



Yearly Meeting of the  
Religious Society of  
Friends in Britain

## **YM Elders**

### **Briefing Information**

#### **Role of Yearly Meeting Elders**

Yearly Meeting Elders have laid upon them the particular concern for the right conduct of Britain Yearly Meeting in session, and other meetings for worship that are held as part of the event of Yearly Meeting, such as early morning worship.

In this context, Yearly Meeting includes both over- 19 and under-19 sessions, in the latter case working with members of Children and Young People's Programme and Junior Yearly Meeting's planning group and elders.

Yearly Meeting Elders support the Yearly Meeting clerks in ensuring that sessions are properly held as meetings for worship for church affairs, and that Friends keep the accepted discipline of the Quaker business method. Yearly Meeting Elders should offer such advice and counsel as may be useful to Arrangements Committee and the clerks.

Yearly Meeting Elders should offer such advice and counsel to Friends individually and corporately as is necessary, as will be of assistance to the right conduct of the Yearly Meeting sessions, and as will enable Friends to participate fully in the Yearly Meeting in session.

#### **History of Yearly Meeting Elders**

At Aberystwyth in 1997, Yearly Meeting agreed to experiment with appointing elders to serve for the time that Yearly Meeting was in session. Agenda Committee reviewed the response to this experiment and felt it right to continue. Yearly Meeting Elders have now become one of the customary, although not established, appointments made by Yearly Meeting on the nomination of Central Nominations Committee.

Initially, Yearly Meeting Elders were appointed within a Yearly Meeting to serve until the rise of that Yearly Meeting. It was expected that Friends would not generally serve more than once in this role, or at least not without a gap of many years. Since 2006, it has become customary to appoint Friends to serve for two years, with the terms of service staggered so that half of the elders complete their service each year. This was done partly to ensure a longer corporate memory amongst the elders, and partly to ensure that during the planning process for Yearly Meeting that there were elders available to be consulted.

# **Procedures**

## **Appointment and term of service**

Each year, four or five Friends are appointed by Yearly Meeting on the nomination of Central Nominations Committee, to serve as elders for a term of two years, with one of their number being appointed to be the convener of elders in the following year. It is generally the case that Friends do not serve again as Yearly Meeting Elders, after their term of service, for some considerable number of years.

Nominations Committee seeks the names of those who would be attending Yearly Meeting in any event, and we hope Friends accepting nomination will see this as a service. Hence expenses to attend Yearly Meeting are not paid for this service, although local meetings may be able to give bursary assistance if required. The Friends sought are those able to care for the meeting for worship for church affairs that is Yearly Meeting, to recognise when the conduct of the meeting is in right ordering and when the Yearly Meeting is in need of assistance.

## **Duties and customary practices**

### **Before Yearly Meeting**

The currently appointed and nominated elders usually meet prior to the first session of Yearly Meeting to plan their time during Yearly Meeting, including rotas to cover the particular responsibilities. The convener will liaise with Arrangements Committee and/or the Yearly Meeting clerks in the run up to Yearly Meeting as required, and may consult with the other elders (and elders nominate) as necessary. It may prove expedient for the convener or other elders to meet with Arrangements Committee in the period before Yearly Meeting.

### **During Yearly Meeting**

Elders should establish a rota for two of their number to support each Yearly Meeting session, usually sitting in specially reserved seats in a prominent place, easily seen by the meeting and the clerks, and convenient to pass messages via the Assistant Recording Clerk to the table.

By custom, the same two elders meet briefly (normally 15–20 minutes) in worship with the clerks immediately prior to each session as they prepare for the session. Elders doing so should be aware that this pre-session worship often follows on directly from Arrangements Committee, and they may need to wait for the clerks to be ready. It can be helpful to ask the clerks whether there are any matters that they are concerned about in relation to the conduct of the coming session. Likewise, during shuffle breaks or at the rise of the session, it can be helpful to offer support to the clerks, while being mindful of the clerks' need to focus on the business at hand.

It has been the custom for Yearly Meeting Elders to have primary care of the meeting during the period of opening worship at the start of sessions, although the practical control is in the hands of the microphone stewards who work independently to bring microphones to Friends rising to minister. On some recent occasions where

the spoken ministry has been over-frequent both duty elders and clerks have risen to hold the silence. It is best if the elders and clerks have a shared sense of how this is likely to operate before it is required.

At the rise of the session, the same two elders should make themselves available to talk to individual Friends who may be in need of support as a result of ministry offered (or not) during the session, or who may have questions or concerns about the conduct of the session. Elders should work with those Friends with pastoral care responsibilities as necessary.

Elders who are not the 'duty elders' nevertheless retain the responsibility for the prayerful support of the right ordering of the meeting and may feel it appropriate, ideally after consultation with other elders, to speak with individual Friends concerning their conduct or that of the session at the rise of the session or during shuffle breaks.

Yearly Meeting Elders normally have a comments box on the information desk and should ensure that this is emptied and any comments are read on a regular basis.

Elders should meet together during the course of the Yearly Meeting. Generally it has been found that meeting daily is sufficient. A room is normally set aside for this purpose. At their meeting, elders should consider the conduct of the sessions, share and review comments made to them as elders (whether in writing or in conversation) and decide what, if any, action is required. If necessary, elders should raise with the Arrangements Committee or the clerks matters of concern about the deliberations and working of the Yearly Meeting, and consider with them whether particular action is required either by the clerks or by the elders. The convener of elders (or other elder) may attend Arrangements Committee; some have done this and found it helpful.

Very exceptionally, an elder may feel led to minister in a session about matters arising out of that session, and the clerk may recognise them as an elder, giving them priority. An elder speaking from the reserved seats as a Yearly Meeting Elder should rise holding a copy of *Quaker faith & practice* so that the clerks may know that they wish to minister as an elder. The Friend speaking should make it clear that they are speaking as a Yearly Meeting Elder. The duty elders need to be particularly attentive to the needs of the meeting, so that they can indicate support and uphold the clerk in an appropriate manner if this appears necessary.

Yearly Meeting Elders usually arrange for one or two of their number to attend early morning meeting for worship, both to serve as elders and to be aware of any ministry that might also affect Yearly Meeting sessions. Yearly Meeting elders have sometimes been asked to provide an epilogue for Yearly Meeting, but in general have not played a particular role in the conduct of epilogues. Likewise, Yearly Meeting Elders have sometimes been asked to provide support for a worship space during breaks, but this can be difficult to arrange around other commitments and has not been the general practice.

### **After Yearly Meeting**

At their final meeting during Yearly Meeting, Elders should consider what items they wish to bring to the attention of Manner of Holding Group in their report. By custom, this report has included a brief overview of the manner of working of the Yearly

Meeting Elders that year, a review of the conduct of the sessions and of any actions taken by elders during the Yearly Meeting. The report may also contain suggestions and recommendations on the conduct of Yearly Meeting and any ways in which this might be improved. Elders have a particular responsibility to draw to Manner of Holding Group's attention any matters where the structure or process of sessions was unhelpful to the right ordering of Yearly Meeting.

### **Guidance to Friends serving as elders**

This section is intended as reflection on the practice of being an elder to Britain Yearly Meeting, rather than as a straight description of the role.

Even when not the duty elder, it is important to pay close attention to how the session is going and to try to be aware of the depth and quality (or lack thereof) of the worship in the meeting. Eldering a meeting for worship for business is mostly an exercise in the quiet, prayerful upholding of those present in the body of the meeting (as well as those at the table). In practical terms, paying close attention to the directions of the clerks, centring into worship promptly after shuffle breaks and remaining centred at times when Friends often find it difficult to do so – such as during the drafting of long and complex minutes or between the reading of notices and the adjournment of sessions – is of great help.

Maintaining the concern for the conduct of the session can give a certain detachment from the specific decisions before the yearly meeting. Elders may be less likely, as a consequence, to feel called to minister, and should in all cases pay careful attention to the discipline of the meeting, recognising that many will identify them as elders even when they are not speaking directly in that capacity. In particular, the duty elders should exercise great caution, as it is almost impossible to minister without carrying the considerable additional 'weight' of being the visible duty elder. If the duty elders do feel it necessary to offer ministry as elders to the meeting, they should endeavour wherever possible to alert the clerks to their intentions beforehand.

From time to time, elders may feel that the yearly meeting would benefit from some teaching ministry to remind Friends of aspects of our discipline – particularly relating to the conduct of large meetings. With the close focus on the right conduct of the meeting, it is easy for elders to become hypersensitive to relatively minor lapses in good order. Elders should consider carefully whether the teaching ministry will in itself be more damaging to the meeting, being perceived by Friends generally as a rebuke or heavy handed. Elders should also bear in mind that overuse of teaching ministry reduces its effectiveness, both within a single yearly meeting and across many. On the other hand, a well-pitched piece of ministry, delivered with humility and humour either through the clerks or directly, can be of great help in maintaining order and thus encouraging a clear and correct discernment of the matters before the meeting.

On occasion, individual Friends can act or minister in ways that are not in right ordering or are upsetting to many others present. In extreme cases, it is necessary to intervene – although in recent years this has generally been by the clerk asking the Friend to conclude their contribution. While elders have the authority to intervene during the opening worship in session, this has only ever been done once and has generally not been found necessary. Again, elders should bear in mind that they are likely to be more sensitive to the conduct of the meeting than most present.

Many of the responsibilities of elders listed in Quaker Faith & Practice 12.12 also apply to Yearly Meeting Elders (see items a to e, g to i) although some of these duties are also within the remit of other groups and committees at Yearly Meeting.

**Contacts for further information and to discuss nomination:**

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