

Family Friendly Meetings: At the Intersection of Religious Education and Outreach

Originally published in *Spark*, NYYM's newsletter, March 2016

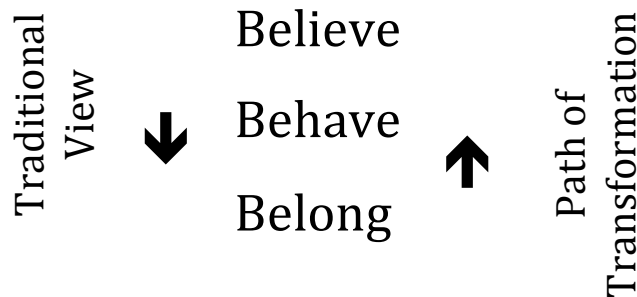
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My Quaker Outreach Mantra is “Meet newcomers where they are, but don’t leave them where you found them.” It’s easy to reduce outreach to an attractive website, an eye-catching sign, or a thoughtfully gathered and displayed set of pamphlets. But if we want to attain what I consider the Gold Standard of Quaker Outreach—having newcomers experience their own encounter with the divine—we’ll need to add Quaker Religious Education to the picture!

I’m inspired by a reimagined model for faith formation by Diana Butler Bass. Let’s use it to explore where the particular needs of families fit in the whole arc of outreach work.¹

Bass’ model illustrates the traditional understanding of how belief forms read in the downward direction. First, we embrace a set of beliefs, then, our actions change to match those beliefs, and finally, we join the meeting or church.



Bass flips the model on its head and instructs us to look first to belonging as the start of the process. First, we find a meeting community in which we feel comfortable and accepted, where we **belong**. Then, we change the way we **behave** to more and more closely match that of the Friends around us. We begin to live more and more fully the Quaker Way. And, finally, we discover that we have embraced Quakerism, that our Quaker meeting “is our path to God,” as Lloyd Lee Wilson says. Now, we **believe**, and it is time to write our letter requesting membership. Bass calls reading of the model in the upward direction “the path of transformation.”

She underscores the key role of relationships in this process, reminding us that spiritual formation is like knitting. “If you want to knit, you find someone who knits to teach you.”

Let's briefly explore each step in the model, lifting up questions to ask ourselves and our meetings or Friends churches. Then, I'll offer a few observations drawn from my Outreach work in New England Yearly Meeting.

Belonging:

How do we help families feel they belong?

How do we help them quickly assess the "fit" between their journeys and what the meeting has to offer?

Remember, not everyone is on a Quaker journey! Helping newcomers discern and decide quickly benefits both of you. If this isn't the path for them, bless them on their way.

Behaving:

How do we help new families live out the Quaker way through opportunities for witness, service, living simply, peaceful parenting, etc?

Do we have times and spaces to check in about how it is going?

Living in a Quakerly way is good as far as it goes. But, it is important that we do not stop there. We have to intentionally reach beyond an external code of conduct to something deeper and living. While it's true that what we do can change who we are, leaving spiritual formation unnamed and unsupported hinders or even truncates the process of opening ourselves to the divine. We need to continually remind newcomers, and ourselves, "When you're ready, there's more." as Marty Grundy is fond of saying. The final step helps us deliver on that promise.

Believing:

How do we help parents and children get traction on their own Quaker journeys?

Are we giving evidence of the power at the heart of Quakerism that guides, comforts, and even corrects, challenges, or rebukes as it draws us into New Life?

Are there Friends ready and able to swim in this deep, living water with parents who may request companionship on that journey?

Diana Butler Bass hopes our Quaker meetings will become Guilds for Spiritual Practice. Imagine how our local meetings might be different if they were Guilds for Spiritual Practice! We'd have a clarity and ready acknowledgment of our purpose as the Religious Society of Friends. We'd have a shared language to communicate our experiences. We'd have well-established paths toward proficiency. We'd have active encouragement to advance on the Quaker spiritual path. We'd celebrate milestones on the spiritual journeys of Friends in our meetings. And, lastly, we'd value and esteem the more proficient among us—their lives serving as inspiration.

Finally, I'd like to offer three observations drawn from my work in NEYM.

1. Create opportunities to increase a sense of belonging. Church growth literature tells us that the number one motivation for folks going to church on any

given Sunday is the expectation of seeing a friend. Before a newcomer sees the Light, they may need to feel the warmth of our community. Here are three ideas to consider:

Parents' Night Out—social potlucks for parents with young children, with childcare at the meetinghouse and parents at a nearby home. Here is a chance to build those connections while they bask in finished sentences and adult company!

Quaker Parent Conversations around themes like “Weaving the Testimonies into our Parenting”. At Wellesley Meeting, we hosted these early on Saturday evenings. We provided dinner and supervised play for children.

Have children report to meeting for business in worship on anything they did as a Quaker, e.g. going to Friends Camp, special service projects, a school report on a Quaker subject or historical figure, etc. This idea was offered to the Quaker RE Collaborative (QREC) by Karen Greenler reflecting on her experience in an Iowa Conservative Meeting. This simple practice is deeply affirming for children and parents alike.

Make sure events are accessible. Offer quality childcare and plan events at days and times families can attend. Be sensitive about costs. Don't price young families out of special events or set up systems around asking for assistance that leave them feeling embarrassed or diminished.

2. Don't be afraid to set the bar a little higher for potential involvement, growth, and engagement in the world, in and through the Meeting. This is often compelling and captivating for newcomers. People find time for something that matters and feeds their soul. Setting expectations too low leaves newcomers with the sense that they won't be missed when they don't attend and that the involvement with meeting isn't worthwhile. Just to be clear, do invite newcomers into active engagement and participation in study classes, celebrations, and one-time events. Do not start by nominating a newcomer to committee service! Give them a chance to find what has Life for them.

3. Watch the Social Glue in your Meeting. Social Glue is my informal term for the amount of warmth and cohesion in the circle of Friends. Too little or too much can be a problem. If there isn't enough, a family won't stick. Some signs that you need to warm up your Social Glue include: no one lingers after meeting to chat, Friends don't know what is going on in each other's lives, Friends don't get together outside of meeting for worship. If there is too much Social Glue, a new family can't break into the social circle. The telltale indicators of too much Social Glue are just the opposite of too little warmth and cohesion. Friends linger after meeting but have so much to say to each other that no one speaks to a newcomer. Or, Friends have so many additional social connections outside the meeting that they unknowingly form a closed clique.

If you have too little Social Glue—warm up your meeting socially! Have more events to get to know each other. Parties are actually very important. Festive events have low social thresholds and let folks get to know each other without pressure to speak

of faith and be put on the spot. This builds trust, which is one key foundation of our worshipping community. When I served as RE Coordinator for Wellesley Meeting, I always used to write a personal, hand-written note on Monday to a new family. I'd tell why the meeting has been crucial in my life and that of my family, and then, invite them to the next party. We had about one occasion a month.

If you have too much Social Glue—a newcomer will always stay an “outsider.” To relax too much Social Glue, try to loosen the edges of your group. Invite other Friends to worship with you to reacquaint the meeting with the experience of having folks beyond their immediate circle gathering with them. Work with Interfaith groups. Don't be too *peculiar*—“we're a peculiar people”—but don't bask in it to the point that others are put off. One new family at NEYM Sessions last year asked for a study card decoding all of the Quaker acronyms. Business meeting seemed unintelligible to them! Sharing a language is a crucial part of belonging—we need to define terms like clearness, sense of the meeting, leading, and the whole alphabet soup of acronyms that Friends love.

We began by linking outreach and religious education. One final caution: ninety-five percent of Quaker religious education actually happens in the home. Rather than making those times when a family is attending Quaker meeting less important, this fact actually makes those moments more critical. We need to be ready to help children and parents to take up spiritual practices at home, to talk about what they are experiencing together, and to creatively use everyday moments like driving to a sports practice to make space for deeper reflections. A first round of such materials can be found at: <http://www.neym.org/qye/faith-home>. Each Sunday, we need to welcome families back and be the warm prayerful circle of Friends in which they can rest, find renewal and encouragement, and listen for God together.

1. Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2012.

Welcoming and Engaging Families into Quaker Meeting – Liz Yeats

It is my experience that most families coming to meeting for the first time are trying it out, having chosen Quakers as a neutral choice in their search for a spiritual home. Often the parents come from two different religious traditions, or no tradition at all. They are seeking a place to be together with a community that will educate their children, give them a community of support in all life's challenges and call forth and embrace their gifts of service. They come because they have a sense that something is missing in their busy lives – a place to grow and be together in the Spirit.

Melinda Wenner Bradley puts it this way: “When a family with children walks in the meeting, there are three sets of needs we need to be prepared to support: the spiritual formation of the *children*, the spiritual journey of the *parents* as individual seekers drawn to Quakerism, and the *family unit* as they seek to find a spiritual community for their family to grow in and contribute to the larger life.” Beth Collea has written about this issue in a recent *Spark*, “Family Friendly Meetings” which has many suggestions.

What can we offer these seekers? What tools can our meetings use, whether large or small, urban or rural, to welcome and engage families of all sizes? Beth Collea has written about this issue in a recent *Spark*, “Family Friendly Meetings” which has many suggestions. Below are more ideas for outreach and engagement for families. These ideas are drawn from the experience of Friends in many meetings, shared in articles and Conversation Circles with Friends across the country sponsored by Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC). They are shared here to spark more experiments with welcoming and engaging families in our meetings and in hope that wide and inclusive sharing will continue.

Initial Welcome

Most meetings offer some initial guidance for newcomers of all ages through their websites, written material at the door, and a greeter who has information about what takes place in meeting for worship including the opportunities for children. Parents may be particularly concerned about appropriate behavior of children during worship. Most Friends recognize that children are likely to disrupt their parent's worship well before that of others. A statement to that effect may be helpful.

One Friend from an NEYM meeting says it this way: *Recognizing the tensions that exist for parents with children's behavior, etc. and dealing with those concerns has been very important, particularly in a meeting where have not been children in some time. [There is a] need to reassure parents and let them know what's OK.*

Here is what it says on the Austin Friends website: *Friends Meeting of Austin joyfully welcomes children. We seek to nurture and support the meeting's young people and their families in their spiritual journeys. Children are welcome to participate in meeting for worship and can remain in meeting as long as they and their parents are comfortable. First Day School is open to the children of all members, attenders and visitors for children... Regular attendance is encouraged, but one-time or irregular attenders are also welcome.*

To welcome families many meetings have quiet children's toys, blankets, pillows, and appropriate books in the worship space. Also helpful are statements about the approach to teaching in FDS.

In many meetings clear statements on child safety are available to address these parent concerns in any new setting. There are several meetings willing to share their statements and policies including Friends Meeting of Austin here: <http://www.austinquakers.org/public/index.php?pg=kids&tab=safety>.

All Age RE (AARE)

Wellesley Friends experimented with and have been using AARE for several years now. (See “All Ages Religious Education (AARE)”) In 2013 Friends in Austin learned about Wellesley's AARE experiment and have embraced and morphed it into their way to help families come into Quaker faith and practice together. Most of the parents are as new to Quakerism as their children and learning with their children has proven an excellent way for all to grow in Spirit. (See “Growing the in the Spirit Together in All Age RE”)

Friends in Moorestown Meeting, PHYM, for some time coordinated FDS lessons with a lesson on the same theme taught to adults and children separately. Then, adults and children all came back together to share.

Family Worship

Beginning in the 1980's, Friends Meeting of Cambridge established monthly all age Family Worship as follows: *Family Worship ... is an intergenerational Meeting For Worship and all are invited to attend. The program is interactive, and usually includes singing, a story or other presentation, and an activity based on a chosen theme for that Meeting. The program ends with a period of waiting worship... Parents participate in Family Worship with their children, along with unrelated interested adults. Children of all ages are welcomed to attend, and Nursery care is available for infants and toddlers during any or all of that time.*

Other meetings have adopted this practice, sometimes altering it to their needs. Some programmed meetings have a children's meeting as part of the service.

Parents Night Out and Other Community Events

As Friends Meeting of Austin adults from the FDS Committee cooked dinner and had activities for children while parents had a night out. Some parents did Christmas shopping, others had a rare dinner for two. All came back early (uninvited as the children were really having a good time) and informally talked with one another about parenting issues.

At Wellesley Meeting Parents Night Out was offered to families whose youngest child was 6 years old or younger. Childcare/games and supper were offered at the meetinghouse for all of the children, even if older than 6, and the parents had a potluck in a nearby home. Parents relaxed, laughed together and finished sentences!

Saturday nights seem to one of the best times for family friendly meeting events. Friends in various meetings have Game Nights with pot-lucks or just dessert pot-lucks. One meeting has a regular movie night in which a movie is chosen for its Quaker related content and appropriate nature for all ages.

Parenting Discussions

At Wellesley Meeting Parent Conversations sessions brought parents and to the meetinghouse for fellowship dinner (we cooked for everyone) and then fun and games for the children while the parents settled in to consider topics like "Weaving the Testimonies into Our Parenting."

Friends in Live Oak Meeting, Houston (SCYM) have had monthly Saturday evening potlucks where the kids played and the parents would talk about a Quaker parenting topic or just catch up with each other.

Friends involved with the Quaker Parenting Initiative (www.quakerparenting.org) point out that religious education in the meeting happens mostly on 1st Day morning, but 95% of religious education happens in the home.

Moorestown Friends (PHYM) hosted Quaker Parenting Conversations and invited area meetings.

Ongoing Communication and Engagement with Families

At several meetings a weekly email goes out to families announcing what's happening in FDS that weekend, what the lesson will be about, who is teaching and any special events that are coming up. Some meetings follow up a visit by a new family with a hand-written note thanking them for coming and sharing some of their experience with why the meeting would be a great place for the family.

Recognizing Gifts

One meeting encourages children to come to business meeting and share their achievements and minutes such.

Parents are some of the busiest people in our meetings. However, engaging newcomers in meeting tasks can really help them integrate into the community. Asking a newcomer, even a busy parent, to do a small task after a few months gives them a way to contribute and feel they are valuable to the community. Austin Friends do cleaning tasks before eating meeting once a month. Families are encouraged to participate, sometimes children working with their parents, sometimes with other Friends. Bringing the gifts of parents to the attention of the Nominating Committee follows later.

Tips for Welcoming Children and Families to our Local Quaker Meetings

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General Tips for Welcoming:

1. There is a spiritual and a social component to welcome.

Make sure you are aware of both pieces and see to the visitor's comfort, socially and spiritually.

2. Check your space for safety and cleanliness.

It's natural for Quakers to prioritize the spiritual dimension of life, but don't forget about the repair and maintenance. Look at your walkway, entryway, meeting space, restrooms, and classrooms with the eyes of a newcomer.

3. Have a guest book and nametags available.

Wear nametags every week so that you are always ready for visitors.

Tips Especially for Families:

4. You may not see the whole family at first!

Often a parent attends first by him or herself to check out the situation. Have *Children Are Welcome Here* and other materials on ways you value and make a place for children in your meeting community visible and readily available. It will give them something to take home and peruse later.

5. Be ready to offer an explanation of meeting for worship.

Visitors unfamiliar with Quakerism will be helped by information on what they are about to experience, especially if it is unprogrammed worship. Guidance around what to expect in worship will set the stage for a positive experience.

6. Have a plan in place for when a family arrives.

For meetings or worship groups without a First Day School, use *Children are Welcome Here* to engage children and help them experience centering while adults are worshipping in the same room. Use bookboard or another stiff surface to give children a way to hold the paper while they draw. Have crayons or colored pencils handy. You might want to corral the crayons/pencils in an unbreakable mug or container. Markers are not as good a choice. The caps make noise and some markers give off an unpleasant odor. You might want to buy some large crayons for younger hands. A basket of soft, quiet toys for toddlers is a must-have in your welcoming strategy.

For meetings with a First Day School, *Children Are Welcome Here* makes a nice take home item to convey a little more information on the Quaker Way. You can offer it to a prospective family who has expressed interest in your meeting but has not attended yet. Have extra copies on hand for outreach tables at fairs, local history celebrations, peace events, and so on.

7. After worship, show genuine interest in visitors.

Ask questions about their experience of worship and if it was different from what they expected. It is always important to assess and follow their comfort level in these discussions. Avoid questions that might be misconstrued as trying to gauge their income or education level. Absolutely, do not invite them to serve on a committee!

8. After the visit, jot down a few notes about your visitors.

Pay special attention to indications of where they are on their spiritual journey or any leadings or concerns that are alive for them right now. This can then be shared with your Outreach or Community Life Committee.

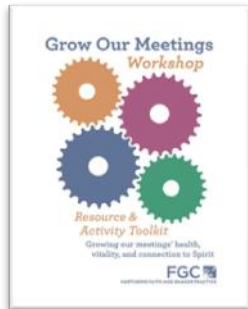
9. Write a note of welcome.

On Monday, or as soon as you can, send a handwritten note of welcome to the family. Answer any questions that they raised, if at all possible, and tell them a little bit about how your meeting has played an important role in your life. Invite them to any upcoming celebrations or special events.



FGC Outreach and Newcomer Resources

Grow Our Meetings



Grow Our Meetings is available as an on-line, step-by-step resources or as a downloadable PDF. Use the toolkit to explore all of the ways that a meeting can grow -- through inreach, outreach, and welcoming and integrating newcomers into the life of the meeting. The Grow Our Meetings Toolkit is an outgrowth of, and expansion upon, the learnings from QuakerQuest in Great Britain, the U.S., and Canada. The online program is at <http://www.fgcquaker.org/grow-our-meetings-toolkit> The PDF download is at <https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/grow-our-meetings-resource-and-activity-toolkit>

Newcomers Cards



Newcomers Cards are a series of FREE cards covering things such as “You Are Welcome Here,” “What Do Quakers Believe,” “Quaker Worship” and more, available for printing by meetings. QuakerBooks.org also carries printed copies of the Newcomers Cards for purchase. Get them at <http://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/newcomers-cards>

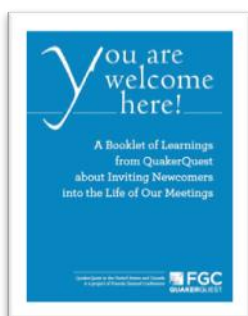
Quaker Activity Pages for Children



These three sets of coloring pages, word search puzzles, criss-cross puzzles and mazes, are available for FREE download. The activity pages were inspired by the Newcomers Cards: Quaker Testimonies, Quakers and Prayer, and You Are Welcome Here. They are useful for First Day/Sunday School lessons, families and to give to visiting children at meetings without First Day/Sunday Schools. Download them here:

<http://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/quaker-childrens-activities-pages>

You Are Welcome Here



This booklet (prepared by the FGC QuakerQuest staff, working group members, and Travel Team members in 2014) includes QuakerQuest learnings for your and your meeting’s use. These are of value whether or not you have participated in previous QuakerQuest activities. Consider sharing these during committee meetings, using them in small group settings, and including them in your newsletter. Using one at a time will probably give the best opportunity for learning, sharing, changing — and having fun! <http://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/you-are-welcome-here-booklet-learnings-quakerquest>