

Meetings and (ex)offenders

Guidance on accepting into our Meetings people who may pose a risk

“How can we make the meeting a community in which each person is accepted and nurtured, and strangers welcome? Seek to know one another in the things which are eternal, bear the burden of each other’s failings and pray for one another. As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other’s lives, ready to give help and receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God’s love and forgiveness.”

Advices and queries 18



Introduction

We, as Quakers, are bad at addressing the dark side of life. In looking at *Quaker faith & practice* we could not find anything that was apposite. Our desire to live in the Light means that we must want to take that Light into dark places.

These guidelines are based on two major considerations:

1. The need to find a balance between our Quakerly desire to welcome everyone into our meetings and our responsibility to provide a safe place for everyone attending our meeting houses;
2. The need for meetings to be prepared for the challenges which welcoming everyone might pose, e.g. when aware of the attendance, or proposed attendance, of an ex-offender, or the possibility of offending behaviour by a member of the meeting.

These guidelines are based on experience; all meetings are different but we recommend that all meetings should give timely consideration as to how to provide a genuine welcome to everyone while ensuring a safe environment.

The word 'ex-offender' is used here to mean all those who have been convicted of an offence, but we also recognise that many people have committed offences for which they have not been convicted, and that many 'ex-offenders' do not pose a threat to a Quaker meeting. Some ex-offenders who have been released from prison recently or who are serving a community sentence and/or on probation may contact a meeting about their wish to attend a Quaker meeting. Some may self-disclose; others choose not to.

Quaker meetings have a responsibility to protect vulnerable groups from the risk that might be attached to the presence of certain offender groups in our meeting, either at meeting for worship or at other events. Sex offenders are known to pose a particularly high risk, and those with fraud or deception-based offences could be another group posing a risk to vulnerable members.

1. Awareness

Remember that faith groups are sometimes seen as a soft target, particularly if they are known to have weak safeguarding procedures. Having an active safeguarding policy is the first step to greater accountability and providing a safer environment.

Watchfulness need not be unfriendly; it includes understanding that some people may bring risks with them, and of what the outward signs might be. These might include requests for money, erratic behaviour, obvious inebriation or a tendency

to be found in the vicinity of the children's meeting. Cultivating a culture of watchfulness towards those whose life story and circumstances we do not know could remove a great deal of anxiety.

Be aware that there are many different offences and offenders.

Where someone is known to have committed an offence the nature of the offence should be taken into account in the response of the meeting; for example, someone who has offended sexually is likely to present different basic problems from someone who has committed theft, fraud or drink driving. Also, different issues of trust will arise for the meeting. In helping the ex-offender to be accepted and to fit into society we have a responsibility to distinguish the situations in which trust can be safely offered from others where it must be earned and have time to grow.

The desire of Quakers to provide an accepting environment can sometimes make us less willing to also provide boundaries.

In order to provide an environment which could help protect a possible or actual offender from temptation needs Quakers to accept that provision of boundaries is, or may be, in someone else's best interest.

It is also important to remember that forgiveness of an individual for a particular offence can only come from three sources – God, the victim and the offender themselves.

2. Communication

It is important for members of a meeting to get to know one another. Members who are well acquainted would find it easier to notice inappropriate behaviour and to be aware of the need to protect particularly vulnerable members. Any concerns over behaviour should be shared quickly according to your area meeting safeguarding policy. The Area Meeting Safeguarding Co-ordinator would be a good person to consult and/or inform.

The needs and sensitivities of children, vulnerable adults, survivors of sexual abuse, other vulnerable groups and the ex-offender should be taken into account. Advice can be sought from the police, probation officers, Quaker prison chaplains or local Social care services.

Quaker prison chaplains can only offer general advice on good practice on working with offenders. The terms of their service in a prison means that they may not offer advice on specific individuals.

If an ex-offender moves away from the meeting, be sure to notify the expected receiving meeting.

3. Preparation

Experience shows that preparation can help to pre-empt difficulties which may arise. Having a section in your safeguarding policy would be a statement of intent and may give the impetus to pursue good practice.

Meetings may wish to consider appointing a Receiving Group. Meetings and Churches have found this to be helpful, even where there is no known offender currently attending the meeting. This group could consist of the local meeting clerk, an overseer, someone with responsibility for children and one or two experienced Friends. It could be helpful to include Friends with some relevant experience, e.g. all aspects of the criminal justice system. The Receiving Group can familiarise itself with the area meeting safeguarding policy, good practice and available materials.

Were an ex-offender wishing to identify him/herself how would they know with whom to speak?

The existence of a Receiving Group can provide the meeting as a whole with assurance that reasonable measures are being taken to protect the whole meeting. The Receiving Group can act as a contact point for probation officers, social workers, community chaplains, or Quaker prison chaplains who may be aware (or need to be informed) that an ex-offender wishes to attend the meeting.

4. Guidance in the event of a known offender or suspected abuser wishing to attend your meeting

Under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 many old convictions and cautions are deemed 'spent' after a period of time, which varies according to the offence. However, for the purpose of working with children or vulnerable adults no offence is considered 'spent'.

This should serve to bring to your attention any known offenders wishing to volunteer with your children's meeting as they would be expected to declare their previous offences on the confidential self-declaration in your application procedure for volunteering. There has been a move to remove certain offences from the Disclosure and Barring Service checks. Advice can be obtained from the CCPAS (0845 120 4550 or www.ccpas.co.uk) and other agencies on what conviction information the meeting (as the employer) can require an applicant to share/divulge.

Convicted offenders against children

Research has indicated that a higher proportion of convicted offenders against children may be found in church congregations, and that includes Quaker meetings, than of the population generally. Some will have committed sexual offences, some will have been guilty of neglect, physical or emotional abuse. Our desire, as highlighted in *Advices and queries* 18, is to make our meetings welcoming to all to experience God's love and forgiveness. How can we balance this desire with the need to create and nurture a safe space?

Research also shows that people who are sexually attracted to children are more prone to re-offend and so specific measures are needed, with a more structured approach to managing risk.

Where a meeting has a Receiving Group it is desirable that they should meet the ex-offender before he or she has any other direct contact with the meeting, discuss their wish to attend meeting and any conditions, appropriate to the risk, which should be observed. The matter of confidentiality should be considered, with the possible adoption of a need-to-know policy. This is a 'best of all possible worlds' situation and it is more likely that the offender will have been attending meeting for a while before he/she identifies themselves.

In all circumstances where a meeting knows that there is someone who has a conviction, or who has been investigated for possible abusive behaviour against a child or a vulnerable adult, the meeting has a duty of care to its members and attenders to provide as safe a space as possible. In these situations Britain Yearly Meeting recommends that the local meeting draws up an agreement with the individual and a small group representing the area meeting, which would be binding. The Receiving Group, if there is one, would be best placed to do this. These agreements should be reviewed regularly, initially three times per month, and then less frequently when both parties are confident that the contents of the agreement are being adhered to.

Areas to be covered in the agreement will include:

- Which meetings for worship can be attended by the offender?
- Which areas of the meeting house he/she can frequent?
- Who will know about the offender and the existence of the agreement?
- To never be alone with children/vulnerable adults
- To not accept hospitality where there are children
- That the meeting will offer pastoral support with a named individual(s).

The offender should agree not to accept any role in which he/she would have access to or responsibility for children or vulnerable adults.

He/she would also agree to regular reviews. It may be that the best way to encourage compliance with the agreement would be to ask the offender to make the suggestions as to the most appropriate subject areas and how best to address them. It is important that the meeting makes contributions to the agreement and the offender's spiritual well-being so that it is not just a one way document.

This is an issue which needs to be considered by all local meetings, although some meetings, particularly those small in size may feel that they need to work as a group, or perhaps appoint a Receiving Group at area meeting level.

In some cases it may be judged that the meeting as a whole cannot cope with a particular person because of the nature of their offences. It may be that another nearby meeting is better able to cope, or that an alternative can be found, such as arranging special meetings for worship which the person can attend.

5. What to do if you suspect abuse and/or an offence

Where there is evidence or suspicion that an offence may have been committed, even by a well-known and, perhaps, loved member of a meeting, Friends need to have the courage to report the matter to the police. If this later becomes public knowledge, it may be necessary to explain to the Friend concerned and others, that it is our meeting's policy to report this sort of behaviour .

Meetings should have a procedure in their safeguarding policy, which should be followed. Seek advice from your Area Safeguarding Co-ordinator or the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service

6. Advice

Do seek help.

Reading material can be helpful but advice is available from the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (0845 120 4550 or www.ccpas.co.uk), local probation offices and Quaker Life. In matters concerning the effect on a meeting contact the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life (020 7663 1023), concerning the media contact the Media Relations Officer in Quaker Communications (020 7663 1048).

Some problems may go far beyond Friends' ability to solve them, e.g. where specialist advice and action are needed as in issues of a criminal nature relating to violence, drug abuse or sexual offending. Being aware of one's strengths and

limitations is a good guide to keeping our meetings safe. It is better to seek advice for reassurance rather than act with insufficient knowledge

If a meeting fully implements safeguarding advice, and is sensible about money and other valuables, it is likely be protected from those offenders who have not been notified to the meeting, including those not yet charged with any offence.

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