberdeen, Orkney, Skye, Pluscarden, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Stirling etc., on a rota. A

full programme for children would be arranged. Young people would be included in as other Friends. A **Quiet Room** should be provided wherever activities take place.

Catering at General Meeting could be done by the 'brown paper bag method' – bag, sandwich, fruit, crisps, drink. Cake at teatime.

A Training Co-Ordinator and small committee (one year/3 years?) could be appointed by GM. It would be expected to organise training events using local members as well as Woodbrooke and Quaker Life etc. as Meetings for Learning.

Communications would be maintained by GM administrator, emails being marked with where else they should go (e.g. Clerk to trustees (for all trustees); Clerk of Banchory LM (for all members and attenders at Banchory meeting); GM Clerk only, GM Clerkship Team only, Clerk of Noms Comm (to all Noms Comm), etc. – we could try to make sure everyone didn't get everything from 8 different sources?? We don't all read them, anyway! An important part of communications would be to **maintain both** the Scottish Friend and AMs' individual newsletters. If we could change to **almost all** email copies, we could **all** share **all** of them? There will always be some hard copies needed!

General Meeting for Scotland would be responsible for (and appoint): delegates to conferences and Quaker and non-Quaker bodies (therefore no duplication) but it would be kept in mind that **we do not need a 'representative' on everything** – although we might request a newsletter or minutes instead? GM would still support Agenda Committee, C & YP, Central Comm., Scottish Parliament Liaison Officer, GM Parliamentary Support Group, GM Nominations Committee, any others.

There could be space for an Easterly Scotland Gathering, similar to the Westerly Scotland Gathering (which already exists) – these would both cross our usual AM boundaries, a good thing?

Local Meetings:

Local Meetings could have a small Nominations Committee (3?) which will bring, to the M4W for Business, the names of a clerk, assistant clerk and local treasurer, and 3 overseers (or how ever many needed, more than 1, fewer than 6?), who will be **appointed** by the careful discernment of that **local meeting**.

Overseers would be appointed by Local Meetings but supported by GM gathering/telephone conferencing/Pastoral Council etc. This would accommodate different models of oversight including 'shattering' the duties so different Friends could do what they are good at, having a rolling oversight, so everyone gets a turn and a chance to learn, circles and branches etc.

Children and Young People would be encouraged to come to Local Meetings for Worship for Business as well as Sunday Meetings for Worship. Can we invite children from other meetings or **other churches to our 'Sunday School' (and go to theirs)?**

These ideas would entail more work and responsibility for GM and LMs, but would remove any need for area meetings. GM would require more support from Friends.

Outreach could be undertaken at GM and Local Meeting levels. Being short of Friends for service might be helped by getting more Friends! We could consider local news coverage (need to do something unusual or exciting!), events, enquirers' gatherings, leafletting,

outdoor meeting for worship, work in schools. Where further/higher education, could we offer to hold a seminar in some subject area?

MODEL C:

NSAM (perhaps in a different form) would be retained but we would lay down LMs in favour of worshipping groups. All church affairs would be handled by NSAM or SGM.

Worship Groups would have **almost** no business to do but only have to ensure:

The Right Holding of Meeting for Worship

The Right Holding of Meeting for Worship for children

Safeguarding

NSAM would have responsibility for:

Right holding of meeting for worship for business

Right holding of meetings for children and teenagers

Safeguarding

Appointment of Nominations Committee

Appointment of Elder/Overseers

Appointment of clerks/clerkship teams

Appointment of trustees

Membership matters (applications, visiting, accepting)

Appointment of persons to attend Quaker gatherings/committees: Meeting for Sufferings, QPSW, Quaker Life, NFPB and non-Q groups

Area-wide Fellowship and Community

NSAM AND WORSHIPPING GROUPS COULD KEEP IN TOUCH BY USING ONLINE FORUMS AND ONLINE MEETINGS FOR WORSHIP FOR BUSINESS – SEE WOODBROOKE MODEL

MODEL D:

North Scotland Area Meeting would not be laid down but would adopt practices adapted from other meetings around the UK.

That General Meeting for Scotland would be one charity of which all Friends in Scotland would be members. GM for Scotland would appoint trustees and area meeting trustees would be released for other service.

In some areas, just **changing the day of Area Meeting to Sunday has worked**. This frees Saturdays for families, whilst keeping Sundays for 'Quakerly things'. It should be noted that Quakers do not admit the sacredness of Sundays.

Meetings for Worship for the Conduct of Business would be held, as now, four times each year but there would be **two extra residential AMs**, simply for spiritual

enrichment, community building, getting to know one another in the things which are eternal, and for meetings for learning. An Arrangements Committee would take on both of these residential meetings and would be drawn widely from NSAM Friends. Perhaps Residential Meetings could be held at Pluscarden and, say, on an island? A **Quiet Room** should be provided.

NSAM will still appoint trustees/elders/overseers/clerks/ assistant clerks/treasurers, brought forward by Nominations Committee, and appoint nominations committees directly, and consider membership applications **after** the applicant has been visited (should we continue to do this). NSAM will receive Concerns from Friends and/or meetings, and discern whether they should be actioned locally or forwarded to BYM (or neither). NSAM will receive reports from appointees to Meeting for Sufferings and, occasionally, other reports. NSAM will pass Memorials to the Grace of God in the Lives of Deceased Friends to GM or BYM when it deems it suitable.

A Clerkship Committee (which would not attempt to preside at the residential meetings) would deal with routine business (dates of meetings, receipt of applications for membership (and appointment of visitors, if any, in conjunction with elders), receipt of reports (which will go into the Scottish Friend and/or Northern Quaker) and the discernment of whether they should be forwarded to AM in session or to Residential Meetings, the preparation of NSAM portion of the biennial List of Members and Attenders, receipt of the Tabular Statement for forwarding to NSAM in session.

A Local Hospitality Scheme should be developed so that Friends who need to stay over may stay with Friends (build community) at little or no cost.

Friends appointed to attend (including ‘officers’) MUST claim expenses – so we can tell how much it costs to run meetings and so that those who cannot afford do not have to claim (because it can be humiliating as well as preventing those who cannot afford from accepting Quaker service). Those Friends who do not want to claim should still do so, and make a donation to general funds.

Catering at Area Meeting could be done by the ‘brown paper bag method – bag, sandwich, fruit, crisps, drink. Cake at teatime.

Nominations Committees would be encouraged to ‘advertise’ what they are looking for in Quaker AM & GM publications – or we could have a yellow form scheme like BYM – we all write down what we are interested in and our experience etc.

Outreach could be undertaken at Area and Local Meeting levels. Being short of Friends for service could be solved by getting more Friends! We should consider local news coverage (need to do something unusual or exciting!), events, enquirers’ gatherings, leafletting, outdoor meeting for worship, work in schools. Where further/higher education, could we offer to hold a seminar?

The Importance of Using What we Have: Friends are kind, usually, and take notice of when we are ill or tramelled by life, or have young children and full-time jobs, and the care of elderly parents and a variety of other commitments. It is suggested that being an older person, of itself, is not a barrier to all types of Quaker Service. What we tend to say is ‘ageing and infirm’. It should be noted that not all people over 70 or 80 or 90 automatically become infirm (although some do, and some are infirm many years before that!). Many can still do things, if others enable them. And they may have Quakerly experience and wisdom to impart to others (can we stop thinking weighty Friends are a barrier?).

MODEL E:

North Scotland Area Meeting would not be laid down but could adopt practices adapted from other meetings around the UK.

That General Meeting for Scotland would be one charity of which all Friends in Scotland would be members. GM for Scotland would appoint trustees and area meeting trustees would be released for other service.

NSAM would be held on either Saturday or Sunday – this used to happen regularly when many Friends were in business!

NSAM would be held only twice per year and would be a residential gathering with full catering. A **Quiet Room** should be provided.

We could have 8 meetings for worship for business exclusively by telephone/Skype conferencing.

Expenses as above

Outreach could be undertaken at Area and Local Meeting levels.

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End Note: Some of the suggestions appear in many of the models above. This may be because they seem like good ideas! Or not. They are:

- a) Sunday meetings (always/sometimes?)
- b) Hospitality scheme
- c) Compulsory claiming of expenses
- d) Using what we have
- e) Catering simplified by 'brown bagging' or provision of finger food
- f) There should always be a Quiet Room when we have any activities
- g) We might think about referring to dry-sounding 'business' as 'church affairs'; we might start referring to 'jobs' as 'Quaker service'
- h) We could seriously consider being more disciplined about triennial appointments
- i) We could remind ourselves that our unique 'business' method is a way of carrying our faith into action

Think about it.

Constance M Tonge

North Scotland Area Meeting Clerk 28/07/2018