

‘When two or three are gathered’ in a Zoom Room: The Theology of Online Unprogrammed Quaker Worship

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Abstract

This research note uses data from surveys of Quaker Meetings in Britain in 2020 to offer reflections into the theology of online worship. It provides both an overview of the changes Meetings made as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic and a discussion of the nature of online worship, including to what extent ‘meeting’ online is experienced as ‘gathered’ or ‘worship’. It ends by highlighting the longer-term consequences that may result from the temporary and pragmatic changes Quakers made locally.

Keywords

Online worship, Digital religion, Community, Religion and the pandemic

Introduction

Unprogrammed Quaker worship is a highly distinctive liturgical form. The history of its theology has been rehearsed by Pink Dandelion (2005) and its rituals analysed from a sociological perspective by Peter Collins and Pink Dandelion (2006). The nature of vocal ministry was the subject of linguistics research by Alan Davies (1988). Yet, there has been little research undertaken into the experience of unprogrammed worship. Rhiannon Grant has written about the use of ‘afterwords’, the practice of introducing a space at the end of unprogrammed worship with lower barriers to spoken contributions (2018) and Helen Meads has investigated the Experiment with Light groups, who use a system of prompts to heighten their spiritual experience and reflection (2011). Studies of worship and church online are growing in number, with particular contributions from Tim

Hutchings (2017) and Yoel Cohen (2013, 2015, 2018, 2019), but nobody has studied local online Quaker worship before.

This research note reflects on data collected on online worship in Britain in 2020 and also explores the theology of online worship. During the pandemic in 2020, when in-person worship was for the greater part of the year outlawed, many local Quaker Meetings adopted online worship. This mirrored what had been offered 'non-geographically' for many years by Quaker study and retreat centres such as Woodbrooke in Britain (as studied by Tim Hutchings, forthcoming) and Ben Lomond and Pendle Hill in the USA and by the European and Middle East Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation in response to the needs of isolated Quakers (Russ and Eccles 2021).

This research note uses data collected throughout 2020 from British Quakers on their experience of online worship. A qualitative survey was sent out to local Quaker groups or Meetings via 'Area Meeting Clerks' (volunteers appointed to leadership roles and who undertake some administrative tasks in Quaker communities) in March 2020, when meeting for worship face to face was first banned by the British government, and some respondents sent back regular updates throughout the year. In addition, two 'snapshot surveys', one in May and one in September 2020, were conducted with staff at Britain Yearly Meeting to collect statistics on how British Quakers were worshipping (Grant 2020a). Quotations below are drawn from these various surveys and from other data offered to us.

At the time of the first snapshot survey, many meetings had moved their worship online, with the majority using Zoom and a few other platforms, such as WhatsApp. The second, September survey coincided with the then-new possibility of meeting face to face again, albeit within strict limitations on the number and spacing of participants within worship settings. Some Meetings initiated pre-registration systems for those wishing to worship face to face, or worshipped in large outdoor spaces during the summer months. Others added technology to their face to face settings to allow 'blended worship', with online and in-person worshippers all able to see and hear one another. By the autumn of 2020 in-person worship was again discouraged, although not outlawed, in England, Wales and Scotland.

Overview

In some ways, it was perhaps more straightforward for British Quakers to worship online than for some other denominations. British Quaker worship, lasting typically an hour, is based in silence, and in person takes place within an inward-facing square or circle. Spiritual authority is seen to be equal among participants, no one 'leads' the worship and there is no 'front'. Meeting Houses are pragmatic spaces rather than consecrated ones and are typically free of decoration or adornment. There are no difficult theological questions as in Anglicanism about whether the corpora extends into the domestic setting, allowing communion to be taken at home. The liturgy, the collective approach to God (Rahner 1975: 854), is one of silent waiting without

creed or external rite. Any vocal contributions ('ministry') in Quaker meetings arise out of what is experienced in the silence. Thus, all Quakers needed to do in order to worship virtually was meet together online in silence.

Meetings adopted a number of different approaches to worship once banned from their Meeting Houses. Some met at the same time as before, with participants each worshipping in their own homes. Others used e-mail to send a text around and gather reflections or written 'ministry'. Most used a video conferencing platform, in particular Zoom, which had the additional benefit of allowing people to join the meeting using a landline telephone. Zoom also allowed the use of 'breakout rooms' for fellowship after worship.

Some Quakers joined the non-geographic online worship events run daily by Woodbrooke or other centres, or tried out worship in different yearly meetings. In Britain, some meetings advertised their worship details only internally after some initial experience of 'zoombombing' (online trolling or attacks usually involving broadcasting offensive material into a Zoom meeting), while others publicly advertised their meeting times and links, using security safeguards such as 'waiting rooms' (monitoring those entering the Zoom meeting).

Online meetings were often shorter than an hour, typically 30 or 45 minutes. Worship was in some cases followed by social time, perhaps in breakout rooms with two or three people chatting for 10–15 minutes before being assigned to a new group. Meetings reported that attendance fell away a little over the year, with numbers falling by an average of three people (Grant 2020b), and some noted that this was particularly among those using a telephone to join a zoom meeting. The phenomenon of 'zoom fatigue' was also reported: 'Working Friends have sometimes been "Zoomed out" by Sunday and might prefer to go for a quiet walk.' Many Meetings reported that the level of vocal ministry declined, perhaps also a function of length.

However, the overall response reports a positive experience, especially where community is fostered and maintained using multiple means. One reasonably typical report says:

We have found that the present experience remains a deep and satisfying worship. It has kept us together and vibrant. We are closer because we speak to each other on the phone between meetings, send contributions (verses, poems etc) or ministry, usually by e-mail, ahead of time. We end the meeting by sending an image of two hands as a handshake on e-mail.

The challenges of domestic interruptions are manifold and one respondent commented that there were 'too many distractions, things needing doing around the house'.

The use of technology excluded those without access to it or the inclination to use it for worship. Zoom hosts talked of missing the experience of worship as they needed to watch for new arrivals or handle other technological issues. For many Quakers, this was new technology. One reported: 'It is so hard communicating

with someone who does not even know what a desktop and an address bar are and who has very little hearing.’

At the same time meeting online included many for whom access to in-person worship was problematic: ‘Friends who no longer live within reach of our meeting are attending online, and it is also of benefit to those unable to get to the meeting house regularly for health reasons.’ Another reported

I am a disabled person and often find it difficult to physically get to meeting for worship due to difficulties associated with mobility, travelling and energy use. Online meeting for worship has been a completely wonderful opportunity to better connect with my home meeting.

As Meetings became more familiar with the technology, some added a wider range of activities than used to take place, such as separate meetings for young people, additional study groups and social groups: ‘Teenagers have chosen a different day to meet and to meet more regularly than they were. We started a weekly online Attenders group, it is better attended than when we have done this previously in the Meeting House.’ Another: ‘We are now meeting more often, adding a shorter midweek adult meeting for worship and a craft and chat evening.’ Online meetings for worship for business became commonplace by the end of 2020, with many local and area meetings, and the yearly meeting, conducting their business online. Technology was also enlisted for pastoral care. One Meeting reported:

Our four Pastoral Friends will be phoning their ‘flock’ every two weeks in order to check that they are all right. For the most part though, we are using social media to keep in contact. We have set up a WhatsApp group which has 14 members at present who tend to communicate daily. It is often light hearted with jokes, funny videos and colourful photos.

The Experience and Theology of Online Worship

Robin Davis, in an article of May 2020, considered the experience of online worship and is worth quoting at length:

What are the advantages and disadvantages? Is it possible to feel gathered in the Quaker sense of that term when we are not in one room together? It is only very recently that we have had the possibility of using online video technology. Does its use emphasise the ‘digital divide’ in our meetings? How do we help those who are unable or feel nervous about using such tools? Does this enrich our worship and if so, how? Is worshipping alone but knowing you are doing so at the same time as the rest of your own Quaker community as deep an experience as being in the one room? Are we being inclusive, in the widest sense of that term? ...

‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ (Matthew 18: 20, authorised version) We gather certainly, in the sense of coming together, but what impels us to do this regularly? Are we still in unity with Query no. 8? Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We

can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us. (Davis 2020: 24–25)

Davis quotes 2.11 from *Quaker Faith and Practice*, the British book of discipline (1995): 'individual experience is not sufficient, and in a Meeting held in the Spirit, there is a giving and receiving between its members, helping one another with or without words' (2020: 25). Davis concludes that 'What Zoom demands of us is no different in essence from meeting for worship in our meeting houses. It asks that we act as true stewards of our discipline' (2020: 28). For most respondents, that challenge had been met. Typical of the responses are the following quotations, which suggest the generally, sometimes surprisingly, positive experiences which have been had:

I think many Friends were surprised by the sense of connection and presence that online worship offers.

After initial strong reservations I have been startled by how adventurously fulfilling it has been.

I like not having to drive to meeting and back. Which means I can have lunch at a regular time. I like the comfort of my own chair and surroundings. Due to hearing difficulties I find it difficult to hear ministry and notices at my normal meeting whereas on line I can increase the sound if necessary if the speaker is very quiet. I have felt part of a world community.

Worship by Zoom is as deep as in the meeting house.

It's worked well, we chat after and I feel closer to the group now. We often sit for the hour in a deep silence it works as though we are together not as individuals.

A joint report from the Quaker body co-ordinating Quaker activity in Europe and Woodbrooke reported a very positive reaction to the non-geographic worship they hosted (Russ and Eccles 2021). Others saw online worship as a pragmatic choice: 'It's a huge loss for me not to be together but online is better than nothing.'

There were many who commented that they hoped the online option would remain part of the Quaker landscape: 'I hope this option will be open always! The quality of course is different but it is ecologically probably better and still a deepening experience.'

Moving forward into the 'new normal' I think it's great for people who can't get to meeting for whatever reason. Maybe we should look at making more of the projector and screen at Meeting Point House to enable us to connect to even more friends when we are, once again, able to meet in person?

Acclaim has not been universal, however, as these quotations illustrate: 'Several people are not taking part as they find meeting via Zoom difficult and unspiritual' and 'Though technically well-managed, I found it as awkward and dreary as a party in a care-home.'

Theologically, respondents raised three sets of issues about how online worship is not equivalent to in-person worship: a) the visual nature of online worship and its incompatibility with Quakerism, b) the lack of physical connection, c) the intrusive nature of technology.

... in my understanding early Quakers eschewed all visual aids to worship (priests, robes, candles, crucifixes, statues, pictures, stained glass etc) as both unnecessary and an impediment to a direct experience/connexion with God.

... zoom – which I use regularly for committee type meetings – is a medium for visual communication ...

... the essence of Quaker worship is inward, spiritual not visual whereas liturgical worship is highly visual and non-conformist worship involves lots of reading of hymns ...

The conclusion here is that online worship could not be gathered, and that it was incongruous to sit in front of a computer even with one's eyes closed. Interestingly, this same respondent affirmed the use of online worship for meetings for business, even though, theologically, these are also ideally rooted in gathered worship.

Here the early Quaker understanding that true spirituality was inward and not outward (Dandelion 2005: 4) has been translated into a critique of the visual. Quakers have traditionally found the outward sacraments unnecessary and unhelpful and outward decoration distracting (Dandelion 2005: 21–28). However, since the 1930s, with the reduction in recorded ministers, Meetings have typically introduced a central table and instituted the practice of adding flowers to it: some Meetings have flower rotas. An informal survey by Pete Duckworth in 2017 found that over 90 per cent of Meetings had flowers:

Reports of other objects on the table commonly include water & glasses, books of other Yearly Meetings, the World Religions Bible, children's books and Visitor's Books. Several respondents reported candles, not just by Friends from the continent, also stones/pebbles and tablecloths. Rarely reported items include berries, needlework, a teddy bear, a model elephant and perfume.

The reaction of responders to the presence of flowers was overwhelmingly positive with over 70% liking them. Those preferring not to have flowers or seeing a conflict with Quaker values amounted to just 5%. Only 2 respondents saw flowers as a distraction. (Duckworth 2017: 2)

Typical of Duckworth's data was the comment: 'The flowers express the love and welcome that we want people attending meeting to recognise. They are a reminder of the beauty of living things' (Duckworth 2017: 2). Thus, while there is rarely a picture on a Meeting House wall, there are other forms of visual display.

The visual display online is of other worshippers, albeit in their domestic settings, which is also normative within the Meeting House setting. Perhaps, framed within a computer screen, the aesthetics are less appealing, or that there is something lost in online visual display. Overall, the argument made by this respondent seems to be incoherent, in that it both assumes a lack of visual elements

when people gather in person, despite the importance of ‘seeing one another’s faces’ (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 6.02), and puts too much emphasis on the visual in Zoom, which as a platform also carries audio and written messages (so much so that some individuals will participate without any visual element, either via a telephone or by joining with the camera function turned off).

The second set of hesitations focus on the loss of physical proximity:

When lockdown first happened, I attended a number of the new online meetings for worship with enthusiasm. Initially it was good to connect with Friends online but after a while I started to feeling uneasy with the experience.

I came to understand over time, and after some perseverance, that it was to do with my understanding of what lies at the core of the experience of Friends worship was what was troubling me; that we join together as individuals with the intent of being collectively attentive to God’s Spirit in that place, at that time and that each meeting has an exciting potential.

What I found lacking with attending Zoom meetings for worship was the physical connectivity that happens when sitting with Friends in a meeting room, it was somehow like being one step removed. I understand that you can worship alone but for me it is the potential of being in a physical space with other worshippers of a like mind that makes for the collective spiritual experience that over the last 30 years I have come to understand as Friends meeting for worship.

I found I was getting stressed at the prospect of joining online meetings, this may be partly explained by the fact that I have an introvert personality, but it was also a strong feeling of being exposed and the lack of connectivity that I felt on Zoom made me come to the decision to stop attending online worship for the duration of the pandemic. I intend to return to meeting once we are able to do so.

Here there is a sense that, without physical proximity, something is lost. The respondent acknowledges the possibility of worshipping alone, and some European Young Friends Meetings in the 1980s held experimental Meetings with, for example, worshippers scattered throughout a forest, each alone in their own space. Quaker theology does present this as problematical in terms of testing discernment and or of sharing/ receiving ministry (the giving and taking that Davis mentions).

Can online worship convey a sense of Presence, in terms of both being with/ among other worshippers and sensing the Divine? Another commented:

I have severely impaired eyesight and Zoom into business meetings and lectures by telephone. If I used a computer, I’d be able to see little on the screen, so would still rely on my hearing. In fact, the same is true when I meet for worship physically in a meeting house. Unless Friends have spoken to me, I usually can’t tell who is sitting near me. And yet, at some level, I often do know. And yet, even when the shapes on chairs are merely blurs, I can feel an energy, an electricity, linking us all to one another and to the heart of our worship. That ‘electricity’ produces the magic of Quaker worship, and I don’t sense that connection in any Zoom meeting. Although I may be proved wrong ... I don’t think anyone does sense it on Zoom.

Others commented that the total silence of collective muting during worship was ‘unnaturally’ quiet, as there were no background noises such as breathing or coughing at all. However, others felt online worship to be equivalent to in-person worship. Two respondents voiced: ‘Being present with friends in silence is much the same online as it is in the meeting’ and ‘The feeling of the presence of the spirit is just as strong online.’

A slightly different hesitation around the sense of physical connectedness was expressed by this Quaker: ‘I don’t like Meeting via Zoom because everyone is too close – just head and shoulders. I find this suffocating’. Some used the facility to hide their own image but another group found it more difficult to worship when people had their camera turned totally off.

The third set of hesitations focus on the intrusive and divisive nature of the technology: ‘I personally find technology intrusive in a worship context.’ Another: ‘I definitely prefer not worshipping online. It was a distraction for me.’

Online worship was seen by some to be divisive because it was available only to those with computers/internet or because some joined the online worship while others chose not to. There was also a concern about the role of ‘Host’ and whether the control inherent in the role was compatible with the ‘Quaker way’. In this analysis, a Host is seen to be distinct from an Elder appointed by the Meeting to nurture the worshipping community or a doorkeeper in a large in-person meeting.

Some of those with hesitations feared for the long-term consequences of the acceptance of online worship: ‘my greatest concern is that, if we continue relying on Zoom for some time, we may gradually lose that precious Quaker magic without even noticing it’s gone.’ Similarly: ‘The whole online event is unavoidable in the short term but the enthusiasm which underpins it is disturbing and ominous!’ and ‘The longer this goes on, the more we feel our Meeting will suffer.’ It is unclear whether this comment is referring to worship or the community or both.

Another thought that online worship may be helpful in some places but was not required in Britain: ‘For seriously isolated Friends I quite see the value of anything that creates contact and a sense of community. But for the most part that is not the position in Britain Yearly Meeting.’

Discussion

At the time of writing in May 2021, it is unclear what pattern of Meetings will emerge as normative within Britain Yearly Meeting. Some Quakers are excited by the adoption of technology and the new possibilities it offers, including for some attending meeting when it had not been possible in person. They hope for blended meetings and celebrate the reduction in the carbon footprint of the ‘drive into town’. They are excited by the increased sense of a global Quaker family and the ability to be joined by those from elsewhere and the ability to join worship elsewhere. ‘Worship on line has held us together in this period and expanded our attendance with visits from Friends across the world. We have adapted and are still

learning, but feel confident this will remain at least part of our ongoing pattern of worship.’ Additional programmed elements to enhance online worship have created in some meetings a spirit of creativity and innovation. Worship in many cases is shorter than previously (one blended meeting cited mask-wearing being uncomfortable for more than half an hour) but more frequent meetings have in some cases fostered a greater sense of community.

We have learnt that we can’t run Meeting for Worship, Afterword, Notices and Meeting for Business consecutively in one day over Zoom in the way we used to in person. Screen time is a strain so we focus on Meeting for Worship and break up into other sessions over the week for study group and business meeting.

The theological questions remain for some and the joy of meeting in person when it was possible was keenly reported by some.

Meeting for worship in person – it was just wonderful to be back in the Meeting House, and when the weather is good in the garden; those of us attending in person expressed our excitement/anticipation/eagerness/joy to be there. It was as though none of us had quite realised how important we each felt about attending Meeting for Worship in person. Having said all that about our physical meeting, while we were in lockdown and the Friends Meeting House was closed, Meeting for Worship on zoom was a revelation to many of us – it worked! And it definitely helped us to see each other, even just on screen.

For others, the experience has overtaken initial hesitations and concerns: ‘In some ways it is not the same but in other ways it is even better than ordinary meeting.’

Getting the sense of a worldwide group of like-minded people, bringing such a range of experience, is a great lift to my life. There is also a regular band of us that turn up for the Woodbrooke mid-week meetings and again it is lovely to see and hear such experience and wisdom. Some of these Meetings for Worship have brought people with some family connection to Quakers, but who have never been themselves until now. There is something wonderfully sobering to meet a sea of other serious, open faces. It just draws you immediately into the silence. I do hope these go on after the lockdown. There must be tens of thousands in the UK who cannot easily get out in normal times, or who are lonely, or who would like something mid-week to keep them going. My faith and interest in Quaker ways has flourished enormously during this period.

The adoption of blended meetings may also bring about new practices that may ultimately be helpful. In this case, the welcome to Meetings becomes explicit: ‘As we have a “blended” meeting, we find it helpful to name out loud all those attending. We do this at the beginning of the meeting. In this way everyone knows who is “here”.’

Another was blended using different spaces:

We held both an outdoors meeting for worship in a lovely garden setting and an online meeting, simultaneously, during the summer. The greater number attended

the outdoor meeting. We are about to try an indoors meeting in a hired hall, and will do this once a month during the winter if restrictions allow.

Meeting Houses may become less central to the life of Meetings. Indeed, for those who worship wholly online, the Meeting House becomes an anachronism, a financial burden and an increase in the carbon footprint of the movement. Further, geographical communities become potentially marginal. At the time of writing in May 2021, one non-geographic meeting has already suggested becoming a permanent and independent community. Quakerism could become a global phenomenon divided by worship style rather than by geographically based yearly meetings. The question this raises are then about the functions of worshipping communities and, indeed, how community is fostered online.

In the following consideration, one informant explores some of the theological implications of these changes.

One effect of Covid is that it has made us all aware of the possibilities that the digital world holds for the spiritual journey. We understand more deeply than we did that the digital world is just another space in which it is possible to meet God. Digital spaces are in principle no different to all the other spaces humans have made – houses, ships, prisons, schools, marketplaces, churches, meeting houses – all hold potential for the spirit, none hold a guarantee of it.

I think many meetings have so far treated online worship as ‘helpful but lesser’ than ordinary meeting for worship. But if we take the experience of those of us who have met every day online over these last 18 months seriously, then a different truth speaks loudly to me: that the practice of daily online worship together is potentially transformative in ways that my own face to face meeting has rarely been for me.

This participant worships online every morning with a small, geographically dispersed group. Their experience of the depth and quality of this worship informs their reflections. They continue:

Speculating, I think these changes are likely to include:

- People increasingly belonging to several Quaker communities. In time, perhaps none of these will be based on geography.
- To the extent that these new forms of online worship are successful then they may undermine traditional place-based, face to face meetings.
- In some respects, online worship means meetings become less insular and more homogenous. Visiting other meetings both here and abroad makes it much easier to share good ideas and see the idiosyncrasies of one’s own meeting. In other ways online Quakerism may lead to multiple different kinds of meetings as it is much easier to find like-minded others. This may lead to further fragmentation and ‘echo-chamber’ group dynamics. But it may also lead to much deeper spiritual journeying and much more effective social action.

- Online worship means that it is now possible to combine worship and social action in new ways. A network focused on environmental action for example could also choose to worship together each morning. This may enrich both worship and witness in unexpected ways. I think that in time this may prove to be the most significant thing to grow out of online worship.
- The move to online worship may destabilise decision-making within the Society as local meetings struggle and the area meeting structure perhaps becomes anachronistic. If I had a concern that I wanted to test out right now, I do not think that my local or area meeting would necessarily be the right place to go – although I don't know where would be.

In all of these axes, the potential for division remains. One reported: 'We seem to have created two meetings for worship as generally no-one attends both the online and the in-person meetings.' What is clear, however, is the way in which British Friends relatively quickly adapted to new circumstances and adopted what was for many new technologies to ensure that worship as the central element of Quaker community continued. This in itself challenges ideas of conservative attitude to form, what Dandelion has termed a 'behavioural creed' (2005: 67), although many of the objections to online worship listed above – the loss of physical proximity, the lack of hierarchy, and technology – are linked to changes in the perception of form. Additionally, the aspiration of maintaining unprogrammed worship based in silence has remained central. What remains less settled is whether online worship represents the same theological elements of worship as in-person meetings, and what the future of unprogrammed worship and of worshipping communities may look like.

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