

“Ask me about Quakerism”

by Eric Sabelman, Palo Alto Friends Meeting (PYM)

From time to time a certain discouragement is voiced among Friends:

- Our Meetings are too small. There aren't enough members to do all the work that needs to be done.
- Friends are declining in numbers. We don't know what to do about it.
- There must be people who are seeking what Friends have to offer, but they don't know about us.

All these statements may be true, but there is nothing to say they have to *stay* true. From time to time, Meetings do rouse themselves to take some action to bring in newcomers, maybe through Quaker Quest or participating in interfaith social action. Here are two ways by which to prepare yourselves for the arduous task of talking about Quakerism to people who are not (yet) Quakers.

But first, why is the task so difficult? Maybe it is because we have interpreted an advice to avoid proselytizing to be an absolute prohibition against ever telling anyone you are a Friend. Maybe it is because we are comfortable with the *status quo*. After all, there are Friends so comfortable in their Monthly Meetings that they never go to Quarterly or Yearly gatherings, and Friends so much more comfortable in these larger groups that they play a minimal part in the life of their Monthly Meeting. We are self-selected to be comfortable in the group we choose, and we become uncomfortable if it changes.

There is reason to see such comfort as a sign of success: we draw from a pool of people who are seeking a satisfying spiritual and social path. When we find it and grow to be comfortable with the similar souls who form the core of a Meeting, who would deny the value of our accomplishment?

Unfortunately, such a degree of comfort also makes us impatient with newcomers who don't know Friends' customs and process. To have too many newbies in your Meeting makes you uncomfortable, so you minimize your contact with them. Actually instructing them in Friends' ways seems to be a distraction and a burden; let them find out the hard way like the rest of us did.

Imagine the confusion if Meetings were full of people who do not know how Quakers worship or conduct business! Imagine the chaos if different ideas of what Friends *are* were struggling to converge on unity! And then, recall that this is very nearly the situation of the early Friends whom we so admire for their courage, their conviction and their success at growing the nascent Religious Society of Friends. One outcome might be holding two parallel Meetings: a Meeting for Comfort and a Meeting for Chaos. Which would you attend? Why not both?ⁱ

So, back to the difficult task. To make it easier, I give you two tools: an exercise in which you can practice talking to non-Quaker seekers in public places, and a silent way to announce that you are a Quaker and you are willing to talk about it.

The “Ask me about Quakerism” game was first played as an interest group at Fall, 2011, CPQM, with about 10 participants. Four actually were new to Quakerism and came to ask their own questions; if they drew the “Answerer” card, they were excused. To play the game, you pretend that you – the “Answerer” – have set up a table covered with Quaker literature on a sidewalk where you are likely to encounter seekers, maybe at a farmers’ market. A crowd of “Listeners” gathers; among them are “Questioners” who ask you about Quakerism – in the game, the questions are randomly drawn from a bowl, or a topic is randomly drawn from another bowl and the Questioner makes up an original question on that topic. In the interest group, we found the table of literature to be little help – the answer might be there, but you don’t have time to dig it out.

The “Ask me about Quakerism” badge is what you wear in the scenario above, or any place you might encounter seekers at a time when you are willing to answer questions. The badge is not too big, not ornamental, not immodest or impolite. It is durable and readable from a reasonable distance. I make badges out of 1/8 inch thick colored Plexiglas at TechShopⁱⁱ, using an Epilog laser cutter/engraver. TechShop (or other such Maker spaces) usually has a bin of scrap plastic, many pieces still large enough to cut several badges from, or you can buy a foot-square piece of new material. The laser cutter first etches the lettering (use settings to get deeply engraved letters; remove any protective film to get deeper letters), then cuts a slot for a name-tag clip, and then cuts around the edge of the badge to free it from the sheet of plastic. Most engraving does not have high enough contrast to be seen from a distance; fill the letters with enamel paint (black or white, depending on the color of the plastic), then wipe off the excess – a form of the Renaissance art of *intaglio*.

I put a batch of badges in a basket in the lobby of Palo Alto Meetinghouse. There are fewer in the basket now, so Friends must have taken some. The sign on the basket says “Take one. Wear it. Answer when asked.” The only person I have seen wearing one is Ray, who wears a lot of badges, so one more isn’t obvious. I confess that I don’t wear my badge everywhere; just to the library and a concert ... so far.

Instructions and materials for the game are in the accompanying files; print the roles, topics and questions on different colored paper, then cut into slips, fold and place in bowls. A CorelDraw file of 2 sizes of badge for input to an Epilog laser cutter is also attached. If you would like a sample badge, I would be glad to send one. If you want more, you would do better to make your own than wait for me to get around to making a batch for you.

ⁱ Adapted from comments during plenary, Fall 2014 CPQM.

ⁱⁱ www.techshop.ws/