

'WILL THE LAST (WOMAN) FRIEND TO LEAVE
PLEASE ENSURE THAT THE LIGHT REMAINS SHINING?'

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This paper analyses trends in membership of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, the number of members per Meeting and the changes in the gender balance of membership. It identifies polynomial equations to curves that match the data very closely. An accelerating decline in membership commencing in 1990 is identified. Trends are extrapolated to determine an end-point in 2032. The paper makes clear that as this date approaches the relationship between the data and trend is liable to breakdown.

KEYWORDS

Quakers, membership, trends, decline, extinction, Meetings, attenders, gender

Alistair Heron's publications on membership, *The Future of British Quakers*, *On Being a Quaker* and *Our Quaker Identity*, collectively developed a thesis that in the middle of the twentieth century membership of the Religious Society of Friends was offered too easily;¹ the result being that there is now no longer any certainty whether anyone at a Meeting for Worship is there to seek communion with a Christian God or simply to obtain comfort from being among a group of tolerant, uncomplaining individuals. In *The Future of British Quakers*, Heron provides some statistical data from the 1980s onwards, though it covers too short a time span and contains too few data to draw clear conclusions. This paper examines statistically trends in membership, to identify whether something really did happen to the Quaker identity in the 1960s and 1970s, and draws conclusions about the date at which the Society may cease to exist. Tabular statements from 1935 to 2003, covering the period 1933 to 2002, were examined to determine long-term trends.

Stroud and Dandelion in 'British Quakers and a New Kind of End-Time Prophecy' have carried out a similar exercise.² However, they include child membership in their study. The abolition of automatic child membership in the 1950s will itself cause a year on year decline in the total membership of the Society, as an unknowable number of those admitted earlier fail to proceed to

full adult membership and subsequent generations of children are not admitted. The result will be a false impression of the rate of decline of the Society. A safer and statistically more accurate approach is to concentrate on adult membership only, as in this study.

Overall trends in adult membership are examined in Figure 1: Total, Male and Female Membership Between 1935 and 2002. The topmost line is the total number of adult Members for each year, the middle line the number of women Friends and the bottom line the number of men. Four distinct periods in the pattern of total membership can be identified. First, from 1935 to 1941 there was a slight rise in numbers followed by a gentle decline from 1941 to about 1960. Next, in c.1960 membership began to rise, peaking at about 1975 before declining to a short plateau lasting until c.1991 or 1992. The final phase was from 1992 onwards when membership began to decline sharply. This last trend has continued. Clearly, something did happen to membership in the 1960s and 1970s and there are two possibilities. The first is that, as Heron suggests, membership restrictions were relaxed in the period and almost anyone who requested it was allowed to join Friends, irrespective of their theology or lack of it. However, it was also the time when children brought into membership by their parents before 1959 began to be first counted among adult Members and then lost again as they drifted away in their early twenties. This is a common phenomenon among Friends, but whether it occurred in sufficient numbers to fully account for the peak is unknown.

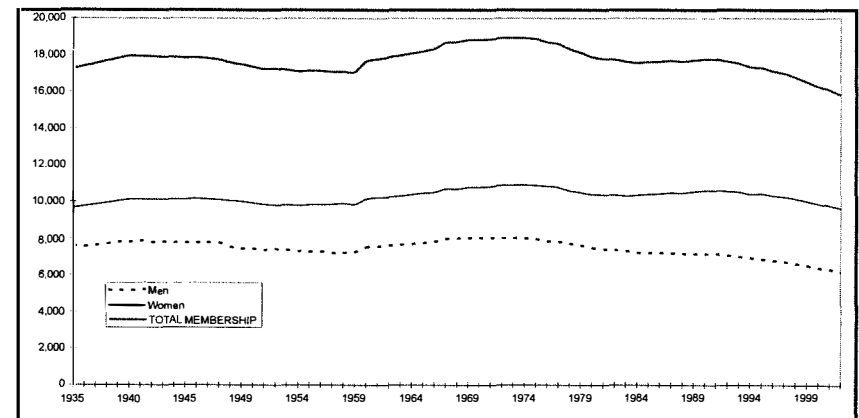


Figure 1: Total, Male and Female Membership Between 1935 and 2002

The subsequent decline in membership is, however, both real and worrying. A closer look at the period from 1990 onwards (Figure 2: Membership 1990 to 2002) shows that the decline is accelerating. A trend line has been added to the data. Trend lines are smooth lines described by an equation. How close a trend line is to real data is indicated by a value, R^2 . If R^2 is equal to 1, the data and trend line match exactly. This never happens in real life. If R^2 is zero, there is no connection between the data and the trend line at all. In practice, an R^2 value

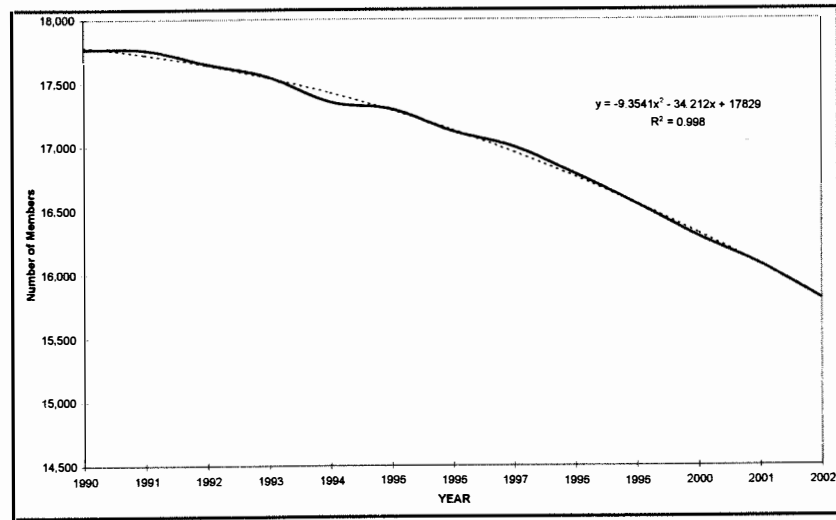


Figure 2: Membership 1990 - 2002

above 0.9 demonstrates a very close connection between the data and the equation describing the trend line.³ In Figure 2, the connection between the second order polynomial trend line and the data is over 0.99! It means that the calculated equation can be used to predict the course of membership, assuming the trend remains constant. In which case the membership of the Society will be zero in 2032, just 28 years from now. In fact the trend will not continue toward zero so predictably and the date is not precise. As the number of Members decreases the relationship between the trend-line equation and the data will begin to break down. With one thousand Members, admission to the Society of an individual will change the total by 0.1 per cent. With only 100

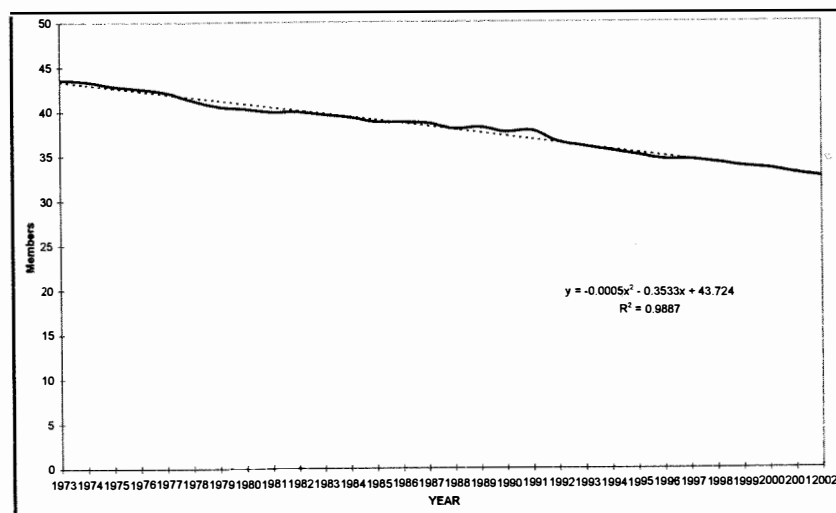


Figure 3: Members per Meeting 1973 - 2002

Members, an admission to membership would change the total by 1 per cent. Thus, with a smaller membership, the total number will fluctuate more, making statistical prediction increasingly uncertain.

The diminution in membership will make the problems of finding officers of Meetings worse. The number of Members in the average Preparative Meeting is shown in Figure 3: Members per Meeting 1973-2002. The data presented here depend on two variables: the number of Members and the number of Meetings and hence the figures fluctuate more. The figure shows that the average number of Members per Meeting has declined from about 43.6 in 1973 to about 33.6 in 2001. Already many Meetings struggle to support themselves and, as the number of Members falls, more will be faced with the possibility of closure. It is likely that Members from Meetings that do close will at first travel to the next nearest, with the result that raw data would show a rise in the average number of members per Meeting. However, it is also likely that those who travel some distance to Meeting for Worship may not be as actively involved as they were. The numbers of 'active' Members would hence most likely decrease, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of each congregation, thus exacerbating organisational problems. Meetings are also the main form of outreach of the Society and the fewer there are, the less opportunity there will be for enquirers to find out about the Society. Over time, the closure of Meetings cannot but hasten the decline in membership.

Figure 1 showed that trends are similar for both women and men, but more accentuated in the case of men. The ratio of women to men Members will as a result change with time. The change is shown in Figure 4: Ratio of Women to Men Members 1935 - 2002 and again a second order polynomial trend fits the real data very closely. This time the relationship seems to have held for the entire period of study. Extrapolating the curve suggests that by the time the 'end' is

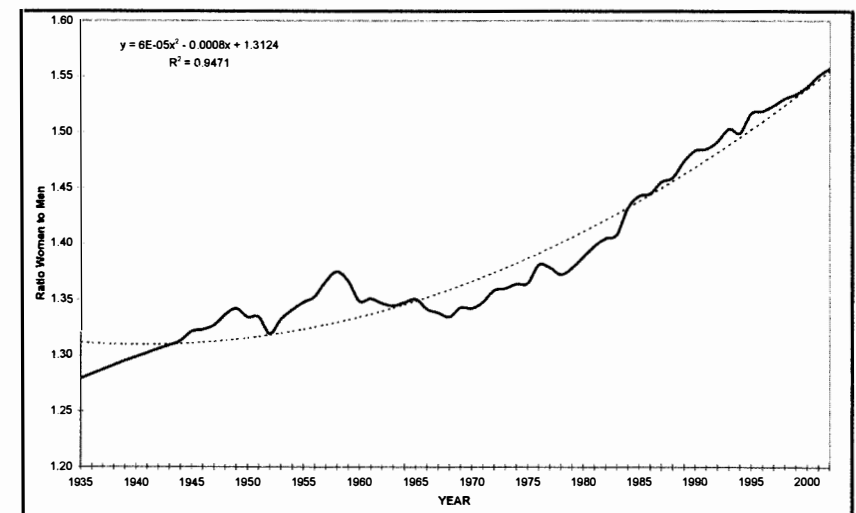


Figure 4: Ratio of Women to Men Members 1935 - 2002

reached in the early 2030s, there will be almost twice as many women Members as men.

It is commonly believed that persuading Attenders to join the Religious Society of Friends would be a solution to the numbers problem. The number of recognised Attenders, or individuals who regularly attend Meetings over a period but who are not Members, has been recorded in tabular statements since 1962. They have only ever been about 50 per cent of the number of Members. The pattern of variation in the total of recorded Attenders is very similar to that for the membership as whole, peaking between 1972 and about 1993 at just over 9,000, and thereafter declining sharply, though at a slower rate than that of members. There is insufficient data to draw conclusions about trends and it will be interesting to see if the decline continues. Since membership is declining more rapidly than 'attendership', the percentage of Attenders in Meetings is increasing, a factor that perhaps gives rise to the general but mistaken impression of more people attending but not joining. The management of Meetings will therefore become even more problematic than suggested above unless ways are found to include non-Members.

	2001	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030	2032
No. Members	16,300	15,200	13,400	10,600	8,300	5,100	1,300	0
Ratio Women to Men	1.5:1	1.6:1	1.6:1	1.7:1	1.7:1	1.8:1	1.9:1	
<i>Women</i>	<i>9900</i>	<i>9263</i>	<i>8266</i>	<i>6630</i>	<i>5260</i>	<i>3272</i>	<i>847</i>	
<i>Men</i>	<i>6,500</i>	<i>5937</i>	<i>5134</i>	<i>3970</i>	<i>3040</i>	<i>1828</i>	<i>453</i>	
Avg. No. Members per Meeting	34	32	30	28	26	25	23	

Figure 5: Summary of data

The numbers in Figure 5 above are calculated from the trend lines imposed on the data and summarise the above discussion, rounded to whole numbers.

Averages mask a range covering the very largest and very smallest Meetings; a typical Meeting is likely to have fewer Members than the above suggests. If one wanted to build an imaginative scenario from the data, it would be as follows. Sometime in the late 2020s or early 2030s a Yearly Meeting composed of the few remaining Members will meet to wind up the affairs of the Society. Two-thirds of the people present will be women and one-third will be men. In c.2032 when the last meeting house closes for the last time, it will probably be a woman Friend who will have to decide how best to ensure that the Light will remain shining.

NOTES

- 1 Heron, A., *The Future of British Quakers*, Kelso: Curlew Productions, July 2001; *On Being a Quaker: membership, past, present and future*, Kelso: Curlew Productions 2000; *Our Quaker Identity: religious society or friendly society?* Kelso: Curlew Productions, 1999.
- 2 Stroud, C. and Dandelion, P., 'British Quakers and a New Kind of End-time Prophecy', *Quaker Studies* 9 (2004), pp.120-25.
- 3 R^2 is a measure of the predictive power of the equation describing the trend line; that is how closely values calculated from an equation correspond to the real data. An R^2 of 0.9 means that 90 per cent of the variability of the data from trend can be predicted by the equation.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Bill Chadkirk has degrees in Applied Physics and Modern European History, and a diploma in International Studies. He is a member of the management committee of Quaker Voluntary Action. Although currently employed in Friends House, the views expressed in this article are entirely his own.

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