

# Membership

## The Religious Society of Friends and Midlothian Friends Meeting

June 12, 2005

### Introduction

This document was approved by Meeting for Business as representing Midlothian Friends Meeting's position on membership in the Religious Society of Friends and Midlothian Friends Meeting. It is comprehensive and represents several years of discussion and discernment by the Care and Counsel committee, Midlothian Friends at large, and Meeting for Business. Within this document procedures are outlined for the Care and Counsel Committee that are consistent with Midlothian Meeting's view of membership.

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### A. The Meaning of Membership at Midlothian Friends Meeting

To become a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) one must become a member of the monthly meeting; i.e. Midlothian Friends Meeting.

The meaning and role of membership varies between Quaker meetings. At Midlothian Friends Meeting becoming a member is a process by which a Friend can make a *formal and explicit* commitment to the underlying principles of the Religious Society of Friends and the meeting community. Membership is not necessary, however, to indicate one's commitment.

Midlothian Friends Meeting regards membership as an individual decision which is very personal in nature. Even though they may feel a commitment to the Religious Society of Friends and the Midlothian Friends Meeting community, many Friends have thoughtful reasons for not becoming a member. They may feel that membership in a religious society is the antithesis to living a spirit-led life. They may have emotional or familial ties to another church or

religious denomination. Or, they just may not see a need to become a member in order to explicitly demonstrate their commitment to Quakerism and the meeting community.

Ultimately, the question that needs to be discerned by a Friend who is contemplating this step is whether membership in the Religious Society of Friends and Midlothian Friends Meeting will be of value to her or him as they continue on their spiritual journey. An enhanced spiritual journey should be the reason for becoming a member. If membership would hinder one's spiritual journey, then it might be best to reconsider taking that step.

“Attender” is the term used by Quakers to describe a Friend who associates with Quakers; however, has not chosen to make the formal commitment of becoming a member. Such a person may even consider herself or himself a “Quaker”.

Midlothian Friends Meeting is resolved to *not* use membership as an indicator of spirituality or commitment to Quakerism and the meeting community. The meeting is concerned that an impression is never given of elitism for members or exclusion of attenders. This fact is evident in several ways. There are no restrictions on attenders serving in any capacity at Midlothian Meeting, whether that be on any of the meeting's committees or even serving as clerk of meeting - perhaps the most visible and public Quaker in any Friends meeting.

## **B. Process for Discerning Membership at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

The process of becoming a member is initiated by the Friend contemplating membership. There is never any pressure placed on an individual to become a member of meeting, since it is regarded as a very personal decision. The process begins with a letter or email written by the prospective member and sent to the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee. The letter usually explains the Friend's spiritual journey which has now led him or her to desire membership. The length or depth of the letter is up to the Friend.

A member of the Care and Counsel committee will then contact the prospective member to arrange an ad hoc Clearness committee that will help the Friend discern their own clarity on the spiritual value of membership and whether she or he indeed wants to take this step. A convenient time for the prospective member should be chosen. The Clearness committee should convene at the prospective member's home if at all possible in order to create an intimate and personal experience for the Friend. If this is not practical or the Friend seeking membership is uncomfortable with this, then a quiet location should be chosen such as another home of one of the Clearness committee members, or the meetinghouse.

One member of the ad hoc Clearness committee should also be a member of the Care and Counsel committee. If the Friend seeking membership has no preference as to which Care and Counsel committee member should be on the Clearness committee, then the contact person should make a suggestion that is acceptable to the prospective member. At least three or four other Friends who may or may not be on the Care and Counsel committee should be selected by the prospective member to also serve on the Clearness committee. As with all committees at Midlothian Friends Meeting, the Clearness committee members do not have to be members of meeting; although, they should at least be attenders. They should not be friends or associates of the prospective member who are not associated with Midlothian Friends Meeting. The Care

and Counsel committee member who will facilitate the Clearness committee should contact the other prospective Clearness committee members to notify them of their selection and the time for the committee meeting with the Friend requesting membership. If one or more is unable or unwilling to participate, the Care and Counsel member should contact the Friend seeking membership, asking him or her to select replacements.

Prior to the Clearness committee meeting, a copy of the prospective member's letter or email sent to the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee should be provided to each member of the Clearness committee. This will begin to get them acquainted with the unique circumstances that have led the Friend to this point in their spiritual journey. Thus, they will be in a better position to ask appropriate questions during the committee meeting with the Friend.

The Care and Counsel member should facilitate the Clearness committee meeting using the guidelines in the pamphlet ***Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment***. It is essential that the information in the pamphlet is read and understood by the Care and Counsel member so that it can be adhered to during the Clearness committee meeting. Experience has shown that when a deviation occurs from these guidelines, unintended and disastrous results may occur. The Care and Counsel member facilitating the Clearness committee meeting should explain the guidelines at the beginning. She or he should also be diligent during the Clearness committee meeting to ensure that adherence to the guidelines is maintained.

A major aspect of the membership process using a Clearness committee is that the Friends on the committee are not making a judgment as to the prospective member's qualifications or readiness to become a member. The committee is present only to help the individual make discernment *within himself or herself* as to his or her readiness and clarity to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends and Midlothian Friends Meeting.

If more than one adult (18 years of age or over) in a household is requesting membership, the option should be provided to have a separate Clearness committee should this be desired by any of those adults. While this places additional burden on the Care and Counsel committee, it is important to allow each prospective adult member to have a membership experience that is most meaningful to him or her.

Should the adults prefer a joint Clearness committee, care should be taken during the Clearness committee meeting to treat them as individuals who are reaching individual clarity.

If a partner, spouse, or other adult members of the household is not requesting membership and is not already a member of meeting, it would be appropriate to allow him or her to be an observer of the Clearness committee if the prospective member is comfortable with that. However, it should be made clear that observers are not participants as are the Clearness committee members. While a spouse's or partner's objection to their 'significant other' becoming a member is something the committee may need to explore with the prospective member during the Clearness committee meeting, consent in regards to the membership request is not sought by the Clearness committee from the spouse or partner.

By the end of the Clearness committee meeting it should be evident within the prospective member's own mind whether there is clarity that membership will be of value on his or her spiritual journey.

### **C. Approval of the Process for Membership at Meeting for Business**

If clarity is reached by the prospective member on proceeding with membership, the member of the Care and Counsel committee who facilitated the Clearness committee meeting should report that fact at the next Meeting for Business of Midlothian Friends Meeting. An example of what is typically reported is, "The Care and Counsel committee would like to report that John Doe is clear that he should become a member of meeting".

Friends present at Meeting for Business should ask questions in order to be comfortable that the correct process for membership was adhered to before making a minute of the new member's decision. Meeting for Business is not making a judgment as to the Friend's readiness or clarity on becoming a member. If the process for membership was adhered to up to this point, that judgment on readiness for membership has already occurred within the Friend's own mind during the Clearness committee meeting. If approval is given by those present at Meeting for Business on the process used by the Care and Counsel committee and the Clearness committee, as well as the prospective member's own process of discernment; then, it may be minuted at that Meeting for Business. If legitimate questions or concerns are raised concerning the process used, the decision to minute the membership may be held over until those concerns are addressed.

Once approval is given the Care and Counsel committee member reporting on the membership should then ensure that the meeting Recorder is informed of the membership. The Recorder will update the meeting membership records and inform Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the new membership.

Some meetings have the custom of holding over for one month the approval and recording of the new membership. They do this to allow other Friends an opportunity to become acquainted with the prospective member so they can approve or disapprove of the request for membership at the next Meeting for Business. However, since at Midlothian Meeting the judgment on whether to become a member or not is being made by the individual and not others, there is no need to hold the decision over for one month as long as Meeting for Business approves of the process used to obtain clarity on membership.

### **D. Membership for Youth at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Children under 18 years of age may also choose to become members of meeting. This choice, however, must be theirs (if they are at an age of reason) and not that of a parent or guardian. It is common for prospective adult members to also request membership for their minor children in their letter sent to the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee.

It is normally best for younger children to have their Clearness committee meeting along with their parents. During the Clearness committee meeting, time should be taken to address the

children to ensure they are making their own decision to the best of their ability. The committee meeting can be overwhelming for some children. So allowance should be made, accordingly. There is no need for the children to sit through the whole committee meeting. However, at least a few minutes should be set aside just for them.

Once a younger child member becomes a teenager or adult, she or he may choose to experience her or his own separate Clearness committee in order to solidify and enhance his or her own experience of membership. The process would be especially helpful should she or he have doubts or issues regarding Quakerism or being a member of meeting. The Care and Counsel committee should periodically make this option known within the meeting community.

If the adult who is seeking membership is also seeking it for a youth who is a teenager, a separate Clearness committee process may be provided for the teenager if that is her or his desire. The same process outlined for adults should be used.

Should a youth (under 18 years of age) want to become a member when his or her parent or legal guardian is not a member or is not seeking membership, the Care and Counsel committee should contact the youth's parents upon receipt of the letter requesting membership. Permission should be sought from the parents or legal guardians to proceed with the membership request. An explanation of the process would be appropriate, as well as an invitation to observe the Clearness committee meeting as it unfolds. If the parents do choose to observe the Clearness committee meeting, it would also be appropriate for the committee to ensure at the end of the process that the parent or legal guardian still approves of his or her child becoming a member.

Should the parent(s) or guardian(s) object to their child pursuing membership, the child should be advised to lovingly go along with his or her parents' wishes, and wait until she or he is 18 years of age before pursuing becoming a member of meeting.

Before approving the recording of membership for a youth who's parents are not also seeking membership or are not already members, Meeting for Business should take care to ensure that the guidelines outlined above for this special situation have been followed by the Care and Counsel committee and the Clearness committee.

Upon approval from Meeting for Business on the process used for membership, children are recorded as full members at Midlothian Friends Meeting. The meeting does not distinguish between adult and youth members as some Friends meetings do. This is in keeping with the Quaker testimony on equality. Therefore, no additional action is required once a minor member reaches adulthood.

## **E. Birthright Membership at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Children born to members of Midlothian Friends Meeting are considered full members of meeting as long as the member parent is also the legal guardian of the child. If the member parent is not the legal guardian of the child at the time of birth, the child may still be recorded as a full member as long as permission is granted by the non-member parent who is the legal guardian.

As with younger children who become members, upon reaching an age of maturity a birthright member may choose to experience a Clearness committee process to solidify and enhance her or his experience of membership. The process would be especially helpful should the young adult have doubts or issues regarding Quakerism or being a member of meeting.

The clerk of the Care and Counsel committee (or his/her substitute) should take the new membership to the next Meeting for Business of Midlothian Friends Meeting so that it is approved and minuted. The clerk of the Care and Counsel committee should then notify the Recorder who will update the meeting's membership records and notify Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

## **F. Membership for Youth Attenders Upon Becoming Adults**

Once a child attender of an adult attender reaches adulthood, it would be appropriate for the Care and Counsel committee to contact that young adult about becoming a member. The contact should be informative rather than coercive. The purpose of the contact is merely to offer the young adult membership should they be interested in pursuing it.

If the young adult was a regular attender as a minor, a Clearness committee may be suggested, but is not required. If the young adult was not a regular attender as a minor, a Clearness committee should be utilized. These situations are often rather "gray" and therefore can offer a challenge on how to proceed. The Care and Counsel committee with the young adult should discern what is best for both the young adult and the meeting community.

If no Clearness committee is required or desired by the young adult, the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee (or his/her substitute) should take the new membership to the next Meeting for Business of Midlothian Friends Meeting so that it is approved and minuted. The clerk of the Care and Counsel committee should then notify the Recorder who will update the meeting's membership records and notify Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

## **G. The Value of Using the Clearness Committee at Other Times Regarding Membership**

Clearness committees for discerning membership do not only have to be used when a Friend first becomes a member. There may be times when a Friend feels "stale" in regards to Quakerism and the meeting community. Perhaps there has been a lengthy absence from the meeting community. Or, a Friend's life could have taken a different course, resulting in confusion or doubts on the value of Quakerism to his or her spiritual life. Likewise, the meeting could have undertaken a course of action which so strongly contradicts the Friend's own values that a withdrawal of membership is being contemplated by the Friend.

All of these circumstances as well as a desire to simply renew one's formal commitment to the meeting community are opportunities to utilize the Clearness committee process. The Care and Counsel committee should be ready to offer this option whenever it seems appropriate.

## **H. Withdrawal of Membership at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Upon receiving a request for the withdrawal of membership, the Care and Counsel committee should always encourage the Friend to first have a Clearness committee to ensure he or she has clarity to take such action. A Clearness committee offers the best vehicle for the Friend to explore his or her decision before finalizing it.

Since membership is an explicit statement of commitment to the meeting community and the principles of the Religious Society of Friends, there may be very rare occasions when a Friend through word or deed seems to be publicly withdrawing his or her commitment. In these situations, the Care and Counsel committee should contact that Friend to suggest a Clearness committee to help him or her discern his or her relationship with Midlothian Friends Meeting and the Religious Society of Friends.

As a result of the Clearness committee the Friend may realize a need to renew his or her relationship with the meeting community. Or, the Friend may discern that he or she wishes to withdraw his or her membership.

If the Friend wants to continue his or her membership, but the Clearness committee has serious concerns, they should arrange for the formation of a Clearness committee for themselves. Only under the most extraordinary circumstances would the meeting ever choose to involuntarily withdraw a membership. This course of action should only be taken when there appears to be no other recourse in order to maintain the spiritual health of the meeting community and the Friend in question.

Requests for withdrawal of membership should be taken to Meeting for Business to be approved and minuted. Appropriate questions will likely be asked to ensure that all possible means were utilized to maintain the Friend's relationship and commitment to the meeting community and the Religious Society of Friends. Upon approval from Meeting for Business to withdraw the membership, the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee should notify the withdrawn member and the Recorder, who will update the meeting's membership records and notify Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

Should a former member eventually choose to associate with the meeting as an attender, they are certainly welcomed to do so. Any Friend who has withdrawn his or her membership or has had it withdrawn by the meeting may request membership again whenever the circumstances have changed that led to the withdrawal. The usual process for requesting membership is followed.

## **I. Keeping in Contact with Members Who Are Inactive at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Should a member become inactive in the life of Midlothian Friends Meeting or move to another location out of the geographic area of the meeting, the Care and Counsel committee should initiate contact with the member regularly. Since the member has made a formal and explicit commitment to the meeting via membership, the meeting has an interest in offering assistance and friendship even if the Friend is no longer physically present in the meeting community.

The contact may be through email, phone, letter, or a personal visit. A gentle inquiry should be made as to the well-being of the member. Appropriate assistance should be offered if needed.

Even though Friends who have moved away continue to be considered members of Midlothian Friends Meeting, they would likely appreciate any encouragement to associate with the nearest Friends meeting if they have not already done so.

#### **J. Transferring Membership from Midlothian Friends Meeting to Another Friends Meeting**

Should a member of Midlothian Meeting wish to transfer his or her membership to another Friends Meeting, she or he should write an email or letter to the clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee, requesting the transfer. That clerk should write a letter to the clerk of the new meeting to request the transfer. Once that clerk acknowledges acceptance of the transfer, the clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee should inform the Midlothian Meeting for Business of the transfer. Transfers do not require approval from Meeting for Business. They are merely minuted so there is a record of the action. The clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee should then notify Midlothian Meeting's Recorder, who will update the meeting's member records to indicate the loss of the member, and will notify Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the loss.

#### **K. Transferring Membership from Another Friends Meeting to Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Should a member of another Friends meeting wish to transfer his or her membership to Midlothian Friends Meeting, she or he should follow the procedures of the meeting in which they are a member. Normally, the procedure would be for them to write an email or letter to the other meeting's clerk of the Care and Counsel committee or its clerk of meeting, requesting the transfer. That clerk should write a letter to the clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee to request the transfer. Should the clerk of Midlothian meeting receive the letter from the other meeting instead, he or she should give it to the clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee to handle. The clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee should then write a letter to the requesting clerk from the other Friends Meeting acknowledging the transfer. Midlothian Meeting's clerk of the Care and Counsel committee should then inform Midlothian's Meeting for Business of the transfer. Transfers do not require approval from Meeting for Business. They are merely minuted so there is a record of the action. The clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee should then notify Midlothian Meeting's Recorder, who will update the meeting's member records to reflect the new member, and will notify Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the new member.

#### **L. Sojourning at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

Many Friends meetings utilize the concept of Sojourning to designate a type of temporary membership for a Friend who is actually a member of another Friends Meeting, but is having a lengthy stay and participation in the life of that meeting. This status is granted so that the Friend may serve that meeting they are sojourning with as though they are a member of that meeting. This Sojourner status lifts for the Friend many restrictions normally placed on non-members.

Sojourning status is not needed by a Friend temporarily visiting Midlothian Friends Meeting for an extended period, since there are no set restrictions placed on non-members, whether they be a member of another Friends Meeting or an Attender. Therefore, Midlothian Friends Meeting does not use the practice for lengthy visits by Quakers who are members of other meetings.

However, Sojourning status may be needed by a member of Midlothian Friends Meeting who is temporarily visiting for a lengthy stay at another Friends meeting. A reason for the Sojourner request would be that the visited meeting places some restrictions on non-members of that meeting, and the Midlothian Friend wants to fully participate in the life of that meeting while visiting.

Should there be a need for Sojourner status, the Friend should make a request to the clerk of the Care and Counsel committee of Midlothian Friends Meeting. That clerk should write a letter to the clerk of the other Friends Meeting requesting Sojourner status for the Friend. Upon receiving confirmation of the Sojourner status, the clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee should then inform Midlothian's Meeting for Business of the Sojourn. Sojourns do not require approval from Meeting for Business. They are merely minuted so there is a record of the action. The clerk of Midlothian Meeting's Care and Counsel committee does not need to notify Midlothian Meeting's Recorder of the action.

#### **M. Celebrating a New Membership at Midlothian Friends Meeting**

As a final gesture to formally and explicitly recognize a new member's commitment to the Religious Society of Friends and the Midlothian Friends Meeting community, the Care and Counsel committee should arrange a celebration for the new member as soon as possible once Meeting for Business has approved and minuted the membership. This is usually done at an upcoming monthly potluck held at rise of meeting. The exact date should be coordinated with the new member and announced in advanced to the meeting community.

Transfers of membership to Midlothian Friends Meeting from another Friends meeting are celebrated in the same manner as new memberships.