

The email newsletter of Shrewsbury Quaker Meeting

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Friends Online

‘Why don’t more people know about this?’

Regulars at Shrewsbury Meeting will know by now that Quaker Quest will launch on Wednesday 28 February and continue on the following three Wednesdays (7, 14 and 21 March).

QuakerQuest evenings are free and open to everyone, Friend or otherwise, and each evening will have a different selection of guest speakers to talk about various aspects of Quakerism.

The Shropshire evenings will be held at the Wildlife Trust, opposite Shrewsbury Abbey, with refreshments from 6.30. Free parking is available from 6.00pm at the Abbey car park.

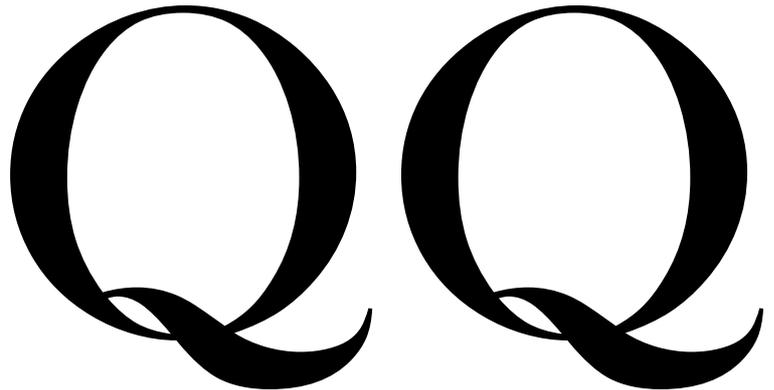
The event will end about 9.00. Attending one of the evenings does not commit anyone to turning up for any of the others and no pressure is put on anyone to ‘sign up’.

There were Quakers in prison in Shrewsbury about 350 years ago for what they believed, so it seems reasonable to think the 21st century town might be interested.

When people find Quakerism for themselves they often say, “why don’t more people know about this?”

QuakerQuest is a way of answering that question.

For further information contact Angie Dunhill on 01743 246574.



‘In a well-known passage in his autobiography Benjamin Franklin describes his reaction to the

perfidious preaching of George Whitefield, the foremost evangelist of the Great Awakening. The passage is usually cited as an illustration of the emotional susceptibility of the 18th century man of reason: “I happened [writes Franklin] ... to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold.

“As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin’d me to give the silver; and he finish’d so admirably, that I empty’d my pocket

Franklin, the preacher and tight-fisted Friends

wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all”.

The remainder of the passage, often overlooked ... draws attention to the one important group in Philadel-

phia which was proof against Whitefield’s appeal to emotion: “At this sermon there was also one of our club, who, being of my sentiments . . . and suspecting a collection might be intended, had, by precaution, emptied his pockets before he came from home. Towards the conclusion of the discourse, however, he felt a strong desire to give, and apply’d to a neighbour, who stood near him, to borrow some money for the purpose ... His answer was, “At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now, for thee seems to be out of thy right senses”.’

The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, ed. Albert H. Smyth (New York, 1907) (Italics in original)

This item from Friends Journal, edited for space reasons, resonates with the need to do, not just talk piously. How do we get on with it?

My first introductions to early Friends characterized them as rebellious, Spirit-led trouble makers who brought haphazard and serious disruption to the official church of England. It seemed to me that Quaker ministers wandered forcefully and randomly into public spaces and other churches directly—without the formal training, credentials, or funding that supported the preachers of the established church of the time. I wondered how this group could have possibly survived, and in fact thrived and grown as a movement without more underlying organization. As I explored more, I learned about a strategic, direct attention to publishing tracts and books, and disseminating a high volume of printed works as well as spoken word shared by travelling ministers. In this way, this roaming band of faithful Friends was strategic, organized, and connected—and founded a movement with far-reaching influence.

What lessons can we take from this history of an early movement? As someone who travels with questions on how we connect and support faithful community in digital as well as brick-and-mortar spaces, I look at tools of communication and church-building that can be effective no matter what their platform. As my local meeting considers how to share a message, adopt a communications strategy, and faithfully carry a message of “who Quakers are” to the wider world, the call is clearly the same as what those early Friends heard. The tools are varied and different. The pervasive strategies that early Friends of the Quaker movement used hold some remarkable lessons in what we might use today in our rapidly changing, growing sense of networks and connections. In thinking more about these early Friends, I began to wonder if I could find the elements of contemporary church communication strategies in their

Lessons of strengthening a movement among Friends

By Kathleen Wooten

actions. There’s a few specific ‘lessons’ that help me to connect the motivations and faithful support of the Quaker movement of both early and contemporary Friends.

1. It is adherence to the Spirit that is important. Early Friends considered their written tracts as important and representative as their preaching. This is why their publishing and distribution was both extensive, well discerned, and very controlled—consistent and recognizable in all places. Then it was published tracts and preached messages—today it might just as easily be 140 characters on Twitter!

2. Friends recognized a need for a central hub for connections, dissemination of information, and standardization of publications and travel. Margaret Fell created this centre for information and support at her house, Swarthmoor Hall. She insisted on there being a centralized address for letters and news carried by ministers. This gave the Quaker movement consistency and strength in being responsive and organized. Today? That might be our meeting website—a consistent email address for new attenders to contact us and receive consistent information. We might post our minutes of importance, our spiritual messages to the world—sending them out as the early Friends did in this new way.

3. Early Friends recognized that how we present to the world is important. Consistency in describing fully who we are, either avoiding insider jargon or using it and

explaining it clearly when absolutely necessary, was their process, and should be ours. Early Friends’ public adoption and use of the name Quaker created a name for a movement recognized instantly by those outside their smaller circles.

4. Why would Early Friends bother to use so much print, in a world where ‘that of God in everyone’ meant sometimes people only minimally literate would be hearing their message? Because that message was for everyone. As Friends realized their message was being heard in written form, they increased their publications at a surprising rate. They still were preaching, and visiting in person, and gathering local meetings. Do we make those assumptions today? Do our meetings only use verbal announcements at the end of meeting? Do we speak to visual learners, digital learners, and the Google calendars of all who might follow us on many platforms?

5. As the Quaker message spread, the seemingly haphazard lack of organization became a strategic process of sensing where ministers were needed, where there might be ears to hear, and where the Quaker Movement might grow. This represented adept responsiveness to growing faith, wherever it had sprouted. How do we do this today? Do our meetings respond to growing and deepening faith with readings, in-person conversations, and digital resources in a timely manner?

6. This ‘sending forth’ and ‘hearing back’ emerged as crucial in growing the movement. How do we do that now? Do we respond quickly to newcomers? Do we have a regular system to respond to inquiries and a published phone number and someone to respond on social media?

Early Friends innovated their systems to become a faithful people of a movement. We are still called, sometimes in ways that look very different from those of 1665, to spread that message today.