

September 23, 2023

Dear Friends,

At yearly meeting sessions in August, the Faith & Practice Revision Committee presented the draft Introduction to the book. We are now sending it out to monthly meetings. We hope you will explore the text as a community and have a rich discussion of the contents. We are asking you to send us feedback that represents you, corporately, as a meeting, rather than a list of remarks by individuals.

This Introduction will follow a brief preface to the book and precede the Illustrative Experience of Friends chapter, which is an extensive collection of extracts voicing the faith experience of Quakers. These texts are available both in the 2014 Interim Faith & Practice and on the New England Yearly Meeting website (<https://neym.org/read-approved-chapters-faith-and-practice>).

The purpose of this Introduction is to preview the experience and practices of New England Friends that are addressed throughout our Revised Faith & Practice. The description of the Quaker Path is more fully developed in the chapters that follow.

We look forward to hearing any corporate reactions to the Introduction. In particular, we would like you to consider these queries:

- Does the naming of the Quaker nature of sacrament in paragraph 6 resonate with your meeting? If not, can you explain?
- How do you understand the Source of testimony? Does Paragraph 16 name your understanding of testimony?
- We have avoided the term “Quaker values”. Do you think there are values that are uniquely Quaker? What are they?
- Is this Introduction something you can hear together as a meeting?

Thank you as always for sharing this journey with us. The most important part of this process is how meetings engage with it. We look forward to receiving your responses by March 1, 2024. Please send responses to [fandp@neym.org](mailto:fandp@neym.org). This Cover Letter and the Introduction can be found at [neym.org/engage-texts-currently-under-discussion](https://neym.org/engage-texts-currently-under-discussion).

In the Light,  
The Faith & Practice Revision Committee

Doug Armstrong  
Marion Athearn  
Maggie Edmondson  
Eric Edwards  
Eleanor Godway

Margaret Hawthorn  
Carolyn Hilles  
Phebe McCosker, clerk  
Sue Reilly

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## **Introduction**

1) This book is a guide to the faith of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and how it is experienced and practiced in New England Yearly Meeting today. It is intended both for those who are new to Quakerism and for those who are already following this spiritual path.

2) For generations, Quakers have written and revised books to articulate fresh understandings of our faith and way of worship, and the practices that support and express that faith. This rewrite is also a response to requests from within New England Yearly Meeting for more comprehensive information on the structure and spiritual underpinning of Friends' practices. The Faith and Practice Revision Committee hopes that our careful listening and discernment -- and the review from Friends throughout the Yearly Meeting -- has resulted in a book that will serve New England Friends and meetings.

3) Books of Faith & Practice provide guidance and counsel to Friends about a Spirit-centered personal life, and to meetings as they worship, do business, and offer fellowship and pastoral care to those in our communities. They also encourage reflection through queries, advices, and extracts from the writings of both contemporary and historical Friends; many Quakers use them for devotional reading. We invite you to engage with this *Faith and Practice* on your own and with other Friends.

### **I. The Quaker Path**

4) New England Friends hold that there is a living, dynamic, spiritual presence which is both within us and transcends us, and is available to all people. We come from various

backgrounds and have different ways of naming the Divine -- for example God, the Spirit, the Christ Within, the Inward Light, the Seed, or the Presence. Each person's choice of language reflects what they have come to know as they have sought to live more fully in communion with the Divine. Whatever name Friends use, we are clear that each person can live in direct relationship with God.

5) However named, the Spirit is experienced as full of grace, eternal, not belonging to the self but entirely accessible at the self's center at all times. This is true even when we struggle with doubt or when God seems absent. That spiritual center is our guide in life. It is a presence that cannot be extinguished. It is present in everything that can be known and all that is beyond our knowing. A sense of unity with the Divine may come to us during worship, during devotional reading, in times of personal retirement, or when we spend time in the natural world. No other authority speaks to us with the same power.

6) Our faith is dependent on few and simple outward forms: gathering together for worship and waiting in stillness for the motions of the Spirit. When we gather together in the silence of waiting worship, when all those present sense the ministry of the Spirit, we know a profound connection with each other and with God; this sense of communion is nothing we can schedule or willfully bring about. Any of us may experience an intrushing of the Spirit, where we are "broken open," or "baptized by the Spirit." Any of us may experience a quiet, steady awareness of the Inward Light in our lives. When we recognize Quaker faith and practice as our own path, we say we have become "convinced." All these experiences have the power to transform our hearts and minds, bringing us into harmony with the Spirit. Friends believe our actions have the potential to be sacramental— visible signs of an invisible grace.

7) Friends' faith in continuing revelation - the awareness that God's Truth is continually unfolding to us - has kept us from formulating a creed. Quakerism invites much freedom for personal spiritual inquiry, reflecting the experience of God's availability to teach, comfort, and minister to each person directly and to the community as a whole. This means living as seekers, always ready for new openings. We aspire to be a community that invites seekers to join us and rejoices when they, too, can affirm, *This I know from my own experience!*

8) While Friends place their faith in the living Spirit of God, we test our spiritual understandings through the discernment and prayer of our meetings. The spiritual life encompasses both individual faith and corporate discernment. We are supported by historical witness as well as Scripture and other inspirational writings, but our direct experience of the Divine -- tested in community -- is our ultimate authority. The same

Spirit that inspired the written words of Scripture continues to reveal itself. Scripture provides an important window into the workings of the Spirit but is not an authority in itself.

## **II. The Corporate Experience of Friends**

### **A. In worship.**

9) Our practice of expectant waiting worship is one of the ways we stand apart from most Christian worshipping communities. We wait together, trusting the Spirit that has led others throughout history to guide us now. Worship may be punctuated by messages prompted by the Spirit, or the entire time may pass wordlessly.

10) We hold within our Yearly Meeting some who find the encouragement and guidance of a pastor is helpful to their own and their meeting's life. Worship in a programmed meeting includes a prepared message and usually music, spoken prayer, and readings, as well as a period of waiting worship. The hope is that, whether programmed or unprogrammed, our time in worship leads to an openness to the Spirit and an experience of communion with each other and with God.

11) Friends are not unique in our faith in the possibility of direct communication with God—all the great mystical traditions share this. Our more unusual understanding is that this capacity in every human being is best nurtured, tested, and seasoned in group worship.

12) Friends' communal worship can be tender, requiring great trust among the worshippers. This experience may be of great comfort, or may challenge us with difficult and uncomfortable truths. At its best, our worship allows the Spirit to enter our hearts and bring each of us under its discipline.

### **B. In meeting for business.**

13) Corporate discernment is Friends' unique and precious practice for reaching decisions. It is firmly grounded in discerning divine will. It encompasses our experience that by listening together we can be opened to God's Truth and see beyond our different understandings. It includes the experiential conviction that our attentiveness to the Presence in our midst and our willingness to fall under the Spirit's guidance leads us to right action. The authority to act comes from finding ourselves in unity with the Spirit as we reach a decision together.

14) At its best, the discipline of corporate discernment ties us together as a community, preventing the community from fracturing into individuals, each following their own interpretation of the Christ Within. The community supports and guides individuals in their journeys just as surely as the individuals inspire the community. Exploring our different understandings allows for the complexity of Truth to emerge, providing opportunities for growth and insight and invigorating the life of the community. We do not believe in either majority rule or in a human leadership that must be followed: we recognize that the majority is not necessarily correct.

15) We understand that God's Truth cannot be held without love—that in attempting to hold Truth without love we lose both. We learn not to ride roughshod over members with whom we disagree, but to take the time to listen to them and together to wait for God's guidance. It is not our aim just to get things done quickly. Our meetings for business are to discern God's will. The process can be long, but in patiently seeking the Spirit's guidance we build up the community of faith.

### **III. Our Life is Our Testimony**

16) Our experience of the Spirit, both individually and corporately, has led us to be moved toward what are sometimes considered traditional Friends' testimonies, such as peace, simplicity, equality, and integrity. However, these are not outward standards to strive toward: they are qualities toward which we find ourselves moved by the influence of the Presence in our midst. Responding to the promptings of God in our everyday actions is how we live faithful lives. An individual's—or a community's—perception of the Light can grow, necessitating a change in action in order to live into the new insight they have been given. Friends' rejection of enslavement in the 1700s is an example of their confronting a cultural norm that they could not reconcile with their growing spiritual understanding. No one can foresee what testimonies to Truth will arise in the future. Each generation faces its own challenges in living out the Quaker message.

17) We are aware of how easily we can be co-opted by the culture, characterized by individualism, materialism, and busyness. We see clearly how we fall short; most of us are not living lives of marked simplicity, or arresting integrity, or astounding prayerfulness. The ultimate test of faithfulness is how Friends live. Our life is our testimony.

Also see: *The Publishers of Truth in England in the chapter "A Brief History of Friends in New England" in the Interim Faith and Practice 2014.*