

Quakers are prone to rail against institutions and structures—believing us to be more organic  
We don't vote or have a bishop or pope or other hierarchical structures  
We don't have a liturgy and form of worship  
The idea being that we simply gather and follow the Spirit's Leadings  
That we are really a movement

But the reality is that there are Quaker institutions  
The local church or Meeting  
Yearly Meetings  
FGC, FUM, EFCI  
FWCC, FCNL, AFSC, etc.

Do Quaker institutions have value today?  
Noah Merrill said, *"I believe that movements need tools, and that's what institutions are essentially."*

George Fox did not intend to start an established church, much less a new denomination  
He simply spoke truth as it was revealed to him  
He called people back to primitive Christianity like we find in the New Testament  
Believing that we had lost our way and that the passion of early Christians could be accessed  
In time he heard God tell him that there was a great people to be gathered  
But he still was not thinking of starting a church or a denomination  
It was a call to renewal in the established church of the day  
It was also a movement—not bound by sect or religion—a call for all to hear Christ speak

The "institutional" accommodations that we know today were only added as needed  
Rather than design a church—they responded to the needs as they rose among themselves  
Given this situation, these needs—how can we meet that in a way that answers  
What is the simplest structure that will allow us to meet those needs?

For example—membership

Originally Quakers did not have membership—people just came and were part of us  
But the movement grew and expanded and at the same time many were put in jail for their faith  
Parents would be put in jail and the children left at home—but without DSHS and foster care  
It became essential to clarify which local group of Friends would take responsibility for their home  
Who would take responsibility—financial and otherwise—for the children?  
Who would see that the crops were harvested? Tend the store? Manage the business?  
It was less about who is in and who is out, than caring for one another in practical ways  
Today we tend to talk about an individual member's commitment to the church  
But what about the church's commitment to the member?  
Have we forgotten our responsibility to truly care for one another?  
How do we meet our needs of community, belonging, and mutual responsibility today?  
Do our current structures of membership effectively communicate and meet this need?  
Are there other ways to respond more effectively?  
Either by changing how we do membership—  
Or by finding a new way to do community, belonging, and mutual responsibility

A modern day example is Administry

When I came in 2000 it seemed that we had a robust committee structure

In fact, people served on multiple committees and were growing weary in some cases  
I began saying that maturity in Christ is not serving on another committee  
As people moved and things here shifted, we considered what was truly needed  
    Faith and Practice said we needed Elders, Trustees, and a nominating committee  
    Everything else was optional  
    A wise Friend reduced their structure to an Administrative Committee  
    Looking at requirements and minimal structures to function  
    We proposed combining elders and trustees into one committee  
    Naming them separately, but meeting together as one committee  
In the Meeting for Business to discuss it, the term Administry was coined and stuck  
Currently our elders and trustees meet together and do our work together  
    Naming them separately ensures that the different gifts and abilities are present  
    Working together allows us to consider spiritual needs and nuts and bolts—simultaneously  
A separate nominating committee does their work in the spring to consider and present names

Institutions and organizations don't bring renewal—they aren't the source of our hope  
Yet they are—or can be—the means through which we open the doors to the Source of Hope—to God  
But too often they take on a form and structure that requires our energy to sustain it  
Over time we become consumed with sustaining the structure  
We need to go back—consider basic needs and how can we meet them with the least structure  
No form is so sacred that it can't be reinvented in the current context—staying nimble

True for the new Yearly Meeting—what are the minimal structures we need to breed life and hope?

True for the established church, yearly meeting, Friends organization—or any group that gathers  
What are the minimal structures we need so that we can effectively live into our callings?  
What do we need to lay down because it no longer serves our purposes and callings?  
What new needs and callings are emerging among us and how do we respond?

Doing church this way is less orderly and more ambiguous—but that allows for new life to emerge  
A friend once told me that as a Quaker pastor—I needed to become comfortable with chaos  
    Rather than chaos, I like to use the word ambiguity—  
    I must allow ambiguity in order for new life and callings to come forth  
    It becomes my job to mid-wife the birthings and growth without controlling it

In Luke 5:36-39 Jesus tells a parable that illustrates this truth  
Jesus is stepping back and saying this is why everything about his ministry is so different

Everything Jesus does and is—is a radical break with common religious practices  
He didn't come to just patch up the old ways—i.e., change out fasting for a dinner celebration  
    Or to change the rituals to be more friendly to the current culture  
It is a brand new deal

Sewing with cloth—the fabrics need to match  
Before sewing, all fabrics are preshrunk so they don't pull because of shrinkage  
Putting new, unshrunk fabric on an old piece of clothing will cause things to pucker and pull

When making wine, they put it into a wineskin where it would ferment

New wineskins were soft and pliable so they could stretch with the fermenting process  
Old wineskins were brittle and would crack or break as the wine fermented

Jesus pinpoints the tension between the new wine of the kingdom and the old religious structures  
The kingdom wine of Jesus cracked the brittle skins of the Sadducees, Scribes and Pharisees

The amazing thing about the new wine of Jesus—is that it is always new and always needs new skins

Jesus didn't just come once to do a radical transformation

Jesus comes all the time—he is our present teacher and lives with us 24/7

The new wineskins are the only thing that can contain what Jesus is doing today

But it isn't just a giving into the culture around us

Jesus didn't go the way of either the Greeks or Romans

In fact it was more Hebrew, more kin to the Old Testament

Yet it was entirely different

Are we as Quakers able to hold the fire and wine of Jesus?

I think yes by constantly having new wineskins

But it is counterculture and unnatural—by nature we want to hold on to the old way

Like Jesus we don't throw out everything

We don't abandon ourselves to the culture around us

We stay Quaker—kin to our history

But we let God remake it

Yes by letting go of the forms and structures that served in the past, yet no longer function well

Yes by embracing the ambiguity that comes with simply trusting and following the living God

Yes by staying minimalist and simply meeting the real needs

Yes by welcoming the change, fire, and new wine of the Spirit, allowing it to transform us