

Hello, my name is Mark Russ. I'm part of Woodbrooke's Learning and Research Team, and I coordinate the online worship we run in partnership with EMES.

In order to complete the second part of this survey I need to give you some background information. The first thing I need to talk about is **the difference between a Quaker worshipping group and a Quaker Meeting**

Part of the Quaker message is that any group of people can meet, anytime anywhere, and be guided by the Spirit of Love. Another Quaker discovery is that it is good for these groups to support one another. This is why we have Quaker structures like Yearly Meetings and Area Meetings.

For this survey, groups that aren't formally connected to these structures are called **Quaker worshipping groups**. These groups have a lot of freedom in terms of their responsibilities, in what they choose or choose not to do, but they may not have much support. They are generally mainly concerned with worship.

For this survey, groups that are formally connected to larger Quaker structures are called **Quaker Meetings**. According to the tradition of Britain Yearly Meeting, a Quaker Meeting must do the following things:

- It must hold a Meeting for Worship that is open to the public.
- It must be publicised and visible, so that people can find it.
- It needs to be a community: welcoming each other, doing things together, and caring for one another. It's more than just the worship.
- It needs to be connected to other Quakers, through the area meeting, through neighbouring meetings, in a wider Quaker network.
- It must hold meetings called Meetings for Worship for Business, using the Quaker business method, in order to make decisions that affect the community.
- It must have a clerk or convenor to organise the Meetings for Worship for Business.

So is Woodbrooke-EMES online worship a Quaker worshipping group or a Quaker Meeting?

Woodbrooke-EMES online worship does some of the things a Quaker Meeting does. It offers public worship that people can find, and it offers some aspects of community. People can chat after worship and get to know each other better. But we don't offer pastoral care or much else other than the opportunity to worship. Our online meetings are not formally connected to other Quaker groups, and so we can't offer our worshippers formal Quaker membership. We don't hold Meetings for Worship for Business that are run by a clerk, and so worshippers have very little control or say over how the meetings are run.

Woodbrooke-EMES online worship also doesn't have the freedom of a Quaker worshipping group. Because Woodbrooke is an educational charity, with specific charitable objectives relating to education, people cannot engage in political issues or make public statements under the name of Woodbrooke-EMES online worship.

In March and April 2020, when the UK went into lockdown, Woodbrooke and EMES began to provide a much larger programme of online worship. This was to meet an immediate need, and to show Quaker communities how online worship could work. In the autumn of 2021, we are still providing this large programme of online worship. People have been worshipping together online for a substantial amount of time. People have got to know each other, and friendships have formed. People are beginning to feel a strong sense of belonging to their online worshipping community.

Woodbrooke-EMES describes our online worship as an opportunity to experience a Quaker spiritual practice. We are clear that these are not Quaker Meetings, and they don't have the freedom of Quaker worshipping groups. But this doesn't stop people experiencing our online worship as their spiritual home, and the people they worship online with as their Quaker community.

So we now find ourselves in an unusual situation. We have a collection of online Quaker communities that in many ways feel like Quaker Meetings, but don't do everything a Quaker Meeting does, and don't neatly fit into existing Quaker structures.

This raises a number of tensions. There are things worshippers want that Woodbrooke-EMES can't provide, such as pastoral care or membership. Also, Quakerism is a do-it-together religion. Quakers don't have a paid priesthood to run things. But Woodbrooke-EMES online worship is coordinated and run by a team of paid staff. This could be seen as going against this long-held Quaker principle.

Is now the time for some, many or all of our Woodbrooke-EMES online communities to become Quaker Meetings?

This is not an easy question to answer. We are all still learning how online Quaker worship relates to and changes the wider Quaker landscape. Online Quaker communities have made Quaker worship accessible to many people who otherwise would not be able to attend. People responding to our survey in 2020 described online worship as a 'life line'. Also, online worship has struggled to be a meaningful space for families, children and young people, for people whose Quaker nourishment and community depends on the opportunity to be together in a physical, in-person setting. For those of us who have a choice, does commitment to an online worshipping community weaken what local, physical Quaker communities can offer? We all want to move forward in a way that strengthens and broadens our Quaker community.

So, what would happen if a Woodbrooke-EMES online worshipping community became a Quaker Meeting?

If the worshipping communities that have grown through Woodbrooke-EMES online worship became Quaker Meetings, they would be able to do things like offer membership, offer pastoral care and engage in activism together. They would also need to take more responsibility for running the Meetings for Worship, and begin to hold Meetings for Worship for Business. Woodbrooke-EMES would no longer pay for or administer the Zoom account.

Becoming a Quaker Meeting could happen in the following ways:

- 1) The Meeting might be put 'under the care of' a Yearly Meeting, or an Area Meeting within a Yearly Meeting. For example, the Woodbrooke-EMES Sunday morning meeting for worship could be put under the care of South East England Area Meeting. It would then receive support from Quakers in that Area Meeting, including things such as eldership, safeguarding and membership. The new online Meeting would in turn be accountable to other Quakers in the Area Meeting, and would be under the authority of Britain Yearly Meeting.
- 2) Another option might be becoming an independent, non-geographical online Yearly Meeting. To our knowledge, nothing like this has been done before. It would have the advantage of not being tied to any one geographical Yearly Meeting, but would need to be entirely self-run by worshippers.
- 3) There may be other options that we haven't thought of.

With this information you can now respond to the rest of the survey.

We really appreciate your thoughts. We want to make decisions about the future of Woodbrooke-EMES online worship that take into account the wellbeing of our worshippers and that honours the special communities that have formed over the last 18 months.