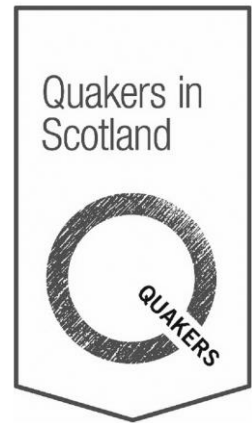


GENERAL MEETING FOR SCOTLAND

Special Meeting on blended meetings

6th February, 2021

Held by Zoom



21/02/01 Worship

We have spent time together in worship, during which Quaker Faith and Practice 26.18 was read. Friends are learners. Throughout our lives, if we care about the truth, we must continue to seek new ways of expressing it, so that we might speak this truth to others when they most need it.

21/02/02 Welcome to all present

We welcome all Friends who are with us today, to this special General Meeting for Scotland, held by Zoom.

The total numbers of those present will be added to these minutes.

East Scotland	21
South East Scotland	32
North Scotland	11
West Scotland	32

Total: 96, including 8 attenders

21/02/03 Elders for this meeting

We are grateful to Friends present who have offered to serve as Elders for this meeting. Their duties are listed in the final arrangements letter. Names of those serving for today have been noted. We remind Friends that all of us share the duties of oversight and spiritual care of our Meetings, not just those appointed to carry them out.

21/02/04 Reporter of this Meeting

We appoint Jane Mitchell, West Scotland Area Meeting, to report on this meeting to *The Friend* and the *Scottish Friend*.

21/02/05 Exploring our future use of blended meetings

A briefing paper on blended meetings was circulated to Friends in Scotland, in preparation for this meeting. It includes current information about equipment, video conferencing systems, and licences, and will be of practical help to any meeting considering introducing blended meetings. Today, our focus is on our future use of blended meetings, rather than on the technical side.

We have discussed the place of blended meetings in our Quaker life in Scotland, at a time when we can meet face-to-face.

Attending a meeting by Zoom makes it more accessible to Friends with transport constraints and those who are unwell or physically infirm. Over the last year, this has resulted in a significant increase in those attending our Meetings for Worship and our meetings for church affairs. Some Friends from other parts of the country and the world have joined in our Meetings for Worship, their presence strengthening our family of Friends.

Travel to Quaker meetings is costly in terms of the planet, our finances and our personal time and energy. Zoom meetings have reduced these costs.

In future when we can meet in person, we would like retain some of the benefits of Zoom by offering blended meetings where possible, but we must guard against blended meetings leading to inequalities between participants who are physically present and those attending virtually. Protocols and guidelines might help.

We agree that blended meetings should be an element of General Meeting in the future.

We have been advised by those who have already introduced blended meetings that we should start by experimenting with the equipment we have, as we might find it produces an acceptable result. To improve on this is expensive. Being able to hear one another is vital to the success of a blended meeting and is more important than the visual element.

We acknowledge that clerking blended meetings will be more complex.

Although the use of blended meetings is a well-established practice in the world, it is new to us and we will adapt it to our Quaker needs as best as we can, learning from one another about good practice and what works best technically.

21/02/06 Quaker issues - discussion in small groups

In six facilitated groups, we discussed how blended meetings might affect the quality of our Quaker worship and business method and what impact they might have on our Quaker roles.

In plenary session, each group has shared three of the issues that were raised. Feedback, which includes some points discussed in the groups but not reported, is as follows:

How Quaker worship and business method might be affected

Several groups mentioned the effect on participation and maintaining our Quaker community. There was generally a sense that we need to change the ways we do things, developing protocols and good practice.

Participation

Overall, blended meetings will make it possible for more Friends to participate but we need to ensure that all can be involved, even if in different ways. However, the benefits of Zoom in including more people, particularly those at a distance and those with mobility restrictions, can be considered to be offset by effectively excluding others who can't use Zoom: for technical reasons, such as poor broadband; because they are zoomed-out with work; or because they can't manage the technology.

There is a danger in blended meetings of having two classes of participants - those present in person and those who join by Zoom. We must not make the assumption that the "real" meeting is the in-person one, with the people on screen as an add-on. Friends physically present might be advantaged over those online, who can be ignored and relatively excluded. All Friends need to look at those physically present, and those on-line. Work needs to be done to ensure equality of participation.

Maintaining Our Community

Blended meetings will help us achieve our aim to be a low carbon community, by reducing our carbon footprint.

How do we define community, especially with people being able to join online from afar? Would blended meetings weaken the sense of a local meeting community, or is it strengthened by the inclusion of those who find it physically difficult to get to meeting, including those with young children? If we are more inclined to use online rather than travel, will this improve participation or reduce connection? We must not forget the human element is key to a successful meeting.

How does the social element of blended meetings work? In blended meetings would those on-line have a sense of exclusion from those

physically present who are able to socialise face-to-face? We will need to think of creative ways to maintain our community. The sense of emotional distance from the Meeting has increased over time, while we are using on-line conferencing.

We need to consider how new inquirers might engage with blended meetings. Would blended meetings reduce the chance of people just 'dropping in' physically or on-line, or perhaps facilitate it?

Worship

Some of those who had experience of blended meetings felt that they can work well spiritually and deep worship can be felt. For others, on-line worship does not match the benefits of in-person meetings for the quality of the silent worship, and they lack informal social contact and catch-up opportunities. Although this is a criticism of Zoom meetings, it applies to the on-line worship at blended meetings. What could help with this?

How do we sustain good ministry and ensure that there are sufficient gaps between ministry in a blended setting? Does being online generate a sense of shyness, manifesting as less ministry, or meditation, rather than 'silence'?

Protocols are required for those on screen: getting people to come early, to settle down before the start, and to behave as if they were in a room holding worship, and not moving about and sorting screens or seats.

We need to make adaptations to bring children into blended meetings but we know that zoom meetings with children have been successful.

Meetings for church affairs

We need to consider and learn how to use blended meetings: we are not just putting meetings for worship or church affairs on-line. The structure of our blended business meetings will have to change.

To protect the health and wellbeing of those Friends joining on-line, there are time constraints for screen watching, as fatigue sets in after 90 minutes. Breaks, at least every hour, are important. How does that affect the way we do things and the pace of the meeting, allowing time for quiet discernment? What will be the effect for face-to-face participants? To reduce the length of time spent at meetings, should we have more short meetings focused on specific business, or do we just need to be more disciplined about what we include?

When using breakout rooms for discussion/ informal chats, how do we include Friends who are physically present?

What impact might they have on our Quaker roles?

Role holders in Scotland need to meet to consider their roles and how they might change in the future. Sometimes meetings on specific issues might be helpful. Blended meetings would allow for a greater possibility of participation in such Scotland-wide meetings, while reducing our carbon footprint and costs.

Clerking relies heavily on the assistance of other role holders. There is a need for teamwork with clerks, assistant clerks, elders and the technical team all working together. Clerking teams will need to learn how to include Friends physically present and those online. The way elders carry out their role in blended meetings might need to be adapted. How does 'eldering' happen online? Consideration needs to be given to the use of "off line" conversations, when appropriate. How does pastoral care work with blended meetings? One-to-one conversations can be awkward at an online meeting, and we might need to create more opportunities for support, such as phone calls and home visits. Clerks, overseers and elders need to be aware of who in their meeting is unable to attend because of limited access to technology, or who resist using technology.

Blended meetings require extra roles such as hosts, moderators, and people to set up the equipment. We need Friends who are able to guide and train us in setting up blended meetings.

So that there is consistency across meetings, it would be helpful to have one point of contact for advice. Is this a GM appointment?

21/02/07 Work needed to take this forward

We have had an initial discussion on work needed to take forward preparations for blended meetings.

Britain Yearly Meeting and Woodbrooke have guidelines on blended meetings and there is a Facebook page, which is a useful resource. These can be accessed via:

Woodbrooke guidance for online/blended meetings for worship for business:

<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Decision-Making-and-Discernment-Guidance-for-Online-and-Blended-MfWfB-November-2020.pdf>

Woodbrooke – thoughts on blended meeting for worship:

<https://quaker-prod.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/store/7f4322d9c00a0c40aff81ad7d6189f87751cb02fd338879edc46b1f34cc1>

Woodbrooke – setting up your own meeting for worship:

<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/worship/setting-up-mfw/>

(contains several other guides and videos from Britain and abroad)

<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/online-worship-in-2020-revisiting-britain-yearly-meetings-response-to-the-pandemic/>

Overall source for blended meetings and technology by an American Friend Kathleen Wooten:

<http://quakerkathleen.org/being-the-church-online/>

Useful Facebook pages:

- Quaker Gatherings and Explorations 'quakergatherings'
- Quaker Social Media Support Group 'QLNSocialMediaCluster'
- Valiant Together: Sharing Quaker Religious Education Support and Resources During Covid-19 'ValiantTogetherQuakerRE'
- Zoom Faith — encouragement, expertise, community (general page for faith groups using Zoom) 'zoomfaith'

With a view to creating a list of suitable premises, it would be helpful if our four area meetings would survey their local meetings to ascertain the facilities they have for hosting blended meetings.

Inclusion and exclusion of Friends from blended meetings and face-to-face meetings has been spoken about. It would be useful to ask Friends about their personal experience of this, and to note what they say. We ask General Meeting to initiate this consultation.

Holding area meetings by Zoom and local meetings in person might be an alternative way of looking at blended meetings.

We need to consider how we continue to build and sustain our Quaker communities. We discussed ideas like weekly local newsletters and alternative ways of facilitating informal chat before and after meetings. More work on this needs to be done.

21/02/08 Closing Minute

We record our thanks to the Friends who set up and hosted this GM by Zoom.

We intend to meet next by Zoom on 6th March, 2021, if nothing occurs to prevent.

Elizabeth Allen,
Clerk