

# After the Charities' Act: Governance and Decision-making in Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

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## Abstract

Conforming to the Charity Commission's governance requirements in terms of the Charity Acts of 1993 and 2006, the Religious Society of Friends in Britain (Quakers) introduced a small trustee body to take strategic responsibility for the management of its national activities. This article traces some of the decisions made by trustees and finds that the centralisation of decision-making has substantially changed the role and authority of the wider membership. It is suggested that this is a manifestation of secularisation through conformity to external, state requirements as described by Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce.

## Keywords

Quaker governance, Charity Commission, governance in faith organisations, secularisation, church trustees, ecclesiology

## Introduction

Many of the organisational changes in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain over the past twenty years have been at least partly informed by the requirements of the 1993 and 2006 Charities Acts. Both Acts can be identified as a response by the British legislature to increasingly specific international accounting requirements, which were themselves grounded in the accounting and governance recommendations formulated in the Cadbury report of 1992.<sup>1</sup>

1 Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, *The Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance* (the Cadbury Report), London: Gee, 1992.

This article examines the effects within Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) of one of the more important structural changes: the introduction of a small group of managing trustees. It takes up the challenge posed by Andrew Chandler<sup>2</sup> in his study of the workings of the Anglican Church Commissioners, and also by sociologists such as Steve Bruce<sup>3</sup> and Bryan Wilson,<sup>4</sup> to broaden the discussion of secularisation within religious groups from simply examining changing beliefs to tracing the changes in religious organisations in response to the demands of the secular state.

It asks whether the Quaker response to the Charity Commission requirements emanating from the new legislation consisted merely of administrative alterations, or whether these changes have fundamentally affected the religious character of British Quakerism.

The suggested vulnerability to shape-shifting in response to the demands of the secular state has not, of course, occurred in isolation from other changes in the Religious Society of Friends and in the national culture within which it functions. The changing profile of membership, and the disparate range of beliefs that members hold, are also symptoms of secularisation, and provide the context for the organisational changes observed and reported upon. These issues are discussed in greater detail in her analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey by Jennifer Hampton,<sup>5</sup> and by other authors such as Pink Dandelion,<sup>6</sup> Rhiannon Grant<sup>7</sup> and Francesca Montemaggi.<sup>8</sup>

### The Secularisation Thesis and Religious Organisations

This paper refers especially to the work of Steve Bruce and his predecessor Bryan Wilson, who posit that one of the ways in which a trend to secularisation may be manifest in a faith community is through the adoption of structures and policies derived from the wider society and from government requirements, displacing and replacing systems, and sometimes even values, developed over time within that faith group.

2 Chandler, A., *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: the Church Commissioners and the politics of reform, 1948–1988*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

3 Bruce, S., *Secularization: in defence of an unfashionable theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

4 Wilson, B. R., *Religion in a Secular Society*, London: Watts, 1966; *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

5 Hampton, J. M., 'British Quaker survey: examining religious beliefs and practices in the twenty-first century', *Quaker Studies* 19/1 (2014), pp. 7–136.

6 Dandelion, P., *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: the silent revolution*, Studies in Religion and Society 34, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

7 Grant, R., *British Quakers and Religious Language*, Brill Research Perspectives in Quaker Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004379145>.

8 Montemaggi, F., *The Spirituality of New Quakers*, QCCIR, 2018, pp. 3–56.

Bruce<sup>9</sup> reiterates Wilson's<sup>10</sup> 1966 definition of the term *secularisation* as 'that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance'. Writing about secularisation in society, they identify it as multi-factorial, and note that a general decay of religious institutions may be accompanied by:

the displacement, in matters of behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of the religious agencies; the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness ... by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; the shift from religious to secular control of a variety of social activities and functions; the decline in the proportion of time, energy and resources that people devote to supernatural concerns.<sup>11</sup>

Following Wilson and Bruce, Malcolm Torry, an Anglican priest and organisational analyst, suggests that secularisation is not a simple, unitary phenomenon in its effects on church members and on religious organisations:

but, rather, secularizations, in the plural: the secularization of ideas (religious ideas are no longer at the heart of the way we think), cultural secularization (religious symbols are no longer central to our culture), desacralization (a loss of the sense of the sacred), practical secularization (a decline in religious activity), state secularization (a loss of links between state organizations and religious organizations), institutional secularization (a loss of links between religious organizations and private, public and voluntary organizations), religious secularization (religious organizations becoming less religious), secularization of beliefs (fewer people now believe in God).<sup>12</sup>

Torry suggests that religious secularisation is a particular challenge, 'of which the inappropriate employment of secular management theory is both cause and symptom'.<sup>13</sup> He proposes that there is plenty that a religious organisation can do to roll back the effects of secularisation,

but if it is to do that then it will need to remain a religious organization, that is, worship must be at its heart, proclamation by word and deed must be integral to everything that it is and does, and crucially, it will need to guard against religious secularization.<sup>14</sup>

Many years ago Thomas Luckmann identified 'internal secularisation', akin to Torry's 'religious secularisation', as being embedded within American faith communities through the bureaucratisation of their organisations: 'There can be

9 Bruce, *Secularization*, p. 2.

10 Wilson, *Secular Society*, p. xiv.

11 Wilson, *Sociological Perspective*, p. 149 and Bruce, *Secularization*, p. 2.

12 Torry, M., *Managing Religion: the management of Christian religious and faith-based organizations, Vol. 1: Internal Relationships*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 188–89.

13 Torry, *Managing Religion*, p. 189.

14 Torry, *Managing Religion*, p. 190.

little doubt ... that Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism are jointly characterized by similar structural transformations—a bureaucratization along rational business-like lines—and accommodation to the “secular” way of life.<sup>15</sup>

This article examines whether this kind of secularisation can be identified in the internal changes in the Religious Society of Friends.

### Authority and Decision-making in the Religious Society of Friends

Throughout its history the Religious Society of Friends has identified itself as a church in which authority is vested in the congregation, modelling ‘the priesthood of all believers’ (1 Pet. 2:9),<sup>16</sup> rather than in a hierarchy of paid or ordained clergy.<sup>17</sup> Church historian Crawford Gribben,<sup>18</sup> writing about the varieties of religious movements in Cromwell’s period, comments that the key characteristic of the Religious Society of Friends, which distinguished it from the other religious movements at that time, was that, while most groups emphasised the importance of the Word of God as transmitted in the Bible, the Quakers celebrated the imminence of the Spirit. This overriding insight helped to ensure that, for most of its existence, the Religious Society of Friends in Britain has been structured to ensure widespread participation by the members of the Quaker community in decision-making, which is framed as communally seeking the will of God.

Any Member of a local Meeting (congregation) can, and is enjoined to, attend the business Meetings—‘Meetings for worship for business’—which are held locally or in the Area Meeting of which the local Meeting is a part. Representatives from each Area Meeting are nominated to attend the national Meeting for Sufferings, the national standing committee of the Religious Society of Friends; or they may be nominated to other national committees, such as Quaker Life or Quaker Peace and Social Witness. Any Quaker, or, with permission, even someone not in membership but a regular Attender, can attend and take a full part in the Yearly Meeting, which is described in the church handbook *Quaker Faith & Practice (QF&P)*<sup>19</sup> as ‘the final constitutional authority of the Religious Society of Friends in England, Scotland, Wales and the Channel Islands’.<sup>20</sup>

*QF&P* explains that Quaker business Meetings are worshipful events, very similar in principle and in their form to the general Meeting for Worship held on a Sunday:

15 Luckmann, T., ‘The decline of church-orientated religion’, in Robertson, R. (ed.), *The Sociology of Religion*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, p. 147.

16 *Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 1 Pet. 2:9.

17 The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, *Quaker Faith and Practice: the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) 1995 (QF&P)*, London: BYM, 5th edn, 2013, 27.35.

18 Gribben, C., *God’s Irishmen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

19 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*.

20 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 6.12.

In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God's will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions.<sup>21</sup>

Remember that we do not seek a majority decision or even a consensus. As we wait patiently for divine guidance our experience is that the right way will open and we shall be led into unity.<sup>22</sup>

This is a challenging issue for British Quakers in the twenty-first century, some of whom do not claim to be theists and others of whom do not phrase their religious understanding in terms of an omnipotent God, especially those who are so directly engaged with individual Quakers and their Meetings as to have a will for the outcome of their deliberations.<sup>23</sup>

As long ago as the 1970s, an American Jesuit, Michael J. Sheeran, undertook a study of the way in which Meetings for Worship for Business were conducted in a North American Yearly Meeting. He concluded that the key difference among Quakers in their perception of the potential of the Quaker business method, and how it works in practice, is between those who have experienced a 'covered' (i.e. in England 'gathered') Meeting and those who have not.<sup>24</sup> He defines a 'covered' Meeting as one where 'an awareness and presence of God is felt in its midst'.<sup>25</sup> However, as Sheeran points out, there are many Quakers who have never experienced a gathered business Meeting,<sup>26</sup> and are therefore sceptical that traditional Quaker processes are sacred, or anything more than a cumbersome, slow and inefficient way of making decisions.

Although widespread attendance at business Meetings is encouraged, researchers such as Elizabeth Isichei<sup>27</sup> and Pink Dandelion<sup>28</sup> have observed that leadership within the Religious Society of Friends, especially at national level, has been

21 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 3.02.

22 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 1.14.

23 Hampton, 'British Quaker survey'.

24 Sheeran, M., *Beyond Majority Rule: voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1986.

25 Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, p. 110.

26 In Britain, see Hampton, 'British Quaker Survey'; Heron, A., *Caring, Conviction, Commitment: dilemmas of Quaker membership today*, London: Quaker Home Service; Birmingham: Woodbrooke College, 1992.

27 Isichei, E. A., 'From Sect to Denomination Among English Quakers', in Wilson, B. R. (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: organisation and ideology in social and religious movements*, London: Heineman, 1967, pp. 161–81; 'Organisation and Power in the Society of Friends 1852–59', in Wilson, B. R. (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: organisation and ideology in social and religious movements*, London: Heineman, 1967, pp. 182–212; *Victorian Quakers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

28 Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*.

limited throughout its history, both formally and informally, to relatively few individuals. They comment, too, that the number of Quakers who speak at the national gathering, the Yearly Meeting or at the interim national Meetings of representatives, Meeting for Sufferings, is similarly limited—usually to the same loose set of individuals. However, that does not offset the fact that the structures of the Religious Society of Friends were designed to enable participation in decision-making at local, Area and Yearly Meeting level by any Friend minded to take part.

Social anthropologist Adam Kuper<sup>29</sup> identifies decisions presented to the body of a ‘council’ (i.e. any size from a village moot to a town council) as if for consideration, but where the real decision has already been made elsewhere, as ‘ritual’ decisions; part of a category of what he terms ‘illegitimate’ decisions. This is markedly different to the model of discerned decision-making at a gathered Quaker Meeting, in which the outcome is genuinely open and any proposal might be accepted, modified or rejected.

The structures of the Religious Society of Friends have not remained precisely fixed since the group formed in the seventeenth century. New committees have arisen in response to changing needs or priorities, and others have been merged or laid down. A series of organisational changes were made in the Yearly Meeting in the twentieth century, including a major reorganisation in the 1960s that reduced the scope and authority of other national committees and reinforced the role of Meeting for Sufferings.<sup>30</sup> More recently, committee sizes have reduced, diminishing the numbers of individuals participating in the national work of the Society. However, it has mainly been in the period since the 1990s that the initiative for organisational change within the Religious Society of Friends has been driven by external rather than internal factors.

Economist Douglas W. Allen observes that the organisation of a church is not independent of its theology. He describes the structure and nature of Quaker church organisation as ‘rather unique in Christendom’,<sup>31</sup> with every Member enjoined to attend and participate in local and national decision-making gatherings. Allen notes that the church structure includes many different committees, the shared inspiration and deliberations of which test and largely restrain the eccentricities or power-plays of possibly divinely inspired individuals. He points out that the processes of a Meeting ‘waiting upon the Lord’ and seeking unity rather than a majority decision are ‘both cumbersome and potentially easily exploited’.<sup>32</sup>

Allen posits that when the doctrinal structure of a religious group fails to match

29 Kuper, A., ‘Council Structure and Decision-making’, in Richards, A. and Kuper, A. (eds), *Councils in Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

30 London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, *Church Government*, London, 1968, para 826.

31 Allen, D. W., ‘Order in the Church: a property rights approach’, *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization* 27 (1995), p. 112.

32 Allen, ‘Order’, p. 112.

the organisational form, the church fails. Hampton,<sup>33</sup> in her analysis of the 2013 British Quaker Survey, and other authors such as Dandelion<sup>34</sup> and Montemaggi,<sup>35</sup> have already shown that the extent and nature of faith among the Religious Society of Friends has diluted in recent years; but some of the changes due to governance requirements by the state are also material to the changes to the nature of the Religious Society of Friends.

### Governance Requirements and Trustees

Since the Charities Act of 1993, the Charity Commission, which is responsible for oversight of the probity of charitable bodies, has incorporated recommendations from the Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance<sup>36</sup> (the ‘Cadbury Committee’) into its governance requirements. A church is, in Britain, by definition a charity; so the Religious Society of Friends is necessarily subject to the requirements of the Charity Commission.

The key recommendations of the Cadbury report, which eventually shaped the UK Corporate Governance Code<sup>37</sup> and the International Financial Reporting Standards,<sup>38</sup> include:

- the separation of functions of the chair and chief executive;
- the appointment of a non-executive board to provide governance and oversight of the work of the executive team;
- the appointment of an Audit Committee reporting to the Board.

The 2006 Charities Act confirmed that:

- Exemption from charity registration for the charities excepted under the 1960 Act (for example, denominations such as the Anglican and Methodist churches and the Religious Society of Friends) was to be abolished;
- Charities with an annual income in excess of £100,000 would be required to register to submit accounts annually for scrutiny by the Charity Commission;
- Every charity should have a board of named trustees, with personal responsibility for any breaches of fiduciary governance.

These measures were designed to foster greater probity and transparency on the part of organisations; however, none in themselves are any guarantee that

33 Hampton, ‘British Quaker Survey’.

34 Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*.

35 Montemaggi, *Spirituality*.

36 Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance.

37 The Financial Reporting Council (2018 and previous).

38 The International Accounting Standards Board (previously IAS Committee) (1992/8ff).

an organisation will be effectively run. In the literature of management and of governance, observers such as Richard Chait and his colleagues,<sup>39</sup> and Bob Monks<sup>40</sup> and Peter Drucker,<sup>41</sup> suggest that the trustee board is not a mechanism that necessarily increases or maintains the accountability of decision-making, or the powers or engagement of shareholders or other stakeholders, such as the members of non-government organisations. So, while the governance changes required by the Charity Commission may increase accountability by a church or other charity to the Commission, which audits their activities on the part of the state, these management analysts would not necessarily expect that pre-existing levels of participation in decision-making would be retained by the membership after the introduction of trustees within a church or charitable organisation.

So it is pertinent to ask whether, in a religious organisation such as Religious Society of Friends, which prizes widespread participation in decision-making, the appointment of a trustee cohort has led to the phenomenon of the privatisation of decision-making by trustees, and to the disengagement and disempowerment of the general membership foreseen by authors such as Chait or Monks.

### Charitable Registration and the Religious Society of Friends

During the 1990s and the early twenty-first century Meeting for Sufferings, the 200-strong national representative committee, was understood to be the trustee body of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.<sup>42</sup> However, once the terms of the 1993 Charities Act had been clarified, the Religious Society of Friends, among the other affected denominations, began to determine how the legal bodies necessary for Charity Commission registration should be structured. The Religious Society of Friends had three general options before it:

- It could, like the Methodists, choose to register as a single unit, responsible internally for oversight of the stewardship and functioning of the different local, intermediate and national bodies within the Religious Society of Friends, and for its activities at national level;<sup>43</sup>
- At the other extreme, each local Meeting (congregation) might register as a separate charitable body;

39 Chait, R. P. et al., *Governance as Leadership: reframing the work of non-profit boards*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004.

40 Monks, R. A. G., 'Governance at a Crossroads: a personal perspective', *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance* 8/1 (2011), pp. 62–76. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/jdg.2010.23> (2011).

41 Drucker, P. F., 'The Bored Board', in *Toward the Next Economics, and Other Essays*, New York: Harper & Row, 1981, pp. 107–22.

42 Britain Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Minute no. 20, 2006.

43 This was the option most favoured in the first formal consultation among Quakers, in 2001/2002.



- Or each Monthly Meeting, later retitled as Area Meeting (the aggregation of local Meetings within a contiguous geographic area) could register, thus perpetuating the long-established Quaker organising principle that the Monthly Meeting is the core unit within the worshipping community for administrative purposes.

The last option was the one eventually chosen. Other Quaker bodies, such as Regional Meetings, were also required to register separately if they had an income in excess of the Charity Commission's threshold of £100,000.

Probably even more important in the life of the Religious Society of Friends than the horizontal separation of the already distinct Area Meetings into discrete legal entities has been the creation in 2006 of a discrete legal body, known as 'Britain Yearly Meeting', responsible for the central work of the Religious Society of Friends. The BYM governing document<sup>44</sup> explains that, while the 'Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain' is the term that 'refers to the church in Britain in its entirety', the term 'Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain' refers to 'the centrally held and managed policy, property, employment and work'.

There was considerable anxiety among Quakers associated with the appointment of a new small body of trustees for the central work, supervening the role of Sufferings. For instance, in the columns of a weekly Quaker journal, *The Friend*, Gerald Drewett questioned how trustees might affect and fundamentally change the theologically determined form of the Religious Society of Friends. He asked whether Quakers realised how seriously they were modifying 'three hundred years of organic development of the responsibility of all members for the Society (known in Biblical terms as the priesthood of all believers)'. Had they lost sight of their testimony to equality? He concluded: 'The Religious Society of Friends is the last vestige of institutional religious nonconformity in this country, but it is going faster and faster down the slippery slope of creeping conformity to the world, and it doesn't recognize it.'<sup>45</sup>

In the Yearly Meeting minutes of 2005, and again in 2006, there is a record that checks and balances were sought to ensure that the power of trustees was limited.<sup>46</sup> Minute 35 of Yearly Meeting 2005 asked the committee tasked to recommend on these matters, the Quaker Stewardship Committee, to prepare proposals for Yearly Meeting in 2006, and it asked that these proposals should clearly state the proposed relationships between a small body of trustees with

44 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings* (2006).

45 Drewett, G., *The Friend*, 13 January 2006, p. 7.

46 'We receive a report from Quaker Stewardship Committee as printed on pages 8–13 in the *Constitutional Issues* Supplement to *Documents in advance* which outlines the roles and responsibilities of a small body of trustees and a representative body (Meeting for Sufferings) as requested' (Minute 18 of Yearly Meeting 2006: *Constitutional issues: Trustees for Britain Yearly Meeting*).

Meeting for Sufferings, and with the Yearly Meeting. Minute 20 of Yearly Meeting 2006 specifically focuses on the accountability of the trustees to the membership of the Religious Society of Friends:

Further to Minute 18 we have returned to the question of safeguards and reassurances for the accountability of a small trustee body. We were reminded in our session yesterday afternoon that all the members of Britain Yearly Meeting are responsible for the work done in our name: for supporting and holding to account those who carry it out on our behalf. We are all called to be better Friends, giving more attention to the issues that arise and are set before our decision-making meetings. But we cannot all scrutinise all aspects of centrally managed work: ensuring the health and safety of our staff and volunteers; agreeing terms and conditions of employment; checking the financial health of the organisation. For this detailed scrutiny the membership needs to trust a smaller body. Meeting for Sufferings currently exercises that function.<sup>47</sup>

The Minute added: ‘We note that Meeting for Sufferings will be consulted on major issues, but that further work is needed for defining criteria for determining when an issue falls into this category.’<sup>48</sup> However, the Minute did not clarify what kinds of decision might or might not require consultation with Sufferings,<sup>49</sup> and the term ‘consultation’ was not defined. Was it to be expected that Sufferings would contribute to a decision, perhaps altering the outcome from that proposed by trustees? Or would their views simply be sought as a courtesy?

One of the expressed reasons for reluctance on the part of ‘Friends on the benches’ over the appointment of the small group of trustees was anxiety that they might assume too powerful a decision-making function, taking inappropriate power from the larger group, be it Sufferings or the Yearly Meeting. Minute 20 of 2006, detailing the roles of Meeting for Sufferings and the new trustee body, took cognisance of these fears when it concluded:

Ultimately, our trust is in God, who can work through small groups as well as large. We are confident that, whatever their number, our Trustees are, and will continue to be, a worshipping group of Friends who find it a natural and normal activity to seek the leadings of God’s spirit.<sup>50</sup>

In 2006 the Yearly Meeting agreed that the role of Sufferings should change, to accommodate the establishment of a small trustee body from January 2007. In 2011, after a review of the functioning of trustees and Meeting for Sufferings, the Yearly Meeting agreed to reduce the size of Meeting for Sufferings by more than a half, to a single representative (and alternate) from each Area Meeting.<sup>51</sup> Revisions to chapters 6, 7 and 8 in the fifth edition of *QF&P* clarify the new

47 Britain Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Minute no. 20, 2006.

48 Britain Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Minute no. 20, 2006.

49 The situation is still not clear.

50 Britain Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Minute no. 20, 2006.

51 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 7.05.

distribution of authority, including that of Sufferings, as having a ‘visionary and prophetic’ role rather than the decision-making management and governance responsibilities which it held previously. It receives reports ‘for information and consultation’ from trustees.<sup>52</sup>

However, while, legally, the trustees are answerable to the Charity Commission for the stewardship of the assets of BYM, they are not necessarily required to make decisions—only to endorse or reject them. There is nothing in the specifications by the Charity Commission that requires the trustees of the Religious Society of Friends, or of any other denomination or charitable body, to reserve large strategic decisions to themselves. Indeed, the Charity Commission lists ‘failure to engage stakeholders in strategic decisions’ as one of the shortcomings of which trustee boards may be deemed culpable.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the discussion below of two particular contentious decisions indicates that the Yearly Meeting trustees have chosen to understand their role in the normal terms that a member of a company or charitable board might do: not merely checking that good governance has been practised, but actively making major decisions about the kinds of issue which, in BYM, were formerly made by the wider body of members, either in the representative committee, Meeting for Sufferings, or at the Yearly Meeting. The two case studies are the reprovision of the Large Meeting House, the main conference space in Friends House; and the renaming of the Large Meeting House, not by trustees as such, but by the Friends House Hospitality Company, an arms-length trading company created in response to Charity Commission regulations.

### Case Study: Reprovision of the Large Meeting House

The single largest item of capital expenditure that the Religious Society of Friends in Britain undertook in the twentieth century was the purchase of land for and the construction of a new headquarters building, Friends House, on the Euston Road in London. So far in the twenty-first century the largest capital item has been the £4.25 million restructuring of the Large Meeting House, the main gathering space within Friends House.

The decision-making processes associated with these two projects has been very different, and each illustrates the role of the Yearly Meeting in capital decisions at the time, and also aspects of the dominant values of the Society in that period.

In the early twentieth century the decision-making process surrounding the building of a new headquarters was iterative, and it came before the Yearly Meeting for discernment over a period of eleven years. In 1911 the concern was raised by

52 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, Chapters 6–8.

53 Charity Commission, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission> [accessed 12/07/16]; see also Charity Commission, ‘RS7: *Membership Charities*’, 2004, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>.

members of the Home Mission and Extension Committee (one of the responsibilities of which was to lobby for improved working conditions in Britain) that the existing central premises, at Devonshire House, were an insanitary rabbit warren of too-small spaces, with inadequate light or fresh air for the well-being of staff (which at that time consisted of nine persons).<sup>54</sup> A sub-committee was appointed to bring proposals to the national representative council, Meeting for Sufferings, and thence to the Yearly Meeting, for consideration, discussion and review.

The input of Sufferings and of the Yearly Meeting was not a mere formality. Decisions were made and revisited. The matter was discussed almost every year between 1914 and 1924 at the Yearly Meeting, and the Meeting's guidance to the subcommittee sometimes varied considerably from the recommendations that had been put forward to it on topics such as whether to refurbish the existing building or to move (1915); whether to have a Large Meeting House or to hire a large space when it might be needed (1914 and again in 1921); the process for appointing the architect (1923); the brief to the architect (1923); and whether to acquire a controversial site (1924). Finally, in 1924, when the plans were ready, there was real exercised deliberation by the Yearly Meeting as a whole about whether the scheme should go ahead, and, if so, whether it should go ahead at the site already purchased.<sup>55</sup>

Friends House won for its designer, Hubert Lidbetter, the 1927 RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) bronze medal for the best new building in London that year. Since its opening, various building and refurbishment projects have between them markedly changed its interior. Some of this work has been undertaken since the building was Grade II listed by English Heritage in 1996 as being of sufficient architectural merit and importance to the national built environment to be worthy of protection.<sup>56</sup>

At the Yearly Meeting of 2008 the trustees' report announced a review of options for the next refurbishment or redevelopment of the building. Minute 34 of that Yearly Meeting recorded: 'We are pleased to hear of trustees' plan to consult widely before any of the major options are implemented.'<sup>57</sup>

An international architectural practice, John McAslan & Partners, was retained by the trustees. At a Meeting for Sufferings in February 2011<sup>58</sup> the Clerk of Trustees announced that the trustees would consider the architects' proposals for configuring the conference space, the Large Meeting House, at their July

54 London Yearly Meeting, 'Report of the Special Premises Committee: A resumé of the principal matters considered by the special premises committee since its inception in February 1911', in *Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends Held at Llandrindod Wells 1924: reports and documents presented to the Yearly Meeting, together with minutes and index*, London: Society of Friends, 1924, pp. 234–43.

55 London Yearly Meeting, 'Report'.

56 English Heritage, <https://historicengland.org.uk>.

57 Britain Yearly Meeting, *Yearly Meeting Proceedings*, London: BYM, 2008.

58 Britain Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings Minutes (S/11/02/3).

Meeting, and that they would then decide whether to take the scheme forward. Actually the decision was agreed in June 2011,<sup>59</sup> before it was announced to Sufferings<sup>60</sup> and to the Yearly Meeting in August that year.

Formal approval for the 'refurbishment' was sought as an item in the trustees' Annual Report to the Yearly Meeting in August 2011.<sup>61</sup> By that time full, costed plans had already been prepared by the architects, and the matter had moved beyond being simply a decision in principle to one which would be expensive to discard.

It was only two days after the matter had been dealt with in the Yearly Meeting session that those attending an 'Interest Groups Fair' were shown the architects' model for the scheme, which revealed that it should be more accurately described as a major redevelopment rather than a refurbishment. The design unveiled in 2011 for the redeveloped space in the Large Meeting House included the addition of an inner shell and the replacement of the raked seating and galleries with a single steep rake on three sides of the room, altogether reducing the accommodation by about 100 places. It also included provision for a retractable roof, to accommodate a 'Skyspace' by an American Quaker light artist, James Turrell.<sup>62</sup> There was no opportunity for the Yearly Meeting in session to reflect on the size and scale of the project, nor on the suitability of the design decisions.

Press releases issued by the BYM communications officer in 2011 and 2012,<sup>63</sup> and the Statement of Need submitted to Camden Council,<sup>64</sup> acknowledge that Friends House is a Grade II listed building. But neither in 2011 nor in 2012, in the reports to Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting, was it made clear to the Society at large that there were any contentious issues associated with the scheme to alter a key feature of a listed building.

For example, neither Sufferings nor the Yearly Meeting was alerted to the reservations of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee (BCAAC). Their report to the planning authority, Camden Council, was short and blunt, but comprehensive: 'The drawing shows extensive and damaging work to the main hall of this fine building (RIBA medal winner 1926 [*sic*]) which is quite rightly EH listed. We object strongly to the destruction of this uniquely consistent and fine interior.'<sup>65</sup> The BCAAC comment was submitted to Camden

59 Britain Yearly Meeting, 'Trustees report for the year ending December 2011', in *Documents in Advance 2012*, London, BYM, 2012, p. 4.

60 *The Friend*, 17 June 2011, p. 5.

61 At a Meeting for Sufferings on 5 February 2011, the Clerk of Trustees announced (S/11/02/3) that trustees would consider the architects' proposal at their July meeting and decide whether to take the scheme forward.

62 *The Friend*, 19 July 2012; McAslan Architects (John McAslan & Partners), *Friends House Refurbishment: statement of needs submitted to Camden Council*, 2011.

63 Quaker Communications, 'Friends House Refurbishment', press release, 11 May 2012.

64 McAslan Architects, *Friends House Refurbishment*.

65 Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee, Report to Camden Council Planning Committee on the matter of Friends House, February 2011.

in February 2011, but it was not mentioned to the Yearly Meeting or to Sufferings in 2011 or 2012. In the absence of this information, even if the Yearly Meeting had been given the opportunity to deliberate on the decisions with regard to the refurbishment, or its details, it would not have had before it the full range of information necessary to come to an informed conclusion.

In 2012, at both Meeting for Sufferings and at the Yearly Meeting, trustees reported on, but did not encourage deliberation or comment about, their plans for the redevelopment. Nevertheless, concerns were expressed very strongly at the March 2012 Meeting for Sufferings about the cost and opportunity cost of the light sculpture.<sup>66</sup> At that Meeting, the Clerk of Trustees said firmly: ‘Trustees are clear that they have acted, in the case of the Large Meeting House development, within their “terms of reference”.’<sup>67</sup> However, a fortnight before the subsequent Yearly Meeting began, the trustees released a statement<sup>68</sup> that the plan to incorporate the ‘visionary “Skyspace”’ had been dropped. Even though the artist offered to donate the £1.4 million installation to BYM, the Yearly Meeting would still be required to pay for the electrical and other running costs and repairs associated with the retractable roof. The trustees explained that ‘they had heard concerns that to install the major artwork may be in conflict with the Quaker commitment to become a low-carbon sustainable community and may not be a right use of money.’<sup>69</sup>

Although there had been critical comment on their plans, the trustees expressed, both in their original decision and in the decision to change their minds, their view that the authority to make these decisions lay within their own hands.<sup>70</sup> This was a very different situation to that which had pertained in the past, when committees brought decisions to Meeting for Sufferings or to the Yearly Meeting not for information or even for ratification, but for discernment, with a real expectation that the outcome might be entirely different to that which the individual introducing the matter, or the committee tabling it, might have proposed.<sup>71</sup>

Technically, it may be said that in reporting their actions and their proposals to Meeting for Sufferings and to the Yearly Meeting the trustees have engaged in transparency. But that is very different to accountability, and to the active participation in decision-making in which the body of Quakers at the Yearly Meetings in the early twentieth century engaged during the deliberations that led eventually to the construction of Friends House. A £4.25 million building project

66 Carn, T., ‘Meeting for Sufferings; BYM Trustees Report’, *The Friend*, 6 April 2012, p. 6.

67 Carn, ‘Meeting for Sufferings’.

68 Kirk-Smith, I., ‘Skyspace Plan Dropped’, *The Friend*, 18 May 2012, p. 4.

69 Kirk-Smith, ‘Skyspace Plan Dropped’.

70 Kirk-Smith, ‘Skyspace Plan Dropped’.

71 Cummins, P., ‘From Actors to Audience? LYM 1912 and BYM 2012’, paper presented at the Quaker Studies Research Association Conference Woodbrooke, Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, 2012.

is an enormous capital commitment, and it would be reasonable in any organisation with a heritage of active participation of its members in decision-making for the wider group to have participated in a careful process of discernment at least about the opportunity cost of such a project. In a group such as the Religious Society of Friends, where prayerful discernment and a patient, communal process of identifying a decision on which the group can unite is, or has been, a distinguishing feature of its religious charism, the privatisation of a decision on this scale of financial importance, and the associated ceding of responsibility on the part of the membership, denotes a substantive change in the ecclesiology of the group.

### Case Study: What's in a Name? 'The Light'

In December 2013 *The Friend* reported that at the recent Sufferings Meeting the Clerk of Trustees,

as an aside to her report on the Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees' minutes, told Friends that the board of directors of the hospitality company that manage Friends House have decided to give an additional name to the Large Meeting House. It will be called 'the Light'.

She explained that the hospitality company felt that having a 'house' within Friends House was confusing to non-Quakers who would make use of the hall in the future. The room will remain 'The Large Meeting House' for Friends.<sup>72</sup>

This caused consternation at Sufferings for several reasons: members questioned the process and the authority of the decision-makers, and they also objected, for theological reasons, to the name chosen. Members of Sufferings commented that this was 'Disneyfication',<sup>73</sup> and reminded the trustees that when Quakers refer to 'The Light' they are generally talking about the Inner Light—an important theological concept to Friends, rather than a suitable term for a hired venue.<sup>74</sup> The concepts of 'the Light (of Christ)' and 'the Inward Light' are important features of Quaker theological vocabulary,<sup>75</sup> and there were participants who found that name to embody a trivialisation of Quaker beliefs and practice.

In the same issue Peter Coltman, the Clerk to the board of directors of the hospitality company, explained<sup>76</sup> that the decision to rebrand the space was, in practice, made by the Friends House Hospitality Company, a company wholly owned by BYM, which 'donated' its profits to the Society. The company had 'consulted professionals' about the name, which sometimes confused new hirers.

72 Kirk-Smith, I. and Carn, T., 'Meeting for Sufferings', *The Friend*, 13 December 2013, p. 4.

73 Possibly not referencing Alan E. Bryman's *The Disneyization of Society*, London: Sage Publications, 2004.

74 Kirk-Smith and Carn, 'Meeting for Sufferings', p. 5.

75 Kirk-Smith and Carn, 'Meeting for Sufferings', p. 5.

76 Coltman, P., 'The Light', *The Friend*, 13 December 2013, p. 6.

Both of these points sound reasonable, but both, on closer examination, can be seen as reflecting the secularisation of understanding about governance and financial management on the part of the trustees. The hospitality company was created in 2008, from the revenue-earning catering facility at Friends House, as part of the BYM response to Charity Commission requirements for charitable bodies to separate revenue-earning trading activities from charitable activities.<sup>77</sup> The company is a legally distinct body from BYM, but it is not one that has or should have goals and values that are at variance from those of BYM. Although it is technically—and legally—independent, it is wholly owned by BYM, and its board includes trustees and other Quakers. Its chief executive is a member of the BYM staff management committee, and BYM trustees are directors of the company. There is no reason why the company might be required to reserve to itself a decision that would elicit disquiet among Quakers. It was perhaps expedient, but certainly not necessary, that a potentially controversial decision was made without reference to the opinions of the wider membership.

Further, given the cross-cutting relationships, such as the representatives of trustees on the board of the hospitality company and the role of the hospitality company's chief executive as part of the senior management Meeting of BYM staff, it is reasonable to expect that the trustees would be in a position to influence the hospitality company's decision that rebranding should occur, or that it should instead rather retain, and perhaps better explain than before in marketing literature, the Quaker terminology.

Rebranding exercises are generally undertaken by organisations that want to draw a line between the past and their future; and while it is certainly understandable that the hospitality company wanted to distinguish in some way the new era of a refurbished meeting space with smart equipment and greater flexibility than before, it was a real strategic decision to rename and rebrand the space—a strategic decision that was taken without engagement of the wider membership, with trustees and the hospitality company consciously claiming the right to do so.

Heated correspondence about the new name and the privatisation of the decision by Hospitality Company board members continued in *The Friend* into 2014, with some authors deeply affronted at the purloining of a theologically loaded metaphysical term for a room.<sup>78</sup> The Inward Light has been historically

<sup>77</sup> In the first full year of trading, the hospitality company generated a profit of £399,000 for Britain Yearly Meeting (Friends House Hospitality Annual Report 2009), an especially remarkable achievement given that the hospitality services had functioned at a loss for the previous four years. More detailed work would be necessary to establish whether the hospitality company and the Friends' House department have been dealt with on a like-for-like accounting basis.

<sup>78</sup> The correspondence was perhaps summarised by Jamie Wrench in his letter in *The Friend*, 31 January 2014: 'Let's not beat about the bush here; renaming the Large Meeting House "The Light" is a very silly idea; and it should be dropped immediately.'



a very important concept to Quakers,<sup>79</sup> too important, and too central, some would argue, to treat lightly or to utilise for commercial profit. But, theologically, some Quakers perceive that this episode has also breached a core Quaker testimony: the commitment to truth. On the one hand, the Large Meeting House had a new name—on the other hand, it hadn't. The Trustees and the hospitality company explained that the name change was only for public use—the original name would be retained for Quaker purposes.<sup>80</sup> A correspondent to *The Friend* found that assertion specious:

Quaker integrity suggests that we call a spade a spade—and a Large Meeting House is a Large Meeting House. So, Meeting for Sufferings' acceptance of the decision by Hospitality Company to call the Large Meeting House at Friends House 'The Light' is incomprehensible. To do so will create the notion that the Large Meeting House is a place unlike others for sensing the Spirit, a steeplehouse, a cathedral with a supposed special aura about it. Whether this was the explicit reason for this choice of name or not, it is pretentious nonsense.<sup>81</sup>

It is not just the content of the decision that exercised the correspondents writing to *The Friend*. They were also perturbed both by the locus of the decision and the fact that none of the Quaker oligarchy appeared to recognise that there was any problem that the right to make the decision had been reserved not just by trustees but by people at a remove from the Quaker hierarchy of decision-making Meetings.<sup>82</sup>

This was certainly not a decision that needed to be made in any kind of hurry and, to be fair, neither the hospitality company nor the BYM trustees asserted that it might be. But it was a decision, and a decision-making process, that made it clear to the members of the Religious Society of Friends that their right and authority to question the actions of the decision-making few were very limited.

### Conclusions

The discussion above provides a small illustration of how challenging it is for BYM trustees to retain any sense that they, or the Clerks of the Meeting,<sup>83</sup> are 'servants of the Meeting'. It is actually so much simpler for them to function like hardworking trustees of any other voluntary organisation than to attempt to maintain the idealised Quakerly non-attachment to the outcome of any matter which they put before the Yearly Meeting.

79 Jn 1:9: 'That was the true *light*, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

80 *The Friend*, 13 December 2013.

81 Geoff Pilliner (on behalf of Alton Meeting), *The Friend*, 24 January 2014.

82 Amor, M., 'The Light', letter in *The Friend*, 20 and 27 December 2013, p. 22.

83 Yearly Meeting, *QF&P*, 3.02.

Organisational changes made within BYM in response to the requirements of external charitable regulation have shifted the locus of actual decision-making away from the Yearly Meeting into the care of a small body of trustees and the Recording Clerk, the chief executive of BYM. So the Yearly Meeting no longer engages in 'great and weighty oversight and Christian care' of church affairs. This represents a real ecclesiological change among British Quakers, and, as this pattern of Yearly Meeting governance becomes normative, the practice of policy creation is mainly at present reserved for groups and occasions outside of the Yearly Meeting in session.

The changes in governance in response to the statutory requirements of the Charity Commission have had the consequence that decision-making—for instance, that associated with major items of expenditure—has been privatised among a small cadre of trustees and managers. The substantive decision-making role of the large group of members attending the Yearly Meeting has fallen away, most decisions put before the larger group have been pre-empted and those resolutions taken within the large assembly are to a greater or lesser extent staged.

Also, inevitably, the fiduciary separation associated with the separation of Area Meetings and of other parts of the Religious Society of Friends, such as the hospitality function at Friends House, into different charitable bodies and, in some instances, separate trading companies, has created barriers and the potential for barriers between different parts of the Religious Society of Friends. The different charitable entities and companies are no longer necessarily linked. They are in a position to make decisions independently of each other, without necessarily even considering the consequences of those decisions for the wider Religious Society of Friends or for parts of the Religious Society of Friends that, geographically or functionally, might previously have been expected to work cooperatively together.<sup>84</sup>

Both of the case studies of major decisions taken recently by trustees illustrate that the Quakers' inverted decision-making pyramid has been flipped and that the Religious Society of Friends has adapted itself to the familiar pyramid of power dominant in Western culture—with a tiny group of decision-makers at the top and the majority of Quakers at the bottom. The case studies also show that trustees have exhibited some reluctance to be transparent with the membership over two of the major decisions taken since the institution of the new body. For example, in the case of the refurbishment, key information such as the heritage bodies' criticisms of the scheme was withheld, so even if the Yearly Meeting had been given the opportunity to deliberate meaningfully about the proposed scheme at a point when it might realistically have been altered or abandoned, the discernment would have been skewed for lack of key information.

84 This situation is of course not unique to the Society of Friends, and further study of its effects in other denominations such as the Baptist Union and the Anglican Church, as well as in the Society of Friends, would also be fruitful.

One is led to recall the warning by Roger Wilson about the opportunities for human ambition to corrupt the management of Meetings for Worship for Business:

If a Committee hides from Yearly Meeting the truth of its work, its work will be bad. It is not difficult, in the short term, to confuse or hoodwink Yearly Meeting. But to just the degree that this is done, those responsible are not laying their service before the Lord in Worship, and the work will not be what it purports to be. It becomes something else—the expression of the unanchored intelligences of the members, of the ambition of individuals, of the unreflecting traditionalism of those who have ceased to think critically of what they are doing.<sup>85</sup>

The appointment of trustees, as required by the Charity Commission, and the simultaneous shift in the role of the Yearly Meeting from a decision-making body to one that reflects on ‘themes’ chosen up to three or even six years in advance<sup>86</sup> have together fundamentally affected the inclusive structures of decision-making and therefore the nature of the organisation. Currently, most decisions put to the Yearly Meeting are, one way or another, ritual decisions,<sup>87</sup> predominantly routine matters of business such as committee appointments. In some years, such as 2012 and 2017, there was not a single substantive issue about which a discerned decision was sought by the agenda committee.<sup>88</sup>

But without the opportunities for substantive discernment and real decision-making on the part of the Yearly Meeting, the prayerful, challenging process of the Meeting reaching towards unity on a decision does not occur and a vital feature of Quaker religious practice is not exercised. Instead, the assembled Quakers are reduced to the role of passive auditors, what Kierkegaard describes as the reduction of a worshipping community to the role of audience.<sup>89</sup>

In that this is an examination of a faith-based group in change, it can also be described in theological terms as a study in ecclesiology, ‘thinking through the church’s status in its environment and society, its relationship to the state, its internal structure’.<sup>90</sup> As such, particularly as the institution of trustees was in response to statutory requirements by the Charity Commission, an agent of the state, it is suggested that this transformation of organisation and processes within

85 Wilson, R. C., *Authority, Leadership and Concern*, Swarthmore lecture, London: George Allan & Unwin, 1949, p. 36.

86 British Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Proceedings, years 2012–17. In 2012–14 the overall theme was ‘Being a Quaker today’; from 2015 to 2017 it was ‘Living out our faith in the world’.

87 Kuper, ‘Council structure’, p. 21.

88 British Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Proceedings, years 2012 and 2017.

89 Kierkegaard, S., *Attack upon ‘Christendom’*, trans. Lowrie, W., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945 [1855], [http://archive.org/stream/kierkegaardsata00kier/kierkegaard-sata00kier\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/kierkegaardsata00kier/kierkegaard-sata00kier_djvu.txt) [accessed 23/02/17].

90 Betz, H. D. et al. (eds), *Religion Past and Present: encyclopaedia of theology and religion*, vol. 4, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008, p. 257.

the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is an illustration of Wilson's<sup>91</sup> and Bruce's<sup>92</sup> thesis that secularisation of religious organisations may occur as the organisation responds to the demands of the secular state.

This example embodies Bruce and Wilson's descriptions of secularism as including, as Bruce puts it, 'the replacement of a specifically religious consciousness ... by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation' in relation to its internal organisation and strategic decisions; and 'the displacement, in matters of [organisational] behaviour, of religious rules and principles by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria'.<sup>93</sup>

This discussion covers a moment in the history of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain when the shared cultural understanding of maximum participation in decision-making, described by authors such as Sheeran,<sup>94</sup> Davie,<sup>95</sup> Collins<sup>96</sup> and Dandelion,<sup>97</sup> has been replaced by an understanding that key decisions are reserved for a small group—in this instance, the trustees. I would suggest that British Quakers have not yet recognised the extent of the ecclesiological shift that has occurred, nor its effect on the shared spiritual and temporal life of the group.

It is of course not impossible that the trends identified in this study are reversible. But it is extremely unlikely that the centralisation of power and authority, and the associated eagerness to comply with secular organisational requirements, will be rolled back unless an understanding is recaptured of the theological beliefs underpinning the organisation and nature of the Religious Society of Friends in the first 300 years of its existence.

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91 Wilson, *Secular Society*.

92 Bruce, *Secularization*.

93 Bruce, *Secularization*, p. 2.

94 Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*.

95 Davie, M., *British Quaker Theology since 1895*, Lewiston and New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

96 Collins, P. J., 'The Sense of the Meeting: an anthropology of vernacular Quakerism', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 1994.

97 Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis*.