

PRESENT AND PREVENTED: A SURVEY OF MEMBERSHIP
ACTIVITY IN BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING OF THE
RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)*

Bill Chadkirk and Pink Dandelion

Farnham, and Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies,
Birmingham, England

ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was sent to all Monthly, Preparative and other Business Meetings and worshipping groups in Britain Yearly Meeting for completion on 7 May 2006. With an over 80 percent response rate meaningful statistics can be calculated for attendance at Meetings for worship, Meetings for business and involvement by Friends and attenders in the business of the Society.¹

KEYWORDS

Britain Yearly Meeting, Membership, Preparative and other Meetings, Monthly Meetings, Business Meetings, Appointments

BACKGROUND

In 2004 and 2005, a number of studies of statistical trends in membership of Britain Yearly Meeting were published. Chadkirk (2004) and Stroud and Dandelion (2004) reached similar conclusions that the Society of Friends in Britain as we know it would cease to exist in the 2030s. A later study by Burton (2005) showed that the picture was not one of overall decline, and even that in some areas membership may actually be increasing. One common factor in all these studies is that they are based on statistics derived from the annual Tabular Statement, which in turn is based on returns from Monthly Meetings recording the numbers of members and recognised attenders in Meetings throughout Britain. As such the statement records 'headline' figures which, anecdotally at least, include significant numbers of both members and attenders who no longer attend Meeting for Worship, who are too ill to participate actively in the Meeting's organisation or merely maintain sentimental or familial connections with the Society. This study is an attempt to obtain an overview of the *active* membership of the Religious Society of Friends and the degree to which the Society demands the involvement of its members in its internal mechanisms.

1. METHODOLOGY

Following a proposal for a single questionnaire to British Quaker Meetings, the idea was developed into a longitudinal study to occur in 2006, 2008 and 2010, measuring trends in attendance at Meeting for Worship and Business Meetings, and gathering information on organisational activity and challenges. While each individual biennial study would obtain a snapshot of the Society at a particular time, over the whole period of the study trends should emerge illuminating the true state of Meetings.

To collect the required information two questionnaires were designed, one for Monthly Meetings (or MMs) and one for Preparative Meetings (PMs) and other worshipping groups (e.g. Recognised and Notified Meetings). For brevity, this part of the study will normally refer to PMs). Each questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter. Although not piloted, the questionnaires evolved through at least five revisions. The final design is intended for use at each stage of the study without a great deal of further amendment, to ensure comparability. Additionally, certain questions were phrased to obtain comparability with censuses of attendance carried out in 1850, 1904 and 1909, the results of which, and in some cases the original returns, are held in the Library of the Society of Friends. The second stage of this longitudinal research will take place in May 2008.

The questionnaires were mailed using the address lists used by the central organisation of the Society to communicate with Monthly and other Meetings—this being the most comprehensive mailing list available. The questionnaires were sent independently of any other mailing and each included a freepost envelope to encourage a good response. To further encourage response a short article was placed in the Quaker weekly magazine, *The Friend*. Altogether 72 Monthly Meeting and 474 Preparative and other Meeting questionnaires were sent out.

2. RESPONSE

Of the Monthly Meetings, 65 fully or partially completed questionnaires were received—a response rate of 90.3%, covering 91.4% of the membership recorded in the 2006 Tabular Statement. Of the PMs and other worshipping groups, 390 questionnaires were returned: a response of 82.3%, covering 80.1% of members and 80.6% of attenders recorded in the Tabular Statement.

3. PROBLEMS

The returned questionnaires do not constitute a probability sample; they simply represent those Meetings that responded to our request to complete and return a questionnaire. We have no knowledge of why Meetings did not respond. However, the high response rate means that we can still have some confidence in inferential statistics calculated from the data.

A. MONTHLY MEETINGS

Question 3: *Appointments?*

Of all the questions asked of Monthly Meetings, that on appointments was singularly misunderstood, as was the similar questions asked of Preparative and other Meetings.

- Not all MMs appoint elders and overseers, but even some of those who do did not include them among their totals presumably on the grounds that the names come from constituent PMs.
- One MM respondent who recorded 61 appointments noted, ‘I have excluded internal committee membership’ (presumably such as nominations committee members, etc.).
- Another respondent who recorded only 18 appointments explained that each filled several positions, thus indicating that they had counted appointees rather than appointments.
- Yet another explained ‘committees are included as one appointment’.

Clearly the statistics derived from the data substantially *underrepresent* the real number of appointments.

B. PREPARATIVE AND OTHER MEETINGS

Question 1: *At this Meeting for Worship how many are present?*

One respondent recorded their uncertainty with the question: ‘*Did this mean members of the Society or members of this Meeting...?*’ Other respondents noted that the visitor’s column included ‘members’ of another Meeting, even within the same Monthly Meeting. Our question referred to members of the Society; we did not indicate any distinction of Meeting and we cannot know now how many respondents made the assumption that we meant otherwise. Members are of Monthly Meetings and hence of the Yearly Meeting, not of Preparative or other Meetings. This is so basic to the structure of the Society that we thought it unlikely to be misunderstood. It is unlikely that anyone at Meeting for Worship was excluded from being counted and where the numbers and genders of wrongly allocated Members were clearly and unambiguously noted, they were reallocated appropriately, otherwise the answers have been coded as recorded. Even if the misunderstanding was widespread the numbers recorded under ‘visitors’ is so small that correction would not affect the statistics for members at Meeting for Worship but those for visitors would be significantly reduced. This unexpected outcome of the exercises is considered further in ‘Conclusions’ below.

On other occasions, there were attempts to ‘improve’ the figures submitted. For example, one Friend noted, ‘...*as there were so few (at Meeting for Worship) on the 7th May 2006 will fill this paper in depicting better attendance...*’ Numbers of respondents also noted that attendance was unusually low for a variety of reasons—holidays, illness and ‘nice weather’ were among the reasons given, while a few noted that attendance was unusually high. Where there was evidence of deliberate misreporting the data have been omitted.

Question 2: *Children: If there is a children's class at **today's** Meeting for Worship how many children are there?*

If the boxes provided for the numerical answers were left blank, struck through or annotated, for example '*We do not usually have a children's class*' they were not coded. As a result there may seem to be a low incidence of replies to this question, but the outcome is nevertheless consistent with Meetings running children's classes roughly monthly. Anecdotally this also seems to be the case. The question should be amended in future surveys to elicit more information on the frequency of classes.

Question 3: *Members and Attenders: At today's date how many members and recognised attenders are on the Meeting's address list?*

There were several problems with the answers to this question.

- i. One respondent scored through the column on child members and noted, '*We do not have child membership any more*', which is not true. However, we do not know how many blank returns have been caused by similar misconceptions. Also, it is unknown how many children might have been recorded as members simply because they are children of members. Another respondent added a fifth column headed '*Adult children in membership but not living locally*', presumably the adult children of existing members who remained on the list of the Meeting after moving away. Another respondent noted the presence of 21 children in the column '*Children not in membership*' but added a note '*List is misleading 16 children never attend*'. It is not clear whether the 16 who never attend are included or excluded from the figures given. In this and similar circumstances only the numbers given in the answer box have been used in the statistical analysis.
- ii. A few respondents interpreted the question as the number recorded in question 1 who were on the Meeting's address list at the time of the survey. Most of these could be identified because the numbers of members and attenders in questions 1 and 2 would be identical, with the following exceptions:
 - There could be some (probably smaller) Meetings with a 100% attendance at Meeting for Worship leading to a statistical overestimate caused by the misunderstanding.
 - There may be some that answered the question correctly but which coincidentally had the same number of visitors to the Meeting as absent members or attenders, again leading to a statistical overestimate.

However, since the numbers who have misunderstood are small the statistics have not been significantly affected.

Question 4: *Is your Meeting urban (e.g. town or city), semi-urban (small rural town) or rural (village or remote)?*

A small number of respondents did not answer the question, ticked two boxes or provided some explanatory comment. In the first two cases the data were not coded and in the second comments were ignored and only the ticked box coded.

Questions 5 and 6: *Do you meet in...? (Please tick the appropriate box)* and *In the last 12 months has your Meeting considered changing where it meets? (Please tick the appropriate box)*. Again a very small number of respondents either did not answer the question or included some comments such as 'We do not have our own premises, Monthly Meeting owns our meeting house'. Several respondents included a number of ticks in the boxes provided for answers to question 6 indicating that they had considered a variety of options for Meetings facing a move, making analysis somewhat difficult.

Questions 7 and 8: *Date of Business Meeting* and *At this Business Meeting how many members and attenders were present?*

In the introduction to question 8 we indicated that answers were to be given at the first Business Meeting following Sunday 7 May 2006. The result was that we missed capturing data from a number of Business Meetings that occurred on the 7 May and a consequent delay in questionnaires being returned. Indeed, the last did not arrive until late October. We had also assumed that most Meetings would hold Business Meetings monthly with only a few following other patterns. It now appears that a large number follow a non-monthly pattern.

4. COMPARISON OF SAMPLE AND POPULATION

Summary statistics for the Tabular Statement are given in Table 1 below. It can be seen that the distribution of Meetings is heavily positively skewed, that is, there are many more small Meetings than there are large Meetings. In turn this means a typical Meeting is better described by the median measurement (highlighted in the table) rather than the mean. The median size of such a Meeting is only 24 adult members and 13 adult attenders. In such a Meeting there are 1.6 women members to every man and only 77, in which men outnumber or equal women members. 64% of Meetings have children, and the median of those that do is only 6 individuals. A similar table to Table 1 (Table 2) shows the statistics derived from the Tabular Statement, but this time only for Meetings that responded to the survey questionnaire. It shows a median size of 26 adult members and 14 adult attenders. There are also 1.6 women members to every man. However, in this case there are rather fewer Meetings, 50 in total, where men members equal or outnumber women. There are also very different numbers of Meetings with children, 54% rather 64%. Given these variations the question that must be asked is: Is the sample represented by the questionnaire significantly different from the population recorded in the Tabular Statement?

Calculation of a Z-score for the number of adult members reveals a value of +1.05, meaning that there is just less than a 7.3% probability that the sample represented by the questionnaire returns has recorded higher values than the population in general represented by the Tabular Statement. That is, there is a one in six chance that the statistics for adult membership calculated from the questionnaire are more optimistic than the real picture.

Table 1. Tabular Statement Summary Statistics

	Members				Non-Members			Total No. of Individuals Associated with MfW
	Men	Women	Total Adult Members	Women—Men	Boys	Girls	Total Members	
Total	5918	9355	15,273	3437	49	52	15,374	26,229
N=	479	475	485	485	38	40	485	487
Maximum No.	96	136	232	55	3	7	233	390
Minimum No.	1	1	1	-10	1	1	1	1
Mode	8	10	17	1	1	1	17	18
Mean μ	12.4	19.7	31.5	7.1	1.3	1.3	31.7	53.9
Median	9	15	24	5	1	1	24	39
Skew	2.8	2.6	2.7	2.1	1.9	5.1	2.7	2.7
A (1) 53								
B (2) 24								

(1) Number of meetings with a greater number of men than women

(2) Number of meetings with equal numbers of men and women

Notes: *Mode* .- the most common figure in a distribution; *mean*.- the average figure; *median*.- equal numbers of measurements lie below and above the median; *skew*.- the higher the positive skew the more smaller measurements in a distribution, the high the negative skew, the more larger measurements. When skew is zero, the distribution is said to be 'normal' and the mode, mean and median are all the same.

Table 2. Tabular Statement Statistics for Respondents

	Members				Non-Members				Total No. of Individuals Associated with MfW	
	Men	Women	Total Adult Members	Women—Men	Boys	Girls	Total Members	Attenders		Children
Total	4719	7517	12,236	2792	39	37	12,312	6551	2158	21,021
N=	366	363	368	368	30	31	368	362	253	368
Maximum No.	75	130	205	55	3	2	205	154	54	390
Minimum No.	1	2	1	-9	1	1	1	1	1	3
Mode	8	8	19	3	1	1	19	7	2	21
Mean \bar{X}	12.8	20.6	33.1	7.6	1.3	1.2	33.3	18.0	8.5	56.8
Median	10	16	26	6	1	1	26	14	6	45
Skew	2.3	2.37	2.36	1.76	1.91	1.63	2.35	3.10	2.13	2.52
A (1) 34										
B (2) 16										

(1) Number of meetings with a greater number of men than women

(2) Number of meetings with equal numbers of men and women

Very similar results are obtained for attenders, with a 16.9% probability of overestimation ($Z = + 0.42$) and children, with a 14.9% probability of underestimation ($Z = -0.53$).

Normally, equivalence between sample and population would be assumed if the chances of variance are 5% or less. Clearly this is not so and with this potential bias in mind, we now look at the outcomes recorded in the questionnaire.

5. MEETING FOR WORSHIP

A new table very similar to Table 2 can be constructed for attendance at Meeting for Worship, Table 3, using the actual returns.

The first comparison to be made is in the total number of individuals attending Meeting for Worship. From Table 2 we can see that 21,021 individuals (excluding visitors) could have been present, but only 6748 (excluding visitors) were—an attendance rate of only 25.7%. The number of adult members is 35.0% of the possible total and the number of attenders is also only 30.4%. The real difference is made up in the number of children at Meeting for Worship. 22.1% of possible children were at Meeting and only 96 of 390 Meetings recorded a children’s class, 24.6%. Comparative statistics are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Comparative Statistics for Attendance at Meeting for Worship: percentages of actual/possible attendance at Meeting for Worship

	<i>Members</i>			Children	Attenders
	Men	Women	Total Adult Members		
<i>Total</i>	33.2%	36.2%	35.0%	22.1%	30.4%

6. MONTHLY MEETINGS

1429 members, representing only 11.39% of those eligible to attend, plus 131 attenders, were recorded at Monthly Meeting. Of these members, 39.3% were men, 60.7% were women. That is, given the figures in Table 4 above, more men than women, proportionate to their numbers in the Yearly Meeting, attend MM. 58 constituent Meetings (out of the 390 that replied) were unable to appoint representatives to Monthly Meeting, an average of about one per MM.

7. MONTHLY MEETING APPOINTMENTS

The Monthly Meetings that replied appointed to 4328 positions of responsibility (about 35% of the membership among the survey Meetings), an average of 74.6 per Meeting (the lowest being 7, the highest 580). There were only 123 vacancies, 2.84% of the total. A calculation of appointments per Member yields a range of between 0.04 (one MM with 7 appointments and 185 members) and 1.47 (another with 56 appointments and 38 members).

8. DISCUSSION

This snapshot of one Sunday in May 2006 does not give us a clear figure of how many Members regularly attend worship but we know, anecdotally, that membership lists are inflated by, for example, many who never come to worship. This is particularly true of children. We know from other recent work by Simon Best (forthcoming) that the lists of children not in membership include many children of Friends who attend rarely or never. What is clear is that members are more likely to attend than recognised attenders. Men are represented proportionately more in rural Meetings.

It is increasingly clear that there never was a golden age when every Friend attended Monthly Meeting and the figure of just over 11% could be seen as healthy. However, it does concentrate the decision-making and the responsibility among (about) a tenth of eligible Friends. Yearly Meeting attendance of about 3–5% of the membership can be viewed similarly. The fact that some Meetings are unable to appoint representatives to MM is of greater interest.

Quakers are seeking to appoint every third Friend to a position of responsibility. In practice, this is more likely to fall to the 11% of MM attendees, meaning that most appointed Friends serve in more than one way. It is noteworthy, however, that less than 3% of posts are unfilled: what is not clear is how many Friends Nominations Committees need to approach for each position, although anecdotal evidence suggests it can be up to twenty. One in five local Meetings are Recognised rather than Preparative Meetings, a figure that has risen in recent years, sometimes prompted by the difficulty in finding PM officers.

This study is by default highly inconclusive but we hope that our future surveys, with additional and clarified questions, will continue to shed light on the changing nature of patterns of attendance and participation. We need a more complex survey instrument to measure the total participating membership of any Meeting but it appears that the Tabular Statement is exaggerated in terms of active membership. The shortfall between 'book membership' and active participation could have dramatic effects on the kinds of graphs on membership decline mentioned at the start of this paper. We look forward to our May 2008 survey in the hope that some of the issues raised in this paper can be further clarified.

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NOTES

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1. We are re using the nomenclature for Meetings used until 2007. There are now only 'Local Meetings' in the place of 'Allowed, Recognised, Notified, and Preparative' and 'Area Meetings' instead of 'Monthly Meetings'.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Bill Chadkirk is currently employed in Friends House (though the views expressed in this paper are personal and do not in any way represent an 'official' position). He is interested in why the membership of BYM is declining, who the Society is made up of, and what we can do to stop the decline.

Mailing address: Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ, England. Email: bill.chadkirk@virgin.net.

Pink Dandelion directs the work of the Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and the University of Birmingham, and is an Honorary Reader in Quaker Studies at the University of Birmingham.

Mailing address: c/o Quaker Studies. Email: b.p.dandelion@bham.ac.uk.