

Who are Young Friends?

A Young Friend is a young Friend is a Young friend is a young friend.

Young Friends are like 'fellow explorers' — we support each other on our journey.

Gertrude Stein wrote 'A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' in her poem 'Sacred Emily'. The repetition in this sentence has been said to invoke the true meaning of a rose, and Stein herself said that in this sentence the rose is red for the first time in English poetry. It also encourages us to ponder the question, 'What IS A ROSE to us?'

We don't presume to have all the answers to what a rose is, or even what a Young Friend is; however, the process of writing the 2010 Backhouse Lecture has taken us all on a journey of discovery of what Young Friends means to us. We recognise that Young Friends is certainly not just one Young Friend, or even one belief, or even one thought. To come closer to understanding what a Young Friend is, we must hear what Young Friends means to each and

every one of us. While we don't all necessarily agree on anything, by bringing all the Young Friends' voices together, the true meaning of Young Friend is clearer and we can hear one voice.

The current group of Australian Young Friends can be traced back more than a decade, to around the time of Perth Yearly Meeting 1998. Some of us have been attending Young Friends gatherings and events for this entire time, some have joined since then and some have moved on from Young Friends.

We have had a few pivotal moments along the way. In Perth, Young Friends and Junior Young Friends came together to write the 'Young People's Statement' about our experience of being young people in Australia Yearly Meeting. At Yearly Meeting in Brisbane in 2000 we ran a Summer School called 'From isolation to inclusion'. At Yearly Meeting in Tasmania in 2007 Young Friends were challenged as a group about the way we operate, our own processes of exclusion and inclusion, as well as the diversity of the Young Friend experience.

One of the things that has come to characterise this group is our desire to be involved in the life of the Yearly Meeting. An example of this is the fact that there are two places on most Yearly Meeting committees designated for Young Friends.

Various local groups in various locations have brought together Young Friends for gatherings of a spiritual and social nature to try to add more local opportunities for community building. The most recent example of this is the Canberra group, whose story you can read in Appendix 1.

The Young Friends community is, in some ways, just a microcosm of the broader Society. A lot of the concerns we talk about, and a lot of the things that inspire us, will sound familiar to Quakers. We are diverse, like Quakers as a whole. We have varying levels of knowledge about Quakerism, and varying levels of interest in the spiritual, social justice or just plain social aspects of Quakers. We are explorers, each on our own spiritual journey, and we find that having some company on the way can teach us new things and help us through the rough patches.

Spiritual community

Although we have many things in common with the broader Quaker family, it is important to note that Young Friends is a distinct and unique expression of spiritual community. We are not just a mini-Quaker gathering and neither are we simply a social club. We are also not a spiritual community in the traditional sense; that is, a group of people bound together by a common belief. Rather, we are a community of young people exploring spirituality and life together, within an identifiable Quaker context.

We create a place for young people to experiment with, and draw from the Society's unwritten rules and written history, as we explore our spirituality as individuals and as a community. As one Young Friend said:

I feel like I get things from Young Friends that aren't available in the wider Quaker community. That's why I stick around — for the ability to have spiritual conversations that aren't really structured. I don't have conversations that challenging anywhere else.

We recognise that Quakers have varied beliefs. For many of us this is what attracted us to Quakers, and is what sets Quakers apart from many other religious traditions. However, as a Young Friends community we experience a great tension between creating a diverse culture, embracing a broad range of beliefs within Young Friends, and maintaining our Quaker identity.

This freedom of belief and acceptance of everyone means that there is naturally a reluctance to articulate exactly what we believe, both individually and collectively. Without a corporate spiritual identity, we struggle with questions about who we are. While not having a creed serves to encourage a broader range of seekers to Quakers, it also raises the question 'What do you need to believe to be a Quaker?'. One Young Friend thought the catchphrase for Quakerism could be 'No God, No Problem'.

Choosing to be involved with Quakers entails either being comfortable with some ambiguity or determining one's own views, belief and identity.

However, even with these struggles for identity, Young Friends still find immense value in being together as a spiritual community, whether exclusively as Young Friends, or as members of the broader Quaker community.

Quakerism gives me the language I need to consider my spiritual journey, the framework to begin exploring questions about conflict in the world.

Finally, as a unique spiritual community actively involved in the broader Quaker context, we hope that our journeys and stories will move the whole Society in new and exciting ways.

I feel that Quakerism will change as the group of people our age grow into being 'older' (weightier?!). Quakers over the decades to come. Sometimes in local Meetings I feel that there is almost a pre-ordained set of rules and beliefs that must be taken on. I feel with Young Friends (perhaps like all younger generations), we feel more free to question these traditional beliefs and maybe even those 'issues that Quakers must have a certain view on'. In doing so, we come up with our own views, which I don't think are any less spiritual or any less valid. In fact, sometimes letting go of the way we are used to doing things and being free to explore new ways is being more open for the spirit to move more freely and guide Quakerism to where it's going. That's pretty exciting.

Young Friends and Quaker identities

As Young Friends, we share the values and ideals of the Quaker community including the testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. How these values and ideals are acted upon and emphasised varies from Young Friend to Young Friend.

I don't like the idea of having to do something because I'm a Quaker and 'that's what Quakers do'. To me it's more a case that I do this and that, and because I do them, that makes me a Quaker. It's the same with beliefs. I feel that because I believe what I believe, I'm a Quaker, not that, because I'm a Quaker therefore I believe.

Some of us call ourselves Quakers because we are convinced Friends, sometimes expressed also through being members of the Religious Society of Friends. Others of us call ourselves Quakers because we were brought up by Quakers and it is our family and cultural heritage. Sometimes we identify as Quakers because of the association we feel with other people who call themselves Quakers whom we respect and whose beliefs are consistent with our own.

By calling myself a Quaker I feel like I am part of a community within which a spiritually rich life is considered an achievable and worthwhile goal, something to search for and work towards. I am proud of Quakers searching for this through history.

Others of us do not consider ourselves Quakers at all, but strongly identify as, or appreciate being associated with, Young Friends. Although some of us choose not to label ourselves as a Quaker, we still embrace Quaker values in our own lives. The reasons for not calling ourselves 'Quakers' include our choice not to be active in a local Meeting or the broader Society, or a general disinclination to be associated with a religious group. There are also Young Friends who have a Quaker heritage from countries other than Australia, such as Burundi, who feel more comfortable identifying as 'Friends' rather than 'Quakers'.

Sometimes Young Friends hold the weighty Quakers in such high regard that it feels presumptuous to identify ourselves as a Quaker alongside these amazing people. Conversely, we appreciate Young Friends

as a place where we can be part of a community that is informed by Quaker values, and where we can explore spiritual growth without the formalities that are often associated with the Society, and without the pressure to feel like a 'true Quaker'.

Beyond how we self-identify as Quakers, Friends, Young Friends or not at all, how we express that to others who are not familiar with the Society reveals a lot. In today's secular society where the media tends to portray religion dominated by fundamentalism, there is a strong reluctance to identify with a religious body. As one Young Friend says:

I never tell people I'm a Quaker. Not unless I know them really well. Whenever an opportunity comes up to tell someone about my Quakerism, a wave of fear comes over me: 'What if they think I'm crazy and don't like me anymore?'

And yet, once we get past the reluctance to associate with a religious institution, we often find that talking about it can be very valuable. The same Young Friend goes on to say:

When I look back on the times that I have talked about my Quakerism to non-Quakers, I realise that the good experiences vastly outweigh the bad ones; it's just that negative experiences tend to stay on my mind.

Because of the amount of time spent together, and the strong friendships built, there is a real depth to relationships within Young Friends, an extra level of trust and openness. Some Young Friends feel that if Young Friends had membership, they would be there in a heartbeat, yet have not chosen to join the Religious Society of Friends (yet!).

We feel that Young Friends should be seen as worthwhile on its own, and not expected to 'recruit' young people for the Religious Society of Friends. Young Friends gatherings provide a space in which people can just 'be' and

explore their spirituality with other young people who are open to exploration. This would not be possible, though, without the broader framework and traditions of the Society of Friends.

Whose Friend are Young Friends?

Arthur: So we've been talking about Young Friends all this time. This might seem pretty basic, but why do we call ourselves this? Are Young Friends just Quakers who are young?

Beryl: *For me, a Young Friend really is just a Quaker who is young. I started attending Meeting before I heard of Young Friends. I was one of the only Young Friends in my local Meeting. It was great to start attending Young Friends gatherings later, but for me 'Young Friends' is just a purely descriptive label.*

Arthur: Yeah, that makes sense.

Clive: It does, but not all Young Friends identify as 'Quakers'. I've attended Young Friends camp, and Junior Young Friends before that, for years. These have been some of the most important years of my life. The friendships have been some of the deepest I've experienced, even though we only see each other a couple of times a year, and have shaped the way I look at things.

Arthur: So you don't see yourself as a Quaker?

Clive: Not really. I haven't got into the whole 'Quaker' thing of going to Meeting for Worship and being on committees. I haven't felt this need in my life. But Young Friends are still very important to me.

Arthur: Right. So we can't assume Young Friends are all just young Quakers. But we still use the word 'Friend' ...

Beryl: *I don't see a problem with that. 'Friend' used to be shorthand for 'Friend of Truth'. For me, it still is. I like to think anyone can be a Friend of Truth, not just Quakers.*

Arthur: Nice. I'm not sure we all use the word this way, though. I think I'm like a lot of Quakers, and use the word because it is the traditional label. I'm not really sure if there is more to it for me right now.

Doris: *I'm not even sure what a Quaker is. I grew up overseas and attended a Friends' Church. We didn't use the word 'Quaker'. We learnt all about how to live based on the Gospels, but now I'm in Australia I don't know how to live as a Quaker. I'm not sure what it means to be a Quaker.*