

Introduction
Given Preliminary Approval
New England Yearly Meeting, August 6, 2024

1) This book is an account of how the faith of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is experienced and practiced in New England Yearly Meeting today. It is intended both for those who are new to Quakerism and for those who are long-time Friends.

2) For generations, Quakers have written and revised books to articulate fresh understandings of our faith and the practices that support and express that faith. This revision is also a response to requests from within New England Yearly Meeting for a more comprehensive description of the structure and spiritual underpinning of Friends' practices.

3) Books of Faith & Practice provide guidance and counsel to Friends about a Spirit-centered personal life, and to meetings as they worship, conduct business, learn together, and share fellowship and mutual support. They encourage reflection through queries, advices, and extracts from the writings of both contemporary and historical Friends; many Quakers use them for devotional reading. We invite you to engage with this book on your own and with other Friends.

I. The Quaker Path

4) New England Friends trust a loving, dynamic spiritual presence which is available to everyone. It is both within us and beyond us – a presence in which “we live and move and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*) We have no set creed. Descriptions of our spiritual experience are diverse, yet we find a unity that binds us together. However named, the Spirit is experienced as full of grace, eternal, not belonging to the self but at the self's center. We can remind ourselves of this when we doubt, or when God seems absent. It is a spiritual presence which is our guide in life, one that cannot be extinguished. Nothing else speaks to us with the same power.

5) Our faith is nurtured by the simple outward practice of gathering in worship and waiting for movement of the Spirit among us. In the silence of waiting worship, we may come to know a profound connection with each other and with God. This sense of communion is nothing we can schedule or willfully bring about. We may become aware of a quiet, steady presence of the Inward Light in our own lives, or come to a point of feeling broken open—filled with new understanding. Any of these experiences has the power to transform our hearts and minds, redirecting our lives and bringing us into

harmony with the Spirit. Friends claim that any aspect of life is potentially sacramental - a visible sign of invisible grace. When we recognize Quaker faith and practice as our own path, we say we have become convinced.

6) Quakerism invites much freedom for personal inquiry, reflecting the experience of God's availability to teach, comfort, and minister to each person directly as well as to the community as a whole. This means living as seekers, always ready for new openings as God's truth continues to unfold. We encourage others to join us and rejoice when they, too, can affirm, *This I know from my own experience*.

7) Our religious life encompasses both individual faith and corporate discernment. We are supported by historical witness as well as Scripture and other inspirational writings, but our direct experience of the Divine -- tested in community -- is our ultimate authority. The same Spirit that inspired the written words of Scripture continues to reveal itself. Scripture provides an important window into the workings of the Spirit but is not an authority in itself.

II. The Corporate Experience of Friends

A. In worship.

8) Our practice of expectant waiting worship is one of the ways we stand apart from most Christian worshiping communities. We wait together, trusting the Spirit that has led others throughout history to guide us now. Worship may contain messages prompted by the Spirit, or the entire time may pass without vocal ministry. The shared silence may be as powerful as any words.

9) In New England Yearly Meeting some find the encouragement and guidance of a pastor is helpful for their own and their spiritual meeting's life. Worship in a programmed meeting includes a prepared message and usually music, spoken prayer, and readings, as well as a period of waiting worship. Whether programmed or unprogrammed, our time in worship invites us into an openness to the Spirit and an experience of communion with each other and with God.

10) Friends are not unique in our faith in the possibility of direct communication with God—all the great mystical traditions share this. Our more unusual understanding is that this capacity in every human being is best nurtured, tested, and seasoned in group worship. Friends' communal worship can be tender, requiring great trust among the worshippers. This experience may be of great comfort, or may challenge us with difficult and uncomfortable truths. At its best, our worship allows the Spirit to enter our hearts and transform our lives.

B. In meeting for business.

11) Corporate discernment is Friends' essential and unique practice for reaching decisions. We do not base our business practice upon majority rule; we recognize that the majority is not necessarily correct. Instead, as we humbly seek to discern divine will, we find that by listening together in the spirit of worship we can see beyond our different understandings and be open to Truth. We trust that attentiveness to the Presence in our midst and willingness to **come into unity** under the Spirit's guidance **can lead us to right action.**

12) We understand Truth cannot be held without love - in attempting to hold just one we lose both. We learn not to be dismissive of the views of those with whom we disagree, but to take the time to listen and wait together for clarity. It is not our aim to get things done quickly. Our meetings for business are to discern God's will. The process can be long, but in patiently seeking the Spirit's guidance we also build up the community of faith. As we find a way forward together, we know a sense of joy and love in living in right order.

III. Our Life is Our Testimony

13) Friends trust in continuing revelation—the awareness that Truth is continually unfolding to us. Our experience of the Presence, both individually and corporately, has led us to what are sometimes considered traditional Friends' testimonies, such as integrity, peace, simplicity, equality, community, stewardship, and justice. These are qualities of spirit and ways of life toward which we find ourselves moved at different times by the influence of the Divine. Some Friends use a list of testimonies as queries to remind themselves of the call to put their faith into action. Responding to the promptings of the Spirit in our everyday actions is how we live faithful lives.

14) An individual's—or a community's—perception of the Light can grow, necessitating changes in order to live into the new insights we have been given. While we may deeply regret our past missteps and those of our religious society, we rejoice in the openings of new light and the reassurance that more will be given. Each generation faces its own challenges; no one can foresee what testimonies to Truth will arise in the future. We are aware of how easily we can be distracted by the individualism, materialism, and busyness of the culture in which we live. Yet, when we are able to live by the Spirit's guidance we find peace. We are grateful for the ways our spiritual community and our worship can move us toward living out the Quaker message together. The ultimate test of faithfulness is how we live. Our life is our testimony.